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Patrick Banner  
*Denison University*

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# **Knights in Shining Armor: The Impact of the Middle Ages on the Modern Western Perception of War**

**By Patrick Banner**

Earth is a difficult place to live. Despite its abundance of food, water, and other resources necessary for survival, these resources are scattered unevenly across the globe, and humans during their early periods have often resorted to war as a way to continue to attain these resources and thus to survive. For this reason war is a vital aspect of human history, and war is embedded in human consciousness. Yet war today is waged with a fervor and a thoroughness never before known. As Chris Hedges discusses in *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, war is not only about winning; an entire society must be convinced of the righteousness of the war, because the entire population takes part in war. This involvement of whole societies in war did not start until the early modern period, but the foundations needed to convince populations were laid in the Middle Ages. This era, during which war was shockingly prominent, saw in many ways the birth of our modern perception of war. Specifically, two major ideas from the Middle Ages have a significant impact. The Crusades brought us the concept of “holy war,” in which a will higher than any individual appears not only to drive the war but also to justify it. The code of chivalry that developed at about the same time idealized violence in many ways, placing it in the same set of morals as loyalty and courage. These two concepts – the idea of “holy war” and the code of chivalry – are central to the Middle Ages' impact on the modern perception of war because they created long-lasting rifts in Western consciousness.

Because we return to these rifts each time we wage war, understanding the scars of the Middle Ages is essential to making peace in the modern world.

The First Crusade, starting in 1096, was medieval Latin Christendom's first taste of “holy war,” and it was precisely what Europe needed at the time. After the Germanic tribes' destruction of the Western Roman Empire at the end of the fifth century, Europe was thrown into chaos. Trade devolved, infrastructure went into disrepair, and people could do little to avoid the famine, disease, and poverty that arose from the crumbling of the empire. During this time, one institution emerged as the guiding force of medieval Europe: the Christian Church. Its ascent to power meant that, as decades and centuries passed, more and more desperate people put their hopes in the forgiveness of God. Karen Armstrong, in *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World*, notes that a Western Christian identity was beginning to form around the trauma of this time, polarized to such forces as the increasingly invasive empire of Islam, experiencing its golden age during this period (52-53). By about 1000 AD, the Church had channeled a great deal of importance into specific holy places, such as monasteries and shrines, for the people to find solace; yet it was clear to Europeans that the holiest place of all could only be Jerusalem, the place where Jesus was crucified (Armstrong 54). A pilgrimage was needed. In the same time period, towns and trade began to revive, because much of the chaos of the Early Middle Ages had ended, especially invasions by the Vikings (Perry 143). This created a new confidence in Europe – the Western Christians believed that God was with them (Armstrong 60). Europeans, still developing a Christian identity, now had a new self-determination for such adventures as pilgrimages to the Holy Land. In 1095, Pope Urban II called for the First Crusade to retake the Holy Land from the Seljuk

Turks. It should be no surprise that more than fifty thousand people, of all social classes, set out for the Holy Land (Armstrong 68) – the pressures of religion and self-determination were ready to be released, and Europe would take the next step in forming the Western identity.

The violence of the First Crusade and subsequent “holy wars” left deep rifts on Europe and its developing identity, not unlike violence leaves scars on the mind of an impressionable child. The concept of “holy war” is perhaps a contradiction in itself – if one of the Bible's ten commandments is “You shall not murder” (*The Holy Bible: New International Version* Exod. 20.13), then the idea of Christians waging war seems nonsensical (Armstrong 63). Yet holy war originates in the Bible itself, as Armstrong suggests when writing of the Jewish conquest of Jerusalem as the first holy war. God himself talks of destroying those living in the Promised Land, that the Jews might live there: “My angel will... bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites, and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out. ... You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces” (Exod. 23.23-24). There is a reversal of ordinary morality in this most ancient holy war. This apparent reversal applies in war today, which, for Hedges, involves a “[dismantling of] our moral universe” (150). The power and force of a holy war in a religion like Judaism springs from the fact that there is only a single God, while polytheists could see many possible solutions because they believed in many gods. For the Jews and later Christians, there is only one solution, and that is the belief in and submission to God (Armstrong 16). God's higher will serves not only as justification but motivation for holy wars of that era. From the very beginning, these wars had an absolute quality to them, in which one solution was right and all the others were

unacceptable; the righteousness of God versus those living in the Promised Land, or any other enemy the Jews might face, had the force of a battle between right and wrong, between good and evil. This idea – that God's holiness and higher will justified the terrible crimes committed in war – survived into the Crusades and was used by the Church as the reason for invading the Holy Land (Briggs 153). The resulting fervor allowed for such atrocities as the massacre of Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem upon its conquest in 1098. The contradiction of “Christian warfare” was covered up by “a powerful complex of passions” (Armstrong 68), and this ability of the Crusaders to rationalize or repress the horrors committed in war, ostensibly justified by some higher will, became a part of Western identity.

Successive Crusades were mostly failures, but Latin Christendom, through these Crusades, refined the ability to fall back on a higher will to justify war and repress its terrible violence, placing the memories so deep within the collective consciousness that each new generation simply forgot the horrors committed. In later centuries even wars that were not directed at the Holy Land were depicted as crusades. French royal propaganda during the wars against the Flemish of the early 1300s contained such passages as “He who wages war against the King [of France] works against the whole Church, against Catholic doctrine, against holiness and justice, and against the Holy Land” (qtd. in Briggs 170). During and after the Great Schism, popes elevated conflicts against both rival popes and their own political rivals to the status of crusades (Briggs 170-171). During the early 1400s, the religious reform movement of Eastern Europeans like Jan Hus became the target of several crusades (Briggs 171). The Age of Exploration, which immediately followed the Renaissance, saw the conquest of civilizations and destruction

of native cultures masked in “the fine phrases of chivalric deeds and the propagation of the Faith” (Briggs 176). Today, holy war as a concept survives, though the “higher will” for which violence is justified has changed. Michael Howard argues that the “higher will” has shifted from God to kings to country, and that soon the ideas of “humanity” and “the global society” will become the newest “higher will” (134-145). Chris Hedges argues that governments and other institutions place their wars above individual will by appealing to forces like God and country as well as to the dead, the victims who “rule” the conflict (94). The ability of the Western world to justify warfare and keep its atrocities out of the glare of rational thought stems from the existence of a power that is higher than any mere mortal, a power against which the public cannot argue; this is the cornerstone of holy war, in the Bible just as in the Crusades and in the modern world.

As the Crusades gave Europeans a way to justify violence, the code of chivalry also gained traction in the Western mind. Chivalry has its origins in the values of the Germanic tribes that conquered Europe at the end of the classical age – loyalty, bravery, and prowess in battle (Perry 139). As the Church grew stronger during the medieval period, it sought to channel the violent energies of the newly-developing class of knights to its own purposes (Perry 140). Thus, the Church, as will be seen, naturalized warfare as a means to salvation (Briggs 153); in doing so, Germanic values were given a Christian element that included, for example, protecting the poor. This fusion of Germanic and Christian values was the code of chivalry (Perry 140). Chivalry became a potent force in the Western mind because of the knights that adhered to it. Because of a lack of centralized government, some of the would-be royal power flowed to the knights, who, in addition to their wealth, gained a certain form of fame (Saul 21). This fame was

augmented by the development of a new literary genre, the chivalric biography (Saul 23). Briggs notes that in this genre, “The dirty business of warfare is transformed into something beautiful and good” (Briggs 167). Marked by a shift in emphasis from groups to individuals and from characteristics to actions, these works often described the prowess, courage, and skill of the subject, as well as the thrill of action and elation of victory (Allmand 23). These are central to our perceptions of and ideas about war even today. The survival of works such as the *Histoire*, written of William the Marshal in the 1230s (Saul 22-23), shows us how important such literature was in the Middle Ages. Tales like these served a twofold purpose – not only were they used as models for how would-be knights ought to act, but they also acted rather like today's public relations departments, serving to bolster the knights' fame and control public perception of these figures (Saul 25). These knights, then, could be seen as the precursors of today's celebrities (Saul 25), and both upper and lower social orders aspired to be like the knights, whose code of chivalry was so strong a force as to be second to, even fused with, religion (Kaeuper 186).

The code of chivalry contained a strong idealization of violence. The original Germanic values included prowess in battle and the value of violence itself (Perry 139). The Church channeled these values into Christianity and thus into chivalry by preaching that violence in the service of God was a way to earn salvation. Clerics, as Charles Briggs elucidates, became “avid war propagandists” who, both in sermons and in literature, supported and legitimized participation in just war as a holy activity (153). Works like *L'arbre des batailles* (*The Tree of Battles*), written by a doctor of canon law, Honoré Bouvet, gave legal expression to this idea, already an accepted social standpoint (Briggs

152). The *Livre de chevalerie (Book of Chivalry)* by Geoffroy de Charny, one of the most influential medieval works about chivalry, showed that men “found in their exhilarating and fulfilling fighting the key to identity” (qtd. in Briggs 153). In the essay “Chivalry, the State, and Public Order,” Richard Kaeuper argues that it was believed that knights not only had a tendency but a right and a duty to violence (185). He also notes that knights waged private war – war against other knights and their territories – when there was no external enemy (225-227). That knights waged private war and committed other violence, and were not only expected to do so but were also glorified in literature for it, highlights the central role of violence in the lives of the knights. Thus violence – purposeful, legitimized, and even justified as a holy activity – was an integral aspect of chivalry, and when Europe adopted this code into its moral and social thought, this legitimization and justification of violence was absorbed with it.

In the Late Middle Ages a gap began to form between the changing reality of war and the static image of the honorable warrior, whose code of chivalry remained an ideal. M. G. A. Vale notes that the development of the first firearms made war “impersonal and mechanical” (57). He illustrates that, through Renaissance art and literature, which tried to beautify the gun for a chivalrous society, “The harsh reality of war, and of the gun's bite and sting, remembered in the words *couleuvrine* [“like a grass snake”], *serpentine* [“serpent-like”], and *faucon* [“falcon”], was being smothered under a cloak of illusion” (72). What gap may have existed between the reality of war and how war was perceived through the lens of chivalry became much wider with the appearance of the gun. At the same time, the bellicose predispositions of Later Middle Ages nation-states encouraged the development of standing armies whose right to violence was given by the king; this is



an image in stark contrast to that of the “knight errant” (Keen 45), who searched for war of his own initiative and waged it as his vocation from birth and with God on his side. The power of the knights was flowing to centralized government, and knights as a social class began to decline. Yet chivalry survived, adopted by the new king's soldiers (Briggs 163-164). Chivalry also continued to be associated with social status, and many who would not gain status through inheritance, including second sons and bastards of the elite, waged war for the purpose of claiming new social status (Keen 39-44). Chivalry came to be something earned after fighting honorably in battle, and with it came an associated claim to nobility. Chivalry in its new form infiltrated the aristocratic upper class of the early modern period. Maurice Keen concludes for Western Europe that, as early as the 1400s, “To live nobly was understood to mean to live by following the profession of arms” – that is, chivalry. This association between social status and chivalry, with its accompanying values of bravery, honor, and idealization of war, continue to be important in Western social thought into the twentieth century and even today (Perry 139).

We still rely on a falsely idealistic image of the modern soldier and modern warfare. Hedges points out that “The myth of war entices us with the allure of heroism” (83). Western society today relies on a cache of “high-blown rhetoric” (84) to draw men to war, ideas like honor, loyalty, and nobility. This is, for Hedges, contrasted with the “impersonal slaughter of modern industrial warfare” in which “Men ... are in service to technology” (84-86). The gap that exists between Hedges's mythic and sensory realities is a virtually direct result of the chivalrous ideal created in the Middle Ages, in which soldiers are so loyal that their determination is never lost, so courageous that they never feel fear, and so skilled in battle that they never die. The myth is augmented by the

Western mind's ability to justify violence by appealing to a higher power, an ability created and refined by the Crusades and subsequent "holy wars." Today, any war can be a "holy war" if its cause is sufficiently justified – the foundation of these wars lies in the belief that some idea, higher, more important, and more powerful than any individual's ability to reason, is the justification and the motivation for violence.

A significant segment of Western civilization, from prominent thinkers to common people, feel that war is irrational and the evil opposed to the good of a peaceful global interdependence (Perry 556). In today's world, war is indeed irrational, at least for the reasons we often claim to fight it. We rely on anachronistic idealisms of war and the soldiers that participate. The soldiers, on average, display no more loyalty or courage than they do plate armor and halberds; war itself has an impersonal, destructive, and horrifying nature that is covered up by the lofty ideas of chivalry and of God, king, and country. Yet these concepts of holy war and the chivalrous soldier survive in Western thought because they have been engraved and refined in our consciousness, from continual and perhaps excessive use over the last thousand years. Holding on to these values not only colors our perception of war, but, as Karen Armstrong argues extensively, it also unnecessarily creates new, practical problems in the world today. To flush these ideas from the Western consciousness would take more effort than many can give and more time than most can visualize, if indeed there is any solution at all. Yet, perhaps there is hope for our would-be peaceful Western society. Holy war and chivalry became so useful because they served as a response to the traumas suffered by Western civilization during the Middle Ages. To understand these values is to recognize that they no longer serve a purpose – simply because there is no longer any threat to the entirety of

Western society. This, then, may be the first step to healing the scars on our collective mind and building the ideal of a truly peaceful society.

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