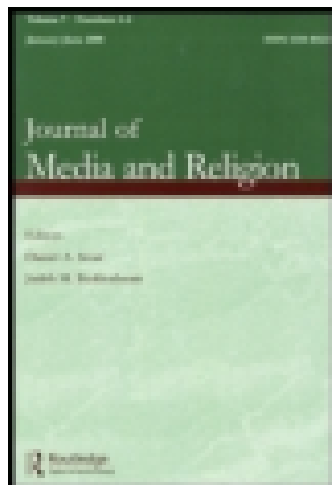


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ARTICLES

The Necessity of Permanent Criticism: A Postcolonial Critique of Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven*

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This article conducts a postcolonial critique of the crusader film *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005). The article shows that although reviewers praised the film for its message of tolerance, this movie actually embodies forms of neocolonial and Orientalist discourse. This article demonstrates the necessity of what Raymie McKerrow and Michel Foucault call “permanent criticism,” that is, exposing how apparently liberating rhetoric can also serve oppressive ends. It also joins previous critics such as Robert Ivie in examining the forces that convince societies of war’s necessity. It gives particular attention to how this film joined broader societal discourses urging Western military involvement in the Middle East. Finally, this article demonstrates how Orientalist discourse has adapted to changes in the contemporary religious landscape, continuing to marginalize Islam, even in an environment where Christianity has partially lost its hegemony. The film transforms Saladin—a highly feared Muslim warrior—into a spokesperson for post-Christian values.

In the summer of 2005, Twentieth Century Fox released *Kingdom of Heaven*, an epic war film that tells how the great Muslim conqueror Saladin used his army to capture the city of Jerusalem from Crusaders who had taken it a century earlier. The film featured both the acclaimed direction of Ridley Scott (*Gladiator* and *Black Hawk Down*) and the admired acting of Orlando Bloom (*Lord of the Rings* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*) and Liam Neeson (*Star Wars: Episode I* and *Schindler’s List*). It opened number one at the box office and earned more than \$200 million worldwide (News Corporation, 2006, p. 3).

The film also opened amid a great deal of controversy. Given the Iraq War, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and other post-9/11 realities, many wondered if the timing was right for

a movie that featured Christians and Muslims killing one another on an epic scale. Though Hollywood had not made a major film about the Crusades in 70 years, many doubted that this was the time. Prior to its debut, many expressed fears that the movie would foster hate crimes and lead to polarization in an already tense world.¹ The portrayal of Muslims, in particular, was of great concern. When Western audiences witnessed the defeat of Christians on a massive scale, would their hatred and fear of Muslims grow deeper?

To the movie's credit, it portrayed the Crusades of the late 12th century in a way that assuaged the fears of many. *The New York Times* review called the film "an ostensibly fair-minded, even-handed account of one of the least fair-minded, even-handed chapters in human history." The review went on to say that the movie "achieved a wonderful balance between how Christianity and Islam are portrayed" (Dargis, 2005). A *USA Today* review observed that "the medieval holy wars known as the Crusades don't usually bring to mind merciful Muslim warriors or faith-doubting Christians or happy scenes of religious diversity in the Holy Land. Yet that's exactly what moviegoers can expect ... in Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven*" (MacDonald, 2005). Roger Ebert (2005) compared the film to Ridley Scott's earlier work *Gladiator*, which won the Oscar for Best Picture in 2000. He wrote, "*Kingdom of Heaven* is better than *Gladiator*—deeper, more thoughtful, more about human motivation and less about action."

Even the Council on American–Islamic Relations gave the film high marks for refraining "from the usual stereotyping or dehumanizing of Muslims," for depicting Islamic culture positively, and for promoting interfaith dialogue (Ahmed, 2005). The review noted that, though Hollywood has a long track record of portraying Muslims and Arabs as "bad guys," this movie goes in a different direction (see also Shaheen, 2001; Said, 1978/2003, pp. 285–293). Saladin, the great leader of the Saracens, is portrayed as a tolerant man who deserves respect.

In Christian circles, the film received praise for its thoughtfulness. Although some conservative groups complained that the movie did not portray Christianity positively enough (Movieguide, n.d.), *Christianity Today* likened this movie to *Lawrence of Arabia*, upholding examples of how it invites audiences to consider deeper theological issues, such as "the relationship between God's will and human agency—and whether the latter can ever discern the former" (Chattaway, 2005, p. 66). Similarly, *The Christian Century* praised the movie for leaving "audiences with the right questions about the uneasy but seemingly inescapable relationship between war and religion" (Renick, 2005, p. 11). It seemed that audiences would be incited not to violence but rather to theological reflection.

Negative reviews tended to focus on poor acting, predictable battle scenes, and fairly minor historical inaccuracies—nothing that should, at least on the surface of things, foster hostility between Christians and Muslims. Conscientious moviegoers, it appeared, could breathe a sigh of relief. Most agreed that this movie is not about demeaning Arabs but about tolerance, religious diversity, and thoughtful reflection.

This article does not deny the value this film places on tolerance, but it does contend that more is going on than what most reviewers noticed in their initial reactions to the film. A critical examination of the film's rhetoric reveals that it may not be as benign as it appears. This

¹Prior to the movie's release, Dr. Khaled Abou El Fadl, professor of Islamic law at the University of California, told Scotland's *Herald*, "In my view, it is inevitable that there will be hate crimes committed directly because of [this movie]" (quoted in Smith, 2005).

article demonstrates that although this movie avoids traditional forms of Arab-bashing, preaches tolerance, and raises significant theological questions, it also comforts a Western audience by alleviating (1) their guilt about past and present efforts to colonize the Middle East and (2) their deep and persistent fear of Islam, which has reached new levels of intensity since September 11, 2001. This film does so by making rhetorical moves that amount to anything but tolerance, subtly influencing viewers to see colonization as a reflection of high ideals and to view Islam as a dim reflection of their own beliefs. Thus, *Kingdom of Heaven* preaches a message of tolerance while ironically embodying forms of neocolonialism and Orientalism (concepts that will be outlined shortly). The movie rewrites the Crusades (and similar colonizing efforts in the Middle East), rationalizing Western occupation of Middle Eastern lands and transforming one of Islam's greatest heroes into a spokesperson for Western values.

GOALS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

In the process of showing how this film subtly embodies neocolonialist and Orientalist discourses, this article makes three contributions to the field of communication. First, it demonstrates ways that even liberating acts of communication are simultaneously expressions of power that must be subject to critique and exposed for how they work oppressively. Raymie McKerrow made a related theoretical point in his classic article "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Practice," when he argued for critiquing not only domination but also freedom. Quoting Foucault (1982, p. 34), McKerrow (1989, p. 96) argued that "the work of profound transformation can only be done in an atmosphere which is . . . always agitated by permanent criticism." McKerrow explains that as forms of domination are exposed and subverted, new social relations emerge. These emergent social relations must themselves be subject to critique. They are "simply new forms of power and hence subject to renewed skepticism" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 96). Objections have been raised to this idea of constant criticism, and it has often been ignored by scholarship.² In contrast to this scholarly tendency, this article argues for the necessity of what Foucault and McKerrow envision by showing that even a movie like *Kingdom of Heaven*, which many understood to have a liberating message, stands in need of thorough critique. The film oppresses as much as it liberates.

Second, this article contributes to rhetorical criticism by asking the basic question that has focused the work of Robert Ivie and others: What are the communicative forces that convince society of war's necessity? Much of Ivie's work focuses on presidential speeches. This article brings *Kingdom of Heaven* into conversation with presidential speeches, showing how this movie reinforced political rhetoric about the most recent Iraq War. This film illustrates how the media industry joined a broader societal discourse whose logic and limitations made military intervention appear as the best, if not the only, possible course of action. Edward Said (1978/2003, p. xxi), in response to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, wrote the following:

²Maurice Charland faults McKerrow and Foucault for offering "no *telos* except for constant critique. Under these circumstances, *praxis* is halted because we have no reason to intervene one way or another" (Charland, 1991, p. 72). Meanwhile, in a review and critique of McKerrow's article, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar tellingly chooses to concentrate on McKerrow's critique of domination rather than his critique of freedom, giving insufficient attention to his argument for the necessity of permanent criticism (Gaonkar, 1993, p. 151).

Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest *mission civilisatrice*.

This article explores how the media industry joined this chorus of "willing intellectuals" who sang calming words that cloaked violence and killing in Iraq. Employing postcolonial methodology, the article shows how *Kingdom of Heaven* participated in a discourse that convinced many of the necessity of invading Iraq, upholding fanciful visions of the invasion's aftermath that blinded viewers to the potential difficulties that lie ahead.

Third, this article draws attention to the new forms that Orientalist discourse has taken in recent years. As many scholars would suspect, various post-9/11 realities have given new expressions to Orientalism. What is less obvious but equally significant is how Orientalist discourse has subtly adapted to religious shifts in modern society. The film *Kingdom of Heaven* reflects the religious concerns of a Western society where Christianity has, in part, lost the hegemony it once enjoyed. Replicating these societal changes, this movie finds new ways of expressing Orientalist discourse to subordinate Islam even in the post-Christian West.

To achieve these goals, this article first explains the essentials of neocolonialism and Orientalism with particular attention to how narrative frames influence audiences toward particular assumptions concerning not only events in the past but also events today. Second, it explains how this film creates scapegoats onto whom audiences can transfer their guilt for colonial efforts. Third, attention shifts to how the film frames positive characters and their actions in ways that reinforce the political rhetoric of recent times. Finally, this article examines how the great Muslim conqueror Saladin is portrayed in Western terms in order to comfort an audience naturally fearful of Muslim military opponents.

POSTCOLONIALISM, ORIENTALISM, AND NARRATIVE

The governing conviction of postcolonial methodology is that while the more explicit forms of colonial rule may have passed away (e.g., the colonization of Africa by European nations), imperialism has left an enduring stain upon Western systems of language, discourse, and thought. At first glance, this stain may go unnoticed. It is often assumed to be a natural part of "how things are." However, postcolonial critics have shown that neocolonial rhetoric continues to exist within Western discourse, adapting to newer dynamics in contemporary society. The work of such critics is to expose how imperial ideologies continue to persist among contemporary expressions of language, thus hopefully bringing about possibilities for alternatives in both discourse and praxis.

Postcolonial studies take many of their cues from Edward Said's classic work *Orientalism* (1978/2003). As he explains, the West has operated for centuries under discursive forms that conceptualize, objectify, and exert Western superiority over the East. Rather than seeking to understand the incredible diversity of the peoples of Asia and the Middle East on their own terms, the Orientalist tradition subtly invents, employs, and reinforces stereotyped imagery of

this Western “Other.” It maintains as one of its primary dogmas “that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared (the Yellow Peril, the Mongol hordes, the brown dominions) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation whenever possible)” (Said, 1978/2003, p. 301).

Rhetoric advancing such notions typically operates silently—invisibly and subtly, in ways that are unmarked, unnamed, and unmapped—to secure colonial power through discursive means.³ It is not surprising that most popular reviews of this movie failed to notice how it functions as a work of neocolonial rhetoric. As Buescher and Ono (1996, p. 130) point out, “Colonial practices today operate for the most part under the conscious threshold of the contemporary popular imagination.” Colonialism in the United States, they explain, was never abolished: “Indeed, the ideology of colonialism was rewoven into the social fabric through popular cultural products such as movies, television, novels, radio, and consumer goods, as well as more pedagogical media: textbooks, military training manuals, and religious texts” (Buescher & Ono, 1996, p. 130). These new forms of colonialism work in subtle and unacknowledged ways that embody the colonial impulse while appearing in refashioned forms that align better with current values. Neocolonialism often looks kind and benevolent while actually reinforcing the effects of colonization (i.e., racism, sexism, domination, and genocide). Much like implicit and institutional forms of racism, neocolonialist practices often go unnoticed while they work to maintain inequality.

One of the most powerful expressions of neocolonialist ideology (or any ideology for that matter) is narrative, especially when it takes a mythic or historical form, as this film does by incorporating elements of each. As Keith Whitelam points out, myth and history alike seek to foster particular ideologies. They each perceive the past, but they are intimately linked to present realities and the contexts in which they originate. They are designed to shape identity. Various accounts of the past, Whitelam (1996, pp. 29–30) notes, are constantly competing with one another, offering not just different narratives of *what happened then* but also, at least implicitly, different accounts of *what should happen now*.⁴ In this case, *Kingdom of Heaven* cannot be viewed simply as an historical fiction that approximated a few medieval events for the purposes of entertaining audiences for two hours. Rather, it offers a way of viewing the Middle East and Western involvement therein that frames perceptions of political realities today. One must ask what ideologies it fosters, what political rhetoric it echoes, and what identities it creates. Its narrative is not neutral. Walter Fisher (1984, p. 3) observes, “Any ethic, whether social, political, legal or otherwise involves narrative.” The present task is to characterize the type of ethic that *Kingdom of Heaven* espouses for engaging the present world.

Edward Said reinforces many of these points in his discussion of the importance of narrative in imperialist discourse:

³Raka Shome (1996, p. 503) uses almost identical language to argue that whiteness operates the same way in contemporary society and popular movies. The ability of ideology to operate at largely unconscious levels has been explored by many thinkers (e.g., Makus, 1990, pp. 498–501).

⁴Similar statements are made by Partha Chatterjee (1986, p. 9): “Every nationalism has invented a past for the nation; every nationalism speaks through a discourse, ‘historical in its form but apologetic in its substance’, which claims to demonstrate the rise, progress and efflorescence of its own particular genius. Modern European intellectual fashion not only decrees that a nation must have a past, it also demands that it have a future.”

The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course; but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations themselves *are* narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them. (Said, 1994, p. xiii, as cited in Whitlam, 1996, p. 22)

Kingdom of Heaven, as a film about the Crusades, is a narrative about imperialism and colonization. In light of Said's insights, critics must analyze what the film says about the land it describes, to whom it belongs, and who has the right to settle it, to work on it, and to plan its future. Critics also have the responsibility of asking what narratives it competes against. What narratives does it block from forming and emerging?⁵ Reviewers praised the movie because it blocked narratives that explicitly foster hate crimes against Arabs, but what other narratives did it also block?

Scholars in many fields have recognized the immense power in how things are framed (e.g., Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Edelman, 1993). By elevating certain aspects of perceived reality and blocking others, communicators "promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the problem described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The creators of *Kingdom of Heaven* have carefully chosen which aspects of Western involvement in the Middle East to select and exclude in their narrative such that viewers walk away from the film influenced toward particular convictions. Naturally, not all audience members are influenced in the same way (cf. Hall, 1985, p. 96; Makus, 1990, p. 500). But the frames within *Kingdom of Heaven* work with other frames within contemporary culture, drawing upon "certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). As will be shown below, many of the frames in this movie closely align with how the Bush Administration sought to frame its military engagement in Iraq. Thus, the ideological representations within this film "trigger off a whole chain of connotative associations" (Hall, 1985, p. 104), summoning ideological representations elsewhere, particularly the political assertions explicitly made by the White House during the preparation for and early years of the most recent Iraq War. Thus, this film about the Crusades works rhetorically to reinforce existing political frames among audiences, influencing many of them to see particular types of Western violence in the Middle East in the most positive of terms.

A FLOCK OF SCAPEGOATS

Derek T. Buescher and Kent A. Ono's "Civilized Colonialism: *Pocahontas* as Neocolonial Rhetoric" provides a model for analyzing how a film can function as neocolonial rhetoric. In their essay, they argue that *Pocahontas*, despite its great popularity and avidly positive reviews, is a neocolonialist text that helps its audience unlearn the history of genocide in America by offering in its place a heartwarming and romantic story that nicely aligns with

⁵As McKerrow (1989, p. 107) observes, "*Absence* is as important as *presence* in understanding and evaluating symbolic action." See also Wander (1984).

feminism, environmentalism, and human freedom. The movie, the authors show, presents two types of colonizers. John Smith is a gracious, generous, moral missionary who signifies benevolent colonialism. Governor Ratcliffe, meanwhile, is the arch-villain who signifies malevolent colonialism. Within the imagined world of the film, viewers learn that there are only two colonial alternatives from which to choose. By siding with Smith's benevolent colonialism, viewers can shift "all guilt for colonialism's wrongs—racism, antipathy, and violence—onto the evil character of Ratcliffe." The movie thus absolves viewers of colonial guilt and lets them embrace a form of colonialism they see as beneficial to the colonized (Buescher & Ono, 1996, p. 142).

Something quite similar takes place in *Kingdom of Heaven*. Here the movie presents two types of colonizers/Crusaders, each with clear parallels to American culture, so that viewers clearly identify themselves with one type but not the other. The malevolent Crusaders are represented primarily by two arch-villains: Guy of Lusignan and Reynald of Châtillon. They are portrayed as bellicose fanatics, desiring nothing more than killing Muslims. They use religion only for justifying their massacres. For example, in one scene, Guy and Reynald scheme to attack a defenseless caravan of Muslims, and just as they launch their attack they yell out, "God wills it! God wills it!" In other scenes as well, they appeal to religion only for the purpose of killing Muslims.⁶ Just after Guy becomes king, he goes to Reynald and with a zealous passion groans, "Reynald, give me a war." In gleeful excitement, Reynald responds, "That's what I do." These two are bent on destroying peace at any cost. They are, moreover, foolish military planners who ignore wise council and cause the death of thousands. Much like *Pocahontas*' Ratcliffe, they are "obese, gluttonous, pompous, greedy, and only marginally competent" (Buescher & Ono, 1996, p. 141). They resemble the fanatics described by thinkers such as Eric Hoffer: they are united by hatred and care little for the complexities and ambiguities of the present moment (Hoffer, 1951/1966, pp. 84–85). The movie tells viewers that Guy, Reynald, and those like them are responsible for the warfare between the Christians and Muslims. When these villains are punished (and in Reynald's case killed), the audience feels a level of relief and satisfaction. Their suffering, the movie tells us, is little more than what they deserve.

The Patriarch of Jerusalem is also portrayed as a villain, but of a slightly different type. When his back is against the wall and Jerusalem is surrounded, all he cares about is his own personal survival. He tells Balian, the movie's hero, that the two of them should escape from Jerusalem. "We must leave the city," he says. "It is unfortunate about the people [left who will die], but it is God's will." Later, when Balian goes out to meet with Saladin to discuss terms of surrender, the Patriarch counsels him, "Convert to Islam. Repent later." The Patriarch clearly enjoys the power and wealth of his position but cares little for his religion or the people entrusted to his spiritual care. He is a fraud.

In such portrayals, the movie does some justice to historical realities. Guy, Reynald, and the Patriarch were all historical figures whose actions align with the attitudes found in the characters of the movie, even if there are differences in actual events. Guy and Reynald were extremists who schemed together to bring about war, attacking Muslim caravans and

⁶At one point, the noble and respected Tiberias (the name the movie gives to the historical figure Raymond III of Tripoli) tells Guy, "That I would rather live with men than kill them is surely why you are alive." Guy responds, "That sort of Christianity has its uses, I suppose."

provoking Saladin. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, meanwhile, was criticized by Muslim chroniclers for his greed and for not doing more to help Christians in Jerusalem (Maalouf, 1984, pp. 184–200).⁷ In portraying these characters, however, the creators of *Kingdom of Heaven* not only reached back to find historical analogues in the past but also reached forward to the present, offering audiences figures who have obvious present-day analogues. Guy and Reynald decode easily enough as hate-filled fanatics, and the Patriarch as an abusive church authority. By representing these types of characters as the ones responsible for the worst effects of the Crusades (i.e., the intolerance, abuses, and violence), audiences can distance themselves from any guilt over Western involvement in the Middle East. Most viewers do not identify with these characters, but rather are led to hate them. These characters serve, in effect, as scapegoats onto which responsibility for evils can be shifted. The movie teaches that extremism must be condemned. Those who are not extremists are, by implication, free from condemnation.

THE BENEVOLENT, MUCH-NEEDED CRUSADER

One reason why audiences distance themselves so easily from these antagonists is that viewers may identify easily with the benevolent Crusader Balian—not only because he is the movie’s protagonist and an embodiment of Hollywood virtue but also because his presence in the Middle East has so many parallels with American perceptions of their involvement there. Implicitly, before the film was even released, there was the obvious parallel between the Crusades (where Western, Christian peoples attacked Eastern, Muslim peoples) and the American invasion of Iraq (where something quite similar happened)—hence so much of the concern before its release. Explicitly, George W. Bush, Saddam Hussein, and Osama bin Laden all made statements framing American military involvement in the Middle East in terms of the Crusades. Shortly after September 11, 2001, President Bush made the following impassioned statement: “The crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while. . . . we will rid the world of the evil-doers” (quoted in Cline, 2004, p. 167). Bin Laden, similarly, not only referred to Americans as Crusaders but also cast himself as a second Saladin. Saddam Hussein did the same, which is quite remarkable given that Saladin was a Kurd (Cline, 2004, pp. 167, 197–200).

Western audiences identify with Balian, furthermore, because he and his companions are the noblest of individuals, the polar opposites of Guy, Reynald, and Jerusalem’s Patriarch. Balian stands in a long line of Hollywood action heroes who function as a paragon of strength, wisdom, and virtue.⁸ His strength and bravery are evident especially on the battlefield. He meets all sorts of foes and defeats them time and again, whether it is a Muslim warrior charging on a horse (while Balian merely stands there) or a squad of soldiers whom he defeats barehanded.

⁷The film omits the historical fact that after Jerusalem’s surrender, Christians could purchase their freedom from Muslims; it was not automatically granted. A large number of people (Medieval sources say 15,000–16,000) could not afford to purchase their freedom and were sold into slavery. Leaders like Balian sold goods to purchase the freedom of those he could. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, it appears, did not sell church ornaments but left Jerusalem with them (see Cline, 2004, pp. 186–195).

⁸At the movie’s outset, one sees his workshop, where inscribed in the ceiling beams are the noble words, “What man is a man who does not make the world better?”

When he does not defeat his enemies in battle, as in the end of the movie, he at least gets them to compromise. Balian survives both the harsh desert conditions of the Middle East and overwhelming armies.

While Balian is shown time and again in battle scenes, usually fighting against Muslims, the movie goes to great lengths to stress that unlike Guy and Reynald, Balian is not out to kill Arabs but rather is only protecting those who cannot protect themselves. In Godfrey's last words to his son, he knights him and says, "Safeguard the helpless and do no wrong. That is your oath. . . . Defend the king. If the king is no more, protect your people." One of Balian's friends, his spiritual advisor, tells him, "Holiness is right action and courage on behalf of those who cannot defend themselves." King Baldwin of Jerusalem (whom the film portrays positively) commands Balian time and again to protect others, especially the helpless. When the climactic battle scene transpires, Balian adds his own voice, saying, "We fight for the people—their safety and freedom." By framing Balian's violence in terms of protecting others, it appears not only justified but even virtuous. Through his character, audiences learn that Western violence in the Middle East—at least when it is Balian's type of violence—may be the most honorable of activities.

Balian is a model of not only strength but also wisdom. Though a blacksmith by trade, he knows more about horses than Arabs, correcting them when they unknowingly harm a horse.⁹ He offers sage military advice to Guy, which, had he followed it, would have possibly prevented the deaths of thousands. Sibylla, the beautiful wife of Guy, quickly becomes amazed by Balian's wisdom, falls in love with him, and offers herself sexually.¹⁰ Balian's wisdom and prowess force Saladin to offer terms of surrender.¹¹ After meeting with Saladin to surrender Jerusalem, he reenters Jerusalem where crowds cheer victoriously—a possible allusion to Christ entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday or American troops entering Baghdad.

Balian's strength and wisdom are complemented by his moral virtues. He is a kind and benevolent man who earns the respect even of Muslims. As with many pieces of neocolonial rhetoric, his involvement in the Middle East is portrayed as one of liberation. When given the opportunity to make a Muslim his slave, he instead sets him free. The Muslim tells him, "Your [benevolent] quality will be known among your enemies before ever you meet them, my friend." The film's writers here appear to frame Balian's deeds by paraphrasing George W. Bush's words the night the American invasion of Iraq began: "The enemies you confront will come to know your skill and bravery. The people you liberate will witness the honorable and decent spirit of the American military" ("President Bush Addresses," 2003). Balian's presence

⁹Here, the film engages in a classic form of Orientalism, which posits "the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior" (Said, 1978/2003, p. 300).

¹⁰This is an interesting twist on the colonialist narrative. Whereas it typically depicts the beautiful colonized woman as needing to be freed from the oppressive and savage native, we have in this film Sibylla who is herself a Crusader with great power nevertheless needing to be rescued from her malevolent Crusader husband, Guy. At the same time, Sibylla is presented in opening scenes less as a Crusader and more as an Arab. She speaks Arabic even when everyone else speaks English, she dresses in non-Western attire while other Europeans do not, and when the two make love, the movie loudly plays Arabic music. The elements of a colonialist narrative are present, but they have been modified in significant ways (see Buescher & Ono, 1996, pp. 142–151; cf. Sharpe, 1993).

¹¹As one reviewer put it, "Balian, who has styled himself a blue-collar working guy, rises almost effortlessly by dint of his inherited talents and soon is not only a knight himself but a wise battlefield commander" (Hunter, 2005).

in the Middle East, like America's, is framed in terms of liberation and respect—something desired by Arabs.

Balian wins the admiration of audiences by holding to the highest ethical ideals, even when it would be quite convenient to do otherwise. The respected King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem gives Balian the opportunity to seize power, marry Sibylla, and prevent war. Because it would involve killing Guy, Balian refuses, saying, "It is a kingdom of conscience or nothing." Balian never sets out to make war but engages in it only when it comes to him. Balian is, in short, the polar opposite of Guy, Reynald, and Jerusalem's Patriarch. Audiences identify with him, cheer for him, and see his cause as their cause. With him, they are able to admire a Crusader who occupied Arab lands and killed Muslims but without a tinge of guilt. In his example, they learn that Westerners can exert dominance in the Middle East without bankrupting their ethics or morals.

AMERICAN RELIGION AND DREAMS AMID THE CRUSADES

Moviegoers identify with Balian not only because of his role as protagonist and his character but also because of his faith, which is strikingly similar to widespread belief systems in the post-Christian West. Ninian Smart, in one of the most popular academic textbooks on world religions, astutely characterizes the general religious sentiments of many Western societies, a characterization that applies just as well to Balian:

There are many people who simply do not attend church or synagogue. They are not necessarily lacking in religious belief, but nevertheless they do not feel called on to belong to any religious organization. They are people who live in a large, gentle twilight zone between religiousness and agnosticism. . . . They see the heart of religion in loving one's neighbor, not in ritual. They are not inclined to pray, though they will do so in times of stress. They are alienated from the churches, because of the rivalry and differences between Christians. They are aware that different creeds teach different things about God and the transcendent world, and they are therefore distrustful of dogma. . . . They have reverence for a Creator; but they feel him to be distant and detached. . . . They recognize Christian moral values, but they reject Puritanism. In a way, they are post-Christian folk. But they are not atheists: and they are more against religions than against religion. . . . They do not have much sense of sin, but they admire saintliness. . . . They think creeds are rather pernicious. . . . They are folk who have belonged to a Christian environment, but they react against regimentation. They are skeptical, but are not atheists. (Smart, 1996, p. 407)

This belief system aligns rather well not only with a great number of Western moviegoers but also with Balian. Though he is a Crusader, the movie never shows him engaging in public worship. He does not pray before battle. His only prayer in the movie is simply one line, "God, what is it you want from me?" Later, he confesses that he hears no answer to his prayer. He practices a heart-religion that seeks to love his neighbors, but he is never too sure of his beliefs. When he learns the words of Muslim prayers, he says, "Sounds like our prayers," reinforcing the popular pluralist conviction that all religions are not really all that different. Roger Ebert describes Balian as agnostic, but he fits better in the "large, gentle twilight zone between religiousness and agnosticism" that Smart describes. He is post-Christian; as he says

to a friend, "It seems I have lost my religion."¹² His friend replies, "I put no stock in religion. By the word 'religion' I've seen the lunacy of fanatics of every denomination be called the will of God." Balian and those closest to him practice not a fanatical faith but rather a skeptical one.¹³ This faith may have doubts, but at least it is authentic. By identifying with Balian and his convictions, audiences can see the root problem of the Crusades (and their modern analogies) not in themselves but in the fanatical convictions of Guy, Reynald, and those like them. They are absolved of guilt.

The film not only gives viewers a host of reasons to identify with Balian, but it also frames Balian's involvement in the Middle East as analogous to American involvement there. Prior to the American invasion of Iraq, the presidential administration told the public repeatedly that war was the last resort—something they would engage in only after all other efforts were exhausted.¹⁴ Likewise, Balian ends up in the Middle East not because it was his first choice but because he had no other options. At the beginning of the film, Balian is in France, where he meets his father Godfrey for the first time. Godfrey is a Crusader who comes to ask his son to join him in Jerusalem. Balian responds, "My place is here," and he tells his father that he wants nothing of him. Godfrey asks repeatedly, but Balian remains steadfast. It is clear that the latter has no desire to be a Crusader, to fight Muslims, or to occupy land in Palestine.

Yet Balian ends up precisely in this role through a series of events that he does not fully control. The movie portrays Balian as struggling with grief after the death of his wife who committed suicide when their child died. Amid Balian's mourning, a malicious priest steals his wife's necklace, decapitates her corpse, and then taunts Balian about her presence in hell. In a moment of seemingly justified rage, Balian responds with classic Hollywood justice, killing the priest. Balian flees to his father, who has already headed back to Jerusalem. Officials soon come to arrest Balian. Though Balian is willing to go with them, his father refuses to let his

¹²He also says, "God does not know me." Similarly, King Baldwin confesses, "God be with you. He's no longer with me."

¹³The place where the movie is perhaps most inaccurate in its portrayal of Balian is the spiritual claims it attributes to him. As Saladin's army encircles Jerusalem and lays siege, Balian stirs his troops with what is supposed to be a moving piece of rhetoric. He tells them that all religions have equal claim to the holy sites of Jerusalem and concludes that "we defend this city, not to protect these stones [i.e., the holy places] but the people living within these walls." Such sentiment could hardly be further from the truth. Prior to the attack, Saladin gave the city the opportunity to surrender the city without combat (which would have fulfilled Balian's goal of protecting people), but the city refused. In a statement attributed to Balian, the reason the Crusaders stayed in Jerusalem was because it was "the place of your Lord's tomb" (quoted [and attributed to Balian] in Lyons & Jackson, 1982, p. 273).

A similar fabrication occurs when Balian agrees to terms of surrender with Saladin. In the movie, he says, "Before I lose [the city], I will burn it to the ground. Your holy places, ours. Every last thing in Jerusalem that drives men mad." On the one hand, the historical Balian did threaten to destroy both the possessions of his people and the holy sites of Islam. But he did so not because he believed such places drive people mad, but because it looked inevitable that Saladin would take the city. Rather than allowing Saladin's army to gain possession of the Crusaders' material goods, Balian threatened to burn them. He also threatened that should Saladin continue his campaign, he would burn their holy sites. It was a desperate and last-ditch threat based on the assumption that these holy places are of immense value—not that they are responsible for religious fanaticism (Maalouf, 1984, p. 198). The film thus recreates Balian in a way that suggests he practices not a religion caught up in rituals, relics, and artifacts, but rather a more spiritual and skeptical faith.

¹⁴As President Bush ("President Bush Addresses," 2003) put it when he announced that the war had begun, "Our nation enters this conflict reluctantly." Similarly, on May 1, 2003, when declaring the end of major combat operations in Iraq, he said, "The use of force has been—and remains—our last resort" ("President Bush Announces," 2003).

son go. A battle ensues, and the officials are killed. At that point, Balian has little choice but to follow his father's urgings and go to Jerusalem, lest he stay in France and face certain imprisonment or death. The events of his life force him to the Middle East. In the character of Balian, moviegoers learn that Western presence in the Middle East is so often not a stubborn choice made with malicious intentions, but rather the best choice given the circumstances. With a hero like Balian, they need not feel guilty when it happens.

While Balian did not originally intend to go to Jerusalem, he learns what great opportunities await him there. En route to Palestine, his father Godfrey describes the Holy Land in terms of the American dream: "Do you know what lies in the Holy Land? A new world. A man, who in France had not a house, is in the Holy Land the master of a city. . . . There, at the end of the world, you are not what you are born but what you have it in yourself to be."¹⁵ Echoing classic colonialist rhetoric about America, the movie frames Palestine not as land that Arabs held for centuries but rather as a wonderful opportunity for Balian to gain power and prosper. Balian learns that the oppression of Europe exists no more in the "new world."¹⁶

Godfrey gives similar advice a short while later. He is about to die, having been wounded in the battle with officials who tried to arrest Balian. Lying on his deathbed, Godfrey instructs Balian to obey the king of Jerusalem. Balian asks what the king could ask of him. Godfrey replies, "A better world than has ever been seen. A kingdom of conscience. A kingdom of heaven. There is peace between Christian and Muslim. We live together. Or, between Saladin and the king, we try. Did you think that lay at the end of a Crusade? It does." In no uncertain terms, the movie here presents the Crusades in the noblest of terms. Despite the massacres (which Godfrey never mentions), the end result is a utopia of tolerance. The audiences watching this film are here told that despite what battles need to be fought in the Middle East and no matter what costs accrue along the way, the end result aligns with our highest ideals and visions. It is the fulfillment of the American dream (some would say, destiny), the chance to bring about heaven on earth.¹⁷ The movie here again echoes the Bush administration's rhetoric, which six months into the invasion attempted to portray Iraq as beginning to approximate this type of tolerance.¹⁸ Both the movie and the presidential administration sought to persuade their audiences that tolerance and harmony lies on the other side of military involvement in the Middle East. There is no mention of death and destruction possibly persisting.

In the movie, Balian begins to create the utopia his father envisioned. He arrives at his father's land in Ibelin. The land is portrayed as extremely arid—virtually uninhabitable. The

¹⁵As Cambridge University scholar Jonathan Riley-Smith points out, however, "for most crusaders there was no prospect of material gain, only great expenditure on enterprises that were arduous and dangerous." Riley-Smith is among the reviewers who had problems with the movie on ideological grounds. He attacks the movie because "the Holy Land is portrayed as a kind of early America, a New World welcoming enterprising immigrants from an impoverished and repressive Europe" (Riley-Smith, 2005).

¹⁶Such sentiment is quite similar to how the movie presents the Crusades at its opening. The following words appear on the screen at the very beginning of the film: "It is almost 100 years since Christian armies from Europe seized Jerusalem. Europe suffers in the grip of repression and poverty. Peasant and lord alike flee to the Holy Land in search of fortune or salvation."

¹⁷The first European settlers in America used this type of concept to frame their colonizing efforts, seeing themselves as "a City upon a hill" (cf. Matthew 5:14). See Allitt (1999, pp. 61–62).

¹⁸Addressing the nation, Bush said, "Iraq's new leaders are showing the openness and tolerance that democracy requires—and also the courage" ("President's Radio Address," 2003).

air is so filled with dust that viewers can make out no more than silhouettes of palm trees only a short distance away. As Balian looks at the land, he is told, "Your father was important. His lands were not." An associate of his father informs him, "You have a thousand acres, a hundred families. You have Christians, Jews, Muslims. You have 50 pairs of oxen." Balian replies, "What we do not have is water." The next scene shows Arabs digging several wells on Balian's land as he oversees them. Once water is found, Balian commands his workers to create a well. Next, a vast system of aqueducts is erected, reminiscent of the Roman colonizers. Water soon flows everywhere. A few scenes later, an aerial shot reveals a complete transformation of the land. Vegetation abounds. Some plots of land are even flooded—so much water exists. The movie tells us that this blacksmith from France is able to do far more with the land than Arabs ever could, transforming this desert into a virtual Garden of Eden. Lest viewers miss this fact, Sibylla explicitly tells Balian, "You've been given a patch of dirt, and it seems you will build a new Jerusalem here."¹⁹ Balian replies, "It is my land. Who would I be if I did not try to make it better?"

Many of the classic elements of colonialist narrative are present here. First, it is significant what narratives this one blocks and competes against. The events it describes take place over eight decades after the land was seized and colonized, meaning viewers never learn the brutal story of how the land was confiscated. They can act as though such violence never happened and embrace "the myth of the empty land." Also excluded from the film are the lived realities of the hundred families who now inhabit Balian's land. Audiences never learn their names or see them as real characters. All they learn is that they are "Jewish, Christian, Muslim," so that colonization can appear as a wonderful expression of multiculturalism.²⁰ Second, the land is portrayed as belonging to Balian. There are no other claims on this property. He is told it is his land. He claims it as his land. He stresses that he merely seeks to make his land better. Furthermore, the people inhabiting this land are also portrayed as belonging to him. He is told, "You have . . . a hundred families. You have Christians, Jews, Muslims." It is not a far cry from slave-imagery, as Balian watches Arabs swing pickaxes to dig his wells while he eats a piece of fruit.²¹ Finally, the colonized are nevertheless grateful and excited about what Balian, their benevolent colonizer, has achieved. They cheer and frolic as the water pours through the aqueducts.²² Raka Shome describes how many Hollywood movies make similar moves as part of their colonial rhetoric:

¹⁹The Christian Bible portrays the "new Jerusalem" as the actualization of the kingdom of heaven at the end of time, describing it with language like that of the Garden of Eden. See Revelation 22:2, 14, 19.

²⁰Similarly, "Through a happy cross-cultural encounter and a sharing of gifts, *Pocahontas* suggests that colonialism was simply one manifestation of today's preferable multicultural world" (Buescher & Ono, 1996, p. 133).

²¹He joins them in digging at times, but there is no doubt that he is the one with the power. He is, in the words of his father, "the [slave?] master of a city." It is also not coincidental that a White man is the one who finally strikes water. In a classic Orientalist move, the Saracens (who in reality are renowned for their abilities to locate water amid the most arid of landscapes) are here portrayed as inferior to the Occidentals.

²²In this sense, those on "Balian's land" appear to consent to his rule and domination. Such a portrayal is quite similar to how Ranajit Guha and others in Subaltern Studies have characterized colonial discourse in India. Guha talks about the assumption, for example, "that colonial rule in South Asia was based on the consent of the colonized just as much as the rule of the metropolitan bourgeoisie in a sovereign Western country is based on its citizens' consent." He goes on to explain that this assumption "continues to inform neocolonialist writing . . . today as one of its basic tenets" (Guha, 1997, pp. xvii–xviii).

Such representations of the white man as being able to make a home for himself in stark living conditions, and emerging as a champion of those who constitute those conditions is a characteristic trait of colonialism that enables the white imperial adventurer to assert his manliness and become a hero. (Shome, 1996, pp. 513–514)

Balian re-enacts the narrative of the “White Man’s Burden” and becomes a “white savior” for those of the Middle East.²³

In short, Balian may be a colonizer, but he is the most benevolent and skilled of colonizers, one able to achieve what the colonized never could. Not surprisingly, this portrayal of Balian aligns quite closely with how the Bush administration attempted to portray success in Iraq. As the White House said in April 2004, “Current projects will provide running water to 75% of the [Iraqi] population—more than at any time in Iraq’s history” (“Public Works,” 2004).²⁴ In each case, the Occidental is able to do more with the land and more for the people than the Oriental ever could. In a common discourse, the presidential administration and this film told audiences that a better world awaits on the other side of invasion and occupation. Predictions of catastrophe and disorder are nowhere to be found.

THE WESTERNIZATION OF SALADIN

This film not only comforts Western moviegoers by absolving their guilt over colonizing efforts in the Middle East, but it also comforts them by alleviating their deep-seated fear of Islam. Edward Said describes how Western discourse has for centuries portrayed the East in terms of the inferior other—fundamentally different from the superior West. “Yet,” he says, “where Islam was concerned, European fear, if not always respect, was in order.” Said (1978/2003, p. 59) goes on to describe how for centuries in the West, “Islam [came] to symbolize terror, devastation, the demonic, hordes of hated barbarians. . . . a lasting trauma.” These words were first published in 1978, but the fears Said described have only reached new levels of intensity since September 11, 2001. *Kingdom of Heaven* was released into a society whose recent and distant memories made them deeply afraid of Islam.

Said explains that one strategy Orientalism employs for assuaging these fears of Islam is exerting control over the faith by capturing it through description. He writes, “Like Walter Scott’s Saracens, the European representation of the Muslim, Ottoman, or Arab was always a way of controlling the redoubtable Orient, and to a certain extent the same is true of the methods of contemporary learned Orientalists, whose subject is not so much the East itself as the East made known, and therefore less fearsome, to the Western reading public” (Said, 1978/2003,

²³For more on the genre of Hollywood movies that portrays a White savior in distant, typically “third world” countries, see Shome, 1996, p. 504. Shome also describes the “rhetoric of liberal white paternalism,” which this movie likewise reinforces.

²⁴Missing from both this movie and the Bush administration’s rhetoric is any discussion about centralized, government-controlled water being a good thing. Bedouin peoples have survived for millennia in the Middle East, finding water on their own amid the most arid of climates. As modern notions of the state, its boundaries, and its control of resources and citizens are imposed on such people, their way of life has been silently dying—with little or no discussion of what the world is losing.

p. 60).²⁵ Said (1978/2003, p. 66) goes on to describe several depictions of Mohammed by Westerners, and then he insightfully elaborates on the calming effects these depictions have on the ever-fearful Western mind: "Mohammed no longer roams the Eastern world as a threatening, immoral debauchee; he sits quietly on his . . . portion of the Orientalist stage. He is given . . . an explanation, even a development, all of which are subsumed under the simple statements that prevent him from straying elsewhere."

Kingdom of Heaven makes similar moves when portraying Saladin. The Western mindset has many reasons to fear him. He was the great conqueror of the Crusaders, the unifier of the Muslim world, and the Muslim figure second in importance only to Mohammed. Saladin's self-chosen bibliographer recorded his desire to fight Christian infidels not only in the Middle East but throughout the Mediterranean: "I will follow the infidels and fight them until I die, or until no infidel is left on the face of this earth" (quoted in Cline, 2004, p. 199). As mentioned above, both Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein referred to themselves as "the Second Saladin" (Cline, 2004, pp. 167, 197–200). He was and is someone to be feared by the West. Yet, when this film represents Saladin, viewers' fears diminish. The movie allows Westerners to feel they have encapsulated the great Muslim conqueror. He is contained within this movie, captured on celluloid, unable to cause additional harm. He is made known and therefore less fearsome. The film tells viewers that he is not that threatening after all. He is a respectable, even likeable, character.

Said explains that a favorite way of depicting Islam in Orientalist discourse is by describing this faith not on its own terms but on Western terms. Focusing on examples from previous centuries, Said (1978/2003, p. 60) writes that "one constraint acting upon Christian thinkers who tried to understand Islam was an analogical one; since Christ is the basis of Christian faith, it was assumed—quite incorrectly—that Mohammed was to Islam as Christ was to Christianity. Hence the polemic name 'Mohammedanism' given to Islam." Said (1978/2003, p. 62, cf. pp. 61, 63, 72) goes on to explain that this older Orientalist discourse depicted Islam as a heretical, misguided form of Christianity: "The Orient and the Oriental . . . become repetitious pseudo-incarnations of some great original (Christ, Europe, the West) they were supposed to have been imitating." In this way, the Orient is presented as both alien and familiar.

In the film *Kingdom of Heaven*, Islam is not portrayed as a pseudo-incarnation of Christianity *per se*; rather, it is portrayed, particularly in the character of Saladin, as a pseudo-incarnation of post-Christian religious belief. Said (1978/2003, p. 122) notes that modern Orientalism utilizes the structures of past Orientalism, albeit in secularized ways, which is precisely what takes place here. In the movie, viewers find Saladin not as an individual driven by his faith or passion for *jihad* to cast out the Christian infidels and unite Islam. Rather, Saladin is portrayed as someone not far from Balian religiously. Like the Crusader, Saladin does not pray or use religious rhetoric to stir his troops (other Muslims do that). Saladin acknowledges that God's hand may be involved in world affairs, but like Balian he is quite astute and ultimately driven by *Realpolitik*. The film's depiction of him seeks not to explain Islam on its own terms, but rather to portray the Muslim leader using a number of Western ideals.

²⁵The reference to Walter Scott's *Saracens* is the book *The Talisman*, a 19th century fictitious novel about the Crusades, which appears to have influenced the writing of the *Kingdom of Heaven* (Riley-Smith, 2005).

In one of the first appearances by Saladin, he argues with a Muslim cleric who demands to know why Saladin withdrew from Kerak instead of attacking the Crusaders there when victory appeared likely.

Cleric to Saladin (*in disbelief at Saladin's actions*): Why did we retire? Why? God did not favor [Reynald]. God, alone, determines the results of battles.

Saladin (*growing angry as he speaks*): The results of battles are determined by God, but also by preparations, numbers, the absence of disease and the availability of water. One cannot maintain a siege with the enemy behind.²⁶ How many battles did God win for the Muslims before I came? (*Then speaking more calmly:*) That is, before God determined that I should come.

Cleric: Few enough. That is because we were sinful.

Saladin: It is because you were unprepared.

Cleric (*rebuking Saladin*): If you think that way, you shall not be king for long.

Saladin: When I am not king, I quake for Islam. (*Implying that the cleric has overstayed his welcome:*) Thank you for your visit.

Several features should be noted here. Saladin is certainly different from the cleric with whom he argues, whom the film implies (and many reviewers agree) is a fanatic. Like many post-Christian individuals, Saladin sees God as somewhat distant, not involved too closely in the affairs of humanity. Saladin acknowledges a role for religion, but the stress and tone of his voice accentuate that he is primarily concerned with more immediate matters. He understands the practical and material factors involved in warfare (*Realpolitik*) and does not think primarily of God when making military plans. Saladin implies that it is his own genius, rather than divine will, that has led to victories—though he is careful not to factor God out completely. Saladin moreover embodies the Western ideal of segregating his personal faith from his public office. He utters the words, “When I am not king, I quake for Islam,” upholding the American conviction of a private-public distinction with religion. Saladin confesses to be religious—perhaps even zealously so (“quake”)—but his faith has minimal effect on his political and military strategies. He could be a Western leader.

In another scene near the end of the movie,²⁷ Saladin and Balian meet to discuss the surrender of Jerusalem:

Saladin: Will you yield the city?

Balian: Before I lose it, I will burn it to the ground. Your holy places, ours. Every last thing in Jerusalem that drives men mad.

Saladin: I wonder if it would not be better if you did. You will destroy it?

²⁶This sentence alludes to King Baldwin's army, which in the movie is presented as coming to fight Saladin's forces from behind.

²⁷There is another scene involving Saladin prior to this one, when he decapitates Reynald, much to the satisfaction of the audience. While the historical Saladin did so, the actual events involve interesting features of how Muslim tradition was upheld (Maalouf, 1984, p. 193). The film, rather than presenting Muslim traditions on their own terms, portrays Reynald's death in terms of classic Hollywood justice.

Balian replies that he will destroy everything. Saladin in turn agrees not to harm any of the Christians in Jerusalem, and Balian consents to surrendering the city. After a few more words, the two have their parting shot:

Balian: What is Jerusalem worth?

Saladin: Nothing. (*Saladin turns away, walks towards his camp, and then turns back:*) Everything.

In this scene, the film shrewdly approximates historical events while subtly crafting Saladin to become a voice for Western convictions about religion. Compare this account with that of a Medieval Muslim historian:

Balian tried to soften [Saladin's] heart, but in vain. He then addressed him in these terms: 'O sultan... if we see that death is inevitable, then, by God, we will kill our own women and children and burn all that we possess.... Then we shall destroy the sacred rock, al-Aqṣā mosque, and many other sites; we will kill the five thousand Muslim prisoners we now hold, and will exterminate the mounts and all the beasts. (Maalouf, 1984, p. 198)

Amin Maalouf (1984, p. 198), author of *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, explains that Saladin then "turned to his advisers and asked them if he could not be released from his pledge to take the city by the sword—simply in order to avoid the destruction of the holy places of Islam. Their response was affirmative." So what we have with the historical Saladin is a leader who cares deeply for the sacred Islamic sites of Jerusalem and is even willing to go back on earlier vows for the sake of preserving the holy sites of his faith—hardly the type of person who would suggest, "Perhaps it would be better [if they were burned]." When the film depicts Saladin as hinting (even admitting) that Jerusalem may be worth "nothing," it transforms this leader who historically cared about Jerusalem above all else into a figure much more understandable and much more comforting for Western viewers.²⁸

The creators of *Kingdom of Heaven* have assumed that religion of all types is fundamentally a spiritual matter, belonging to a separate "spiritual" realm rather than the physical world. While that is true of much of Western Protestantism and many other post-Christian systems of belief, it stands in sharp contrast to Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Judaism, and Islam—all of which attach greatest importance to holy sites and physical objects. For these religions, none of which enjoys a position of hegemony in America, faith is a physical matter.

Much like those who in centuries past characterized Islam on Christian terms and with Christian analogies, *Kingdom of Heaven* characterizes Islam in terms of post-Christian spirituality, undermining some of the most fundamental tenets of Islam.²⁹ Saladin does not speak about his own faith on its own terms. He does not express deepest concern for the sacred

²⁸As Maalouf (1984, p. 180) notes, Saladin's primary military objective in life was "to reconquer the occupied territories, above all Jerusalem."

The film's desire to make Saladin understandable to a Western audience is consonant with Orientalism's portrayal of the Orient as both alien and familiar (Said, 1978/2003, p. 72). Though many features about Saladin are alien (dress, appearance, language, people), his faith is strangely familiar.

²⁹One of the five pillars of Islam is *haji*. It states that every Muslim who is able should engage in a pilgrimage to Mecca. Islam is a faith with deep physical roots (Smart, 1996, pp. 297–298).

rock and the al-Aqṣā mosque, described by some as “the jewel of the signet ring of Islam” (Lyons & Jackson, 1982, p. 276). Rather, Saladin is here a figment of the Western imagination, what Said (1978/2003, p. 62) calls a “repetitious pseudo-incarnation of some great original (Christ, Europe, the West),” in this case, post-Christian conviction. Moviegoers thus walk away from *Kingdom of Heaven* not with a deeper understanding of Islam or why Muslims would be concerned about holy places but rather with the erroneous belief that Islam, at least in its more noble forms, dimly reflects their own assumptions about religion. This film squandered any opportunities it had for teaching the basics of Islam.

The film stresses repeatedly that Saladin (along with Balian and other positive characters) upheld tolerance as a high ideal. On the one hand, there is some historical basis for this portrayal. Saladin, for example, considered destroying Christian places of worship once he gained control of Jerusalem, but decided against it and allowed Christian pilgrims to visit them.³⁰ Examples like this should be made known to a Western public who may not be aware of them. On the other hand, such examples were exaggerated by the film.³¹ More importantly, these examples were presented in terms of tolerance and religious diversity, two Western ideals, instead of the highly celebrated Islamic tradition of hospitality, which one suspects lay behind the historical Saladin’s practices. Once again, this film embodies Orientalist discourse, presenting Islam in Western categories, not its own. Instead of allowing viewers to learn about the depth and breadth of Islamic hospitality, the film controls and manipulates Islam by presenting it with Western ideals of the 21st century.

The film’s message of religious tolerance, moreover, provides the veneer that made this movie appear commendable to so many viewers. Its “happy scenes of religious diversity” (MacDonald, 2005) detracted attention from the ways the film actually embodies colonialism and Orientalism. Furthermore, it does not depict genuine religious diversity because it does not present several religions on their own terms, but rather only Western beliefs, some of which were dressed in Arabic attire. Viewers can walk away from the film with mistaken assumptions about how difficult and costly it is to achieve genuine religious tolerance among actual faith communities.

Said (1978/2003, p. 301) says that one of Orientalism’s principal dogmas “is that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared . . . or to be controlled.” *Kingdom of Heaven* provides a mechanism whereby Western audiences can shift from their fear of Islam to a sense that they have control of Islam. It uses, encapsulates, and manipulates one of Muslim’s most feared heroes, robbing him of his core beliefs and making him a mouthpiece for Western conviction.³² Portraying Islam as a reconfiguration of Western spirituality may curb hate crimes, but it also silences that faith’s voice in our world.

³⁰This historical event is approximated by the movie when it shows Saladin walking through Jerusalem. He sees a golden cross (a Protestant one at that) that has fallen off a table. He stops, picks it up, and sets it upright. For an account of the historical event, see Lyons and Jackson (1982, p. 276).

³¹According to Paul Cobb, professor of medieval history at the University of Notre Dame: “The greatest inaccuracy is the theme of religious tolerance. . . . To have religious tolerance as the central theme of a movie about the Crusades is like having lasers in a movie about the Civil War. It’s a modern concept being imported into the film” (quoted in MacDonald, 2005).

³²It embodies what Said (1978/2003, p. 12) defines as Orientalism, that is, “a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different . . . world.”

CONCLUSION

Kingdom of Heaven illustrates the need for the “permanent criticism” that McKerrow and Foucault envision. Even the most overtly liberating rhetoric may actually serve the most oppressive ends. This film emphasized repeatedly the value of tolerance, while ironically persuading audiences of the value of imperialist violence in the Middle East. Amid its happy multicultural scenes, it subtly recounts the myth of how the colonized need benevolent colonizers, how Western military involvement in the Middle East can bring wonderful things, and how the Orient is a dim reflection of the West. It is a sophisticated work of neocolonial rhetoric that appears to uphold openness as a high ideal and to critique religious fanaticism. But cloaked within its message is the neocolonial myth that Western involvement in the Middle East can take two forms, one based on extremism that must be denounced and another that embodies nobility through colonization and occupation. Through the hero Balian, viewers learn that the Middle East desires Western dominance to achieve its full potential and embody diversity. The film joins political voices in rationalizing Western military efforts there, absolving colonial guilt and blinding viewers to the potentially catastrophic outcomes of military engagement. Expressing Orientalist discourse for post-Christian audiences, it alleviates fears of Islam, containing Saladin on film and filling his mouth with Western convictions. In short, *Kingdom of Heaven* is classic colonial rhetoric repackaged for a post-9/11 audience. Its liberating message of religious tolerance is fully negated by its justification of violent and imperialistic practices. It is one voice in a chorus that sings of the nobility of war.

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