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Book Review

Ian Almond, *Two Faiths, One Banner: When Muslims Marched With Christians across Europe's Battlegrounds*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009. Pp. 246. \$29.95 (hardcover)

For many Americans and most people around the world, it is still quite a shock to see a black man, born of a biracial marriage between an African Muslim father and an American Christian mother, as the president of the United States of America. Less shocking, because it is less well-known, is that it is becoming a common sight to see Muslims from Africa, Arabia, and parts of Asia fighting in the United States Army against Islamist governments and militias. Yet, it was not so long ago that one of the most senior and distinguished officers in the U.S. Army was an American of Arab descent from Lebanon: General John Abizaid, who oversaw U.S. military operations in Iraq from 2003 to 2007. Not even many Muslims around the world would know that every major city or military base in the United States has a mosque regularly frequented by devout Muslim military personnel who have either just returned from Iraq or will soon be deployed to Afghanistan. The Muslim presence in the U.S. military makes America look like a new Andalusia.

If one flashed backward to the Middle Ages, thousands of Muslim and Christian soldiers could be seen fighting together under one banner against a common rival force of their own respective faiths from Spain in the West to Russia in the East. The new American practices of having the little mosques on military bases, Muslim chaplains in deployments, and marking Muslim soldiers' and sailors' graves with crescents in the Arlington National Cemetery were common features of the old Byzantine, Ottoman and Tsarist empires in which regional and global interests prompted the use of soldiers hailing from minority faith communities.

What circumstances make such situations possible? That is the question that Ian Almond

answers in several ways, though all are strikingly similar on battlefields across Eurasia. In perusing the causes, courses of conflicts, and co-optations that led to conflict across civilizations, Almond drives home the main message of his book, that "the history of Islam and the history of Europe belong to one another," and that "Muslims do not belong to an 'other' civilization, but rather to the essence of a 'Europe' we are quickly in the process of forgetting" (1).

Besides an introduction and conclusion, *Two Faiths, One Banner* has five chapters that span Eurasia from eleventh-century Muslim Spain to nineteenth-century Tsarist Russia. Almond focuses on major military campaigns that exemplify strategic and political alliances between Muslim and Christian groups and governments whose stability and security, as well as peace and prosperity, depended on the loyalty of people of the 'other' faith. Almond reminds the reader that there was nothing new in the Bush-Bandar-bund handholding picture showing the Saudi prince in an informal moment with former President George W. Bush in Crawford, Texas, when Bush got the blessing of the Saudi Kingdom to attack Saddam Hussein. Nor is there anything unique about Muslim non-citizen soldiers and other "green card soldiers" fighting for the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Almond constantly argues that it was the economy, not religion, which motivated both the Muslim conquest and the Christian *Reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula, as well as other military campaigns including the Crusades and numerous jihads. Politics and economics mattered more than religious and ideological preoccupations, but even these could not stop Muslim-Christian alliances against their respective co-religionist rivals.

The unintended consequences of such seemingly disparate coalitions are brought home in *Two Faiths, One Banner's* first chapter, "The Eleventh-Century Spain of Alfonso VI: Emperor of the Two Religions." The chapter focuses on the year 711, when the Umayyad Caliphate of Damascus sent Tariq ibn Zayd (whose name later gave us the term Gibraltar) to the peninsula at the request of the Christian Visigoths to help eliminate their Christian rivals. The Muslims' invasion effectively led to their conquest of, and rule in, Spain for more than five centuries.

While Almond rightly warns readers not to romanticize or liken eleventh-century Muslim Spain to an "interfaith utopia," because it was not, he also stresses that even under most intolerant rulers, "Muslim Spain possessed an infinitely more tolerant environment towards Jews than any Christian society could offer. Indeed, such tolerance was a reason why Jews came to Spain in thousands during Muslim domination—and, naturally, why they also left with equal speed when the Christian rulers regained control" (29). The rise of the Mozarabs (Arabized Christians and Jews in Muslim Spain) to prominence in literature, art and philosophy is highlighted in the book, and exemplified in the lives of judges and scholars, such as Maimonides of Cordova, "probably the greatest Jewish philosopher of all time [who] wrote his *Guide to the Perplexed* (1191) not in Hebrew but in Arabic. [But] there were also Jews (as well as Christians and Muslims) who were unhappy about such multi-lingualism" (30–31). While Muslim Spain was an island of religious coexistence broken by occasional waves of intolerance, it was also a complex world of intra-faith hatreds and invasions that contradicted religious affinities and associations as both Muslim and Christian rulers used soldiers of the other faith in getting rid of their co-religionists' rival kingdoms.

Chapter Two, "Frederick II and the Saracens of Southern Italy," explains the still more perplexing situation of thirteenth-century Muslim Sicily. Across from modern-day Tunisia, the island of Sicily had a large population of more than 30,000 Muslims, whose military and agricultural skills and commercial wealth Frederick had been told was a threat to his Holy Roman Empire. In 1222, when Ibn Ibad, the Sicilian Muslim leader, foolishly revolted against the Hohenstaufen control of the island, the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II (r. 1220–1250), himself a Hohenstaufen, brutally suppressed the revolt. To avoid such a dangerous repetition of any future revolts, the young Frederick carried out the de-Islamization of Sicily as the Church had demanded of him upon coronation. Between 1222 and 1242, Frederick expelled the Muslim population from Sicily, and forcibly resettled them in Lucera, in the center of Apulia, the southeastern region of Italy.

In the new stronghold of Lucera, Fredrick, however, treated Muslims with kindness, with a view to buying their military services, farming and irrigational expertise. He also used Lucera as a valuable source of taxes and revenues, and a secured agricultural supply base in the southern Adriatic. In fact, Pope Gregory loved to mock Fredrick as the "Sultan of Lucera" for his protection of the Lucera Muslims and alleged keeping of a harem. Fredrick needed Muslim fighters against his Christian enemies. Economic and political agendas made, then as now, strange military alliances. These contradictions reflected the thirteenth-century politics of hate and war between Frederick and his Muslim soldiers on the one hand, and his Christian enemies, including three popes, on the other.

Though twice excommunicated by the pope, amazingly Fredrick still won back the Holy Land without any bloodshed and crowned himself the King of Jerusalem. He attracted Muslims, Arabized Jews, and Christian theologians and philosophers to his court, and had them translate Arabic treatises on Greek sciences. Now that he was the *al-anbaratur* ('the Emperor'), as the Arabs called him, in the demographically Muslim-dominated Holy Land, Fredrick showed great curiosity, if not serious interest, in Islam. To secure his imperial interests in the region, Frederick did not flinch from fighting Pope Gregory IV and Pope Innocent IV in 1229–1247.

Hard politico-economic realities and tough military situations, rather than divine commandments, dictated both papal and princely choices. In his wars against the two popes, Fredrick utilized Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. Glowing in the glory of his successful Crusade, and fresh from the Holy Land, in 1429, Fredrick attacked those Italian cities whose populations had rebelled against him on the instigation of Pope Gregory. Fredrick's army was conspicuous by the presence of several thousand Muslim soldiers and their elephants. To the people of Sora, one of the rebellious cities north of Naples, Fredrick showed little mercy. It was razed to the ground, and "its entire population, men, women and children, put to the sword as an example to others" (72). For all the rumors that his Italian enemies and the papacy had spread about his death in the Holy Land, he would have loved to club the Pope to death. He could have, but deliberately did not march on Rome because he still hoped to gain papal pardon and absolution. Gregory absolved him in 1230, a year after of the Sora massacre, only to excommunicate him for the second time eight years later.

If the character of Frederick seems full of contradictions ranging between torturing Muslims in

Sicily when they became a threat to his Holy Roman imperial authority but protecting them in Lucera as he needed them against his Christian enemies, it was because his imperial interests clashed with papal designs in Europe and the Holy Land. The papacy hated his political noncooperation and outright insubordination, especially his refusal to rid the Italian south of his Muslim subjects because he did not want to be seen in the Holy Land and North Africa as the enemy of Islam. No wonder the papacy derided Frederick the "baptized Sultan" of Lucera "with its shari'a law, its Muslim royal guard and its prayer calls, all a hundred and fifty miles down the road from the Vatican" (79). In turn, Frederick had his own unpleasant words for the papal army. Just as the princes were hungry for more political powers and sources of revenue, so were the popes. There was nothing Christian or Islamic about the best or worst decisions of Christian and Muslim leaders when it came to their political and financial survival.

The presence of a large contingent of Muslims from Lucera alongside thousands of French- and German-speaking Christian holy warriors, including Teutonic Knights, in the Sixth Crusade, led by the excommunicated Frederick II in 1228–1229, must have been shocking to Muslims in the Holy Land. But did Fredrick's Muslim soldiers then, and Afghan Muslim soldiers now in the U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom, think of the fight in religious or national terms? Almond asks, "Or are we wrong to ask such questions, wrong to exaggerate [w]hat is nowadays the much talked about role of 'Islam'" (65)? Almond's answer is the closest to the truth: "Christians and Muslims...lined up against Christians and Muslims" (80), just as some Middle Eastern rulers sided with the United States and European powers against Saddam Hussein. Fifty years after the death of Fredrick, his Christian enemies, in 1300, destroyed Lucera, massacred its Muslim inhabitants, and burned its mosques, madrassas and Korans before finally selling the surviving women and children into slavery. It was clear that the local Christian population, the papacy, and the monarchy were "relieved to have rid Italian soil of the 'unclean doctrine of Mohammed'" (91).

Similarly, just a decade earlier, thousands of Jews in Sicily had been forced to renounce their religion and convert to Christianity. Charles II (r. 1285–1309), the King of Naples and the darling of Pope Boniface, being unable to launch a crusade against Muslims in the Holy Land, had decided instead to persecute the Jews in southern Italy. Dominican friars spearheaded Jewish persecution and forced conversion in southern Italy under Charles II.

Chapter Three, "Turkish-Christian Alliances in Asia Minor, 1300–1402," is the story of the rise of the Ottoman Empire out of the ruins of the Byzantine Empire. The Ottoman-Byzantine hostilities were full of complexities, but contemporary simplistic and nationalist Muslim chroniclers and European historians presented the two empires through their own religious propaganda that made people believe that the two empires were caught in either a Greek-vs.-Turkish or Christian-vs.-Muslim struggle of life and death. In reality, half of the Turkish/Ottoman "jihad" armies had Christian soldiers, while the Byzantine armies used Muslim mercenaries. Several Greek/Byzantine/Orthodox Christian princesses were even married to Turkish/Ottoman/Muslim princes. History is far more complicated than what the author calls "our simplistic, 'football-match' understanding of the history of Asia Minor—essentially Greeks versus Turks" (104).

The strangest of all of the factors in the hostilities between the two empires was the hate that existed between Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christians. As early as the ninth and eleventh

centuries, the two churches had mutually excommunicated each other for theological and political reasons. Historically, the Catholic Church accused the Orthodox Church of first compromising with the Arian Christians, and later accommodating the Muslim iconoclastic monotheism and not standing to the Muslims' prohibition of statues. The Orthodox Church, in comparison to the Catholic Church, was more tolerant of the Jewish presence in the Middle East.

The Catholic Church played no small role in the demise of the Byzantine Empire at the hands of the Ottoman Turks, even though the Crusades originally used the pretext of protecting their religious brethren in the Eastern Church from Muslims who, as Pope Urban II alleged in 1095, stopped Christians from making pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Rather than attacking Muslims in Palestine, the Crusaders, in 1204, sacked Constantinople, the capital of the Greek Orthodox Church and Byzantine Empire, murdering, raping and pillaging the population of the city. As Almond recounts, "bursting into the Orthodox Church of St Sophia, the soldiers found a prostitute off the streets and seated her on the patriarch's throne, with a fake sceptre in her hand, as the Whore of Babylon" (97).

The religious hatred alone among Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, and Jews cannot explain the political and economic hostilities among them. Class mattered more than creed. Orthodox peasant populations, caught between rival Byzantine feuding families, looked towards Muslim Ottomans for rescue. Byzantine rulers for long periods hesitated using peasants as soldiers lest the latter turn their blades against their Christian masters. The phenomenon of strange bedfellows was many a time a rewarding strategy, not only aimed at the highest level of Greek-Turkish ruling families, but also most suitable to poor peasants (whether Greek, Turk, Serb, Albanian, or Bulgar) who joined forces across ethnic and religious boundaries in order to protect their common interests against demonic landlords, be they Greeks or Turks.

Almond cites numerous events that convey the most important point in Chapter 3: "the early Ottomans were more interested in absorbing cities than laying them to waste," and were looking for "a way of living together." It was surely not "some utopia of blissful tolerance—when the Turks captured an Anatolian town, the first thing they did was convert the central church into a mosque" (105). Both popular and scholarly historians, however, offered the main reason of the Ottomans' success in one word—Islam. Almond insists that the secret of the Ottomans' startling success was "far from being any kind of Islamic call to jihad, [but] actually appears to have been the reverse: the early Ottomans were not particularly Islamic at all, and appeared to have no problem doing convenient deals with any neighbour, Christian or Muslim, if it helped them get ahead" (105).

Chapter Four, "Muslims, Protestants and Peasants: Ottoman Hungary, 1526–1683," reinforces the major theme of the book: that the myth and mantra of East-West conflict between a Christian Europe and a Muslim Orient is "nothing more than a Disney version of history" (140). There were strong political and economic factors that rationally defied religious reasons that led to the Ottoman Siege of Vienna in 1683 and the startlingly swift conquest of Hungary. In fact, it was the Hungarian Christian peasants' terrible economic lot under the Habsburg princes, rather the cross-versus-crescent conflict or the jihadi zeal of the Ottoman soldiers that made possible the easy conquest of Hungary. Beware the seething hungry peasants: "Many Hungarians appear to have preferred the pragmatic tolerance of Ottoman rule to the Catholic fervour of Habsburg

domination" (141). In the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Balkan region it was a difficult task for the Ottomans to recruit soldiers and officers across the ethno-religious divides. Some of the Ottoman forces were made of "Turks, Greeks, Romanians and Hungarians, led by Italians on behalf of the Sultan. Some Jewish merchants also accompanied them" (155).

Well over half of the "Turkish" soldiers marching against the Habsburgs were Christians. Just as the Shias of Iraq could thank Allah for the George Bush's help against Saddam Hussein in 2003, Hungarian Protestants could say in 1542: "The Good Lord has protected us miraculously through the Sultan and Turkish nobles" (159). Neither European contemporary historians nor loyal Ottoman mullahs had the courage and wisdom to face brutal economic and political realities to abandon labels such as "Islam" and "Christendom," or "infidel" and "Turk." "In many ways, the myth of a Christian Europe attacked by an army of Islam persists because we have not yet found that courage" (178).

Chapter 5, "The Crimean War [1853–6]: Muslims on All Sides," may be the most enlightening part of the book, examining what could be called the mid-nineteenth-century 'coalition of the willing' ganging up against a common enemy. Almond makes it clear at the outset that the Crimean War (1853–1856) was, first and foremost, not a clash of civilizations but of imperial projects. At this moment in history, "an alliance of France, Britain, and later Italian Sardinia, joined forces to save the Ottoman Empire from the threat of Russian invasion" (181). The chapter chronicles the presence of "a large number of European officers who (under Turkish names) led Ottoman troops against the Russians on the very edges of the Ottoman Empire" (181). Similarly, the chapter highlights the presence Muslim soldiers in the British, French, and Russian armies, as well as Christians in the Ottoman armies, fighting on the side of their respective empires in the Crimean War.

Hidden beneath the popular discourse of the superficial "clash of civilizations" rhetoric, there are many examples of substantive cultural cooperation in world history. But it is not easy to get past the endless talk about "the army of Islam" and "the Muslim bogeyman" that dangerously distracts people from current "public debates concerning corporate ownership of the media or the influence of lobbies on government policy" (222). Ian Almond offers a useful antidote to such thinking. His accessible writing style, substantive arguments, ample citation of historical events and lively comparisons make the book an easy read. I highly recommend it for general readers, students in classes of world civilizations, and, especially, those working in European and Middle Eastern studies.

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