



## Book Review

### **Infidels: A History of the Conflict between Christendom and Islam**

*by Andrew Wheatcroft,  
England: Penguin Books, 2004*

**Reviewed by Shlomo Sharan**

Wheatcroft's book demonstrates enormous scholarship with an uncanny eye for detail. It also wears the author's personal views on its sleeve, or, at times, expresses them in a cleverly covert fashion. This reviewer's clear, but not unequivocal, impression is that the author's attitudes are pro-Muslim and at least somewhat anti-American (he likens George W. Bush to pope Urban II who initiated the First Crusade) and somewhat anti-Semitic. He discloses no small amount of distaste for Christianity, although he was born and raised (in Scotland) as a Christian. However, I surmise that Wheatcroft's extensive travels in Muslim countries, as well as his study of Islam, appears to have tilted his values and attitudes in favor of Islam. On occasion he makes statements that are blatantly pro-Islamic, even at the cost of sacrificing reality in favor of his personal opinions.

The bulk of this book of 360 pages of text (plus another 117 pages of notes, bibliography, and index) is indeed devoted to the conflict between the Christian and Muslim worlds. Yet, the Jews are "caught" between the two. In European-Muslim countries (Spain, the Balkans, etc.), Jews were often persecuted and mercilessly slaughtered. Yes, there were several relatively extended periods of peace between Muslims and Jews. Peace between Christians and Jews was far less frequent throughout a good deal of European history. Wheatcroft treats the precarious position of the Jews between the two powerful adversaries and pieces together the mosaic of their history.

### **Christian/Western Fear of Muslims**

One of the explicit and implicit messages conveyed throughout the book is that the West maintained – and continues to maintain – egregiously negative stereotypes about the Muslims. Unfortunately, Muslim rule, including the extended rule of the Ottomans, in Greece, the Balkans and elsewhere, was a fiercely repressive one. "The fear of the Islamic threat remained

a strong connection between the past into the present”. (page 156\*) Hence, the social-political reality of Muslim rule provided the substance of the suspicious and fearful Western perspective on the Muslims that the positive and productive features of the relation between the two failed to counterbalance.

There are, most likely, a host of reasons for the slow development of printing in the Muslim world, but history documents the paucity of printed material in the Middle East. That fact appears to provide one explanation for the relative cultural canyon that separated the Muslim Middle East from the largely European Christian world. Indeed, Wheatcroft cites a 17th century source to the effect that: “...the Turks ...follow the decree of Bajezid...(who) proclaimed in 1483, on pain of death, not to read printed books...” (page 295) The Muslims’ “spirit of enterprise reflected in their production of, and commerce with, paper, thus stands in sharp contrast with Islamic obscurantism that...prevented the introduction of Gutenberg’s press”. (page 295)

### **The Crusades**

Wheatcroft devotes considerable attention to the Crusades, as is to be expected. In the year 1096, Pope Urban II aroused people to undertake pilgrimages to the Holy Land. These mass movements later became known as the Crusades. (page 175 ff) Jerusalem was conquered by the hordes of the First Crusade after three years of fierce battles with Muslim armies in and around Antioch. The Christian army, with its mass of pilgrims and its relatively small number of knights and foot soldiers, arrived at the walls of Jerusalem on June 7, 1099. By July 13, three huge mobile towers had been erected and were moved up to the city’s walls so that soldiers could enter the city by crossing over bridges dropped from the towers onto the walls. “The Jews of the city had been confined to their synagogue which was then set alight. All died.” (page 185) In August a battle near Ashkelon between the Crusaders and a Muslim army advancing from Egypt resulted in the utter defeat of the Muslims. “After Ashkelon there was no enemy likely to challenge their (i.e. Crusaders) possession of Palestine. The Latin Kingdoms of the East...began to embed themselves.” (page 186)

It may be observed that the term Crusade was coined in 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain long after the wars to “rescue” Jerusalem had started. That term was employed in the English language (in its French version) about 1575 and became anglicized as “crusade” in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. (page 187)

The Crusades have been the object of extensive research by scholars, including some in Israel such as Joshua Prawer of the Hebrew University (*The Crusaders’ Kingdom: European Colonialism in the Middle Ages*. NY: Praeger, 1972). The Crusades, conducted over centuries, left an indelible mark on Eretz Yisrael.

### **Scorch, Kill, Eradicate, Burn**

The tale of the Christian-Muslim conflict is largely, though not completely, a recounting of acts of near-ultimate brutality. Perhaps only the history of human slaughter carried out by the Nazis and by the Russian Communists exceeds the horror of the Christian-Muslim confrontation that has dragged on since the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Professor Wheatcroft mentions, now

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\* All page numbers cited in the text refer to the book under review by Andrew Wheatcroft unless indicated otherwise.

and then, the number of people killed in particular battles or in specific murderous rampages. If those numbers were to be collected and added up, the final product would be staggeringly large. I am grateful to have been spared that gruesome task and to spare the reader too.

Permit me to remind contemporary readers that for most of history the clergy of both the Christian and Muslim nations led troops in battle, urged them to fight or even paved the way for men (and for women in the camps that followed the armies) to form armies. In our day of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Muslim mullahs still rule in Iran, but in most Muslim countries, and certainly in the European-Christian world, the clergy may lead prayer services for those who wish to participate in the armed forces but they have no power to command anything or anyone. In 1865 the Reverend Sabine Baring Gould wrote a march called “Onward Christian Soldiers” that was sung in England in processions. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century English hymn writers continued their crusade to convert people to the Anglican church, although the missionaries ceased some time ago to try to convert Muslims in Palestine to Christianity due to the danger to their lives that such an effort would entail (pages 210-211). Nevertheless, it is a far cry from missionizing to fighting on the battlefield.

When I, the reviewer, was a teenager in Milwaukee (USA) in the 40s, missionaries often stopped me on the street-corner to discuss verses in the Bible that, they claimed, foretold the advent of Jesus as the Savior. (Milwaukee was a very Catholic and Lutheran city). Generally they were unsuccessful with Jews regardless of how much or little the Jews knew about the Bible. But clearly, at that time at least, anyone approached by missionaries could just walk away or brush them off with a wave of the hand.

Apropos the discussion here of missionary activity, it may be recalled that the Mormons were very eager to missionize in Israel, but that effort has been stopped. Strange as it may sound, there is a miniscule group of Jews in Israel who have married Muslims and adopted Islam, although most anti-Zionist Jews in Israel eschew religion of all kinds. The threat today to Jews from Islam is overwhelmingly external and does not stem from a “fifth column.” As is well known, the major external threat to Israel and Jewry at this time is the Iranian threat to Israel’s existence. That threat must not be under-estimated.: It is truly physical in nature. Yet, its roots are in Islam and it is expressed in Islamic terminology. Recall that almost all of the Muslim countries “threaten” Israel to some degree or another, not just Iran.

The Catholic Church has formally annulled the view that Jews living today bear responsibility for the death of Jesus. He claimed to be the Messiah but could not prove his assertion by expelling the Romans from Eretz Yisrael. The Jews handed him over to the Romans for execution (Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Golah V’Neichar*, vol. 1, Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1930, Chap 8: see in particular, pages 355 ff.). Since Jewry was – and is – accused by Christians of having committed deicide, they cannot forgive Jewry, as long as there is a Christian religion. The Jews remain trapped in the middle, between Christianity and Islam, whether or not the Christians genuflect to Islam. That condition is potentially dangerous for Jewish survival, as is true for any creature or nation caught in a trap.

Hundreds of years later, many of the acts initiated by the Church were committed once again, on a grand scale, by the Nazis. In retrospect, those acts were not just relegated to the pages of history, but rather surfaced as precedents to be imitated and expanded (*verteiched und verbessert*) by 20<sup>th</sup> century tyrants and their myriad of followers. For example, Wheatcroft (page 141) relates how the Church in Spain ordered, in 1499, “that all copies of the Holy Qur’an and other religious works” should be destroyed. On October 12, 1501, the books were burned in the main square of Granada, while elsewhere in Spain the Inquisition was burning the bodies of Jews. The infamous burning of Jewish books by the Nazis on May 10, 1933 is

well known, as is the symbolic significance of that act that foreshadowed the burning of Jewish bodies in the furnaces of the concentration camps. The Christians believed that the burning of Muslim books was a great moral act “to achieve the purposes of God”. (page 141) The Nazis believed they were ridding the world of inferior creatures and ensuring the ultimate rule of the “master race”.

Christian-Jewish controversies obviously could not be held on the battlefield: The Jews had no armies. The remarkable figure of Shmuel Hanagid (Shmuel Ha-Levi Ibn Nagrela, b. Cordoba, 993, d. Granada, 1056) is probably unique in Jewish history after the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, He was the commander of the armies of the Muslim vizier which he led against his country’s enemies, Arabs (Berbers) and Christians alike. Jews were numbered among his soldiers at all ranks, but the army was Muslim not Jewish. The Christian-Jewish controversies were theological debates centered on Biblical verses and conducted by eminent Bishops and Rabbis, the latter often coerced to participate. Wheatcroft does not treat this latter phenomenon.. (References to the Christian-Jewish controversies in Spain can be found in the Index volume, pages 33-34 to Salo Baron’s *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1960).

For their part, 19<sup>th</sup> century French monarchs such as Louis 18<sup>th</sup> (1815) Charles X (1824) and Louis-Philippe (who won the 1830 Revolution) asserted that there was a direct connection between the First Crusade and their expanding conquest of Algeria. In the wake of the Algerian campaign, the latter monarch began to remodel the palace at Versailles to create a national history museum. Once more Catholic France was warring with Islam. The soldiers were soon followed by missionaries. The French believed that the Latin Kingdom was reborn on the soil of the Muslim Infidels (pages 213-215) and they, the French, were bringing civilization to the barbarous lands of the Muslims. That belief was widely shared by French citizens, not restricted to the nobility.

### **Conquest, *Jihad* and the Spread of Civilization**

Both Christians and Muslims believed that the residents of territories they wrested from their infidel enemies had their culture significantly enhanced by the conquerors because, heretofore, they were, partially at least, immersed in an inferior civilization. Indeed, frequently the “conquered” resident adopted important features of their invaders’ cultural life, such as dress, language, and so forth, sometimes – though far less frequently – even religion. Assimilation into the culture of the ruling group is almost a universal phenomenon, depending, of course, on a series of conditions including the number of people involved in both groups, the conquerors and the conquered, their demographic distribution, the degree of tolerance exhibited by the dominant group toward other or minority groups, and similar features. The phenomenon of Jewry’s assimilation into European and Middle-Eastern societies is a cardinal topic of Jewish historiography and demography, and has been treated at length by scholars (for example – Kaufmann, *Golah V’Neichar*, 1929-1932; Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*, Philadelphia, JPS, 1920; see “Polonization and Russification” in Index, vol. 3; Cecil Roth, *The History of the Jews of Italy*, Philadelphia, JPS, 1946 –see “assimilation”; David Vital, *A People Apart*, UK: Oxford, 1999; see the extensive publications by Sergio Della Pergola and Paul Ritterband, and the *American Jewish Year Book* series.). The pace of assimilation in the Christian and Muslim worlds was very different in each culture. The West developed new ways of communication that disseminated cultural contents much earlier than those instruments developed in the Muslim world. “It was four centuries before images and the printed word became as common in the Middle East as they

were in the West.” (page 309) By now the Islamic world uses the printed and visual media with the same degree of sophistication as do the countries of the West. (page 309) However, the Muslim world despises the “Western Satan” with a vehemence not matched even by the fear experienced in the Christian nations. The latter persist in praising Muslim countries, although lately the fear has risen and the praise is declining, for palpable reasons.

Wheatcroft attempts to be evenhanded in his attribution of fear-provoking behavior to the Christian and to the Muslim world. However, in my opinion, the author’s relativism in this *magnum opus* eventually allows history to become the story of any depravity that he identifies deserves to be named as such, while leaving to the author the decision as to who is the victim and who the perpetrator – if there indeed is one.

## War and Peace

All the people I have ever known wanted peace not war. War does make us revert to cursing our enemy. What Wheatcroft utterly fails to mention is that, like other critical relationships in life, a unilateral decision can be deadly because the other partner disagrees. With luck, a unilateral decision can succeed if and when it is adopted by the other party. In the arena of war and peace, luck is absolutely not to be relied on in a country that has the welfare of its citizens at heart. Pacifism is wonderful when the other parties prefer peace. If they are waiting to catch a glimpse of weakness in your behavior so they can gain the upper hand, then peace is the royal road to death. Like many quaint adages, “it takes two to tangle” has its moments of truth. But, try to walk away when someone is pointing a gun at your back and you won’t get far if that person is prepared to shoot. It only takes one to pull the trigger.

The law of most, if not all, countries allows for self defense that potentially could result in great harm or even death to the attacker. If a nation stands idly by while some other country covertly arms itself and could attack you, the probability is great that your country will sustain terrible damage or even defeat. Wheatcroft’s denunciation of employing the term “evil” to describe someone’s – or some nation’s – intention by calling it atavistic may not surprise the reader of his book but it is nevertheless disturbing. He wants to live in the here and now and ignore history much as the poet Paul Valery said in the lines Wheatcroft placed as the caption to his book (quoted from Valery’s volume, *Reflections on the World Today*).

“History is the most dangerous product ever concocted by the chemistry of the intellect.”

Let us juxtapose the poet’s remark with that made by the philosopher George Santayana:

“Those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it.”

Valery’s statement is very emotive, but Santayana’s is thoughtful. Poetry offers enormous insight into the human soul. Philosophy provides the medium by which people can think about their condition and direct their behavior accordingly. We need both, but not always simultaneously.

The Biblical view of human existence is a linear one, i.e. historical in essence, rather than one characterized by a cyclical or repetitive nature. The Bible itself is a kind of history book, albeit not in the modern sense of being factually accurate but rather in the sense of being linear, as noted. Paganism is more related to the cyclical perspective than it is to the arithmetic notion of worshipping more than one God, just as monotheism is not simply a question of worshipping ONE God rather than many. Hebrew monotheism emphasizes the uniqueness of God as creator who stands outside the laws of nature and not subject to them, and the uniqueness of Man created in God’s image who has a measure of free will to shape his

history. The world –primarily the history of Mankind – as a created phenomenon, displays a beginning that is on its way to an end. The cyclical view leads to a conception of life as meaningless because *whatever was will be again*, and whatever happens is not important because it will recur in the future. Nothing is unique, and hence nothing is important *sui generis*. In that repetitive world, people write myths, as did the ancient Greeks. In myth the gods themselves are subject to the forces of the universe, i.e. fate, and cannot free themselves from their fate, as the Greeks repeated time and again. The heroes of Sophocles' tragedies cannot avoid their fate (*une male dictione*) even when they know it in advance. Hence, "there is nothing new under the sun," which *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes, chapter 1, verse 9) said in the only Biblical book that embodies a pagan mentality.

### Concluding Comments

Andrew Wheatcroft directed his book to the question of the relationship between Christians and Muslims. But, as an "added value" the book seems to reflect some typically British attitudes towards the Jews

The expulsion of Jews from an entire region so that it became Judenrein began in England in 1290 when the Jews were expelled from York. They were permitted to return to live in England only in 1665. Thus, Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock is based on the playwright's imagination because he never saw or spoke to a Jew. The remarkable British White Paper flew in the face of the mandate given by the League of Nations to Britain. In Palestine/Israel, the British handed over many "fortresses" (i.e. police stations that, in 1948, were equivalent to fortresses) to the Arabs. T.E. Lawrence "loved" the Arabs, and ever since WWI the British have been in league with them, including our "great friend" Tony Blair whose sister was on one of the boats from Cyprus that brought "aid" to Hamas in Gaza. Tony has praised Israel for making many positive gestures to the Arab-"Palestinians" despite the fact that they continue to carry out terrorist acts in Israel that result in the death of men, women and children. In short, England has proven itself to harbor a deep-seated anti-Semitism that has been sustained for centuries, despite the fact that many Jews found a home there and have pursued peaceful and productive lives. Wheatcroft's book, to this reviewer's mind, has an undercurrent of prejudice against Jews which the author does not identify while bemoaning the anti-Muslim attitudes he claims permeated Western culture. That observation is not intended to detract from the nature of the author's vast scholarship and penetrating insight into the broad subject he chose to write about in this huge work. It is still perplexing to see an erudite historian hang out his dirty laundry to public view instead of expressing his personal opinions in a less demonstrative manner. Perhaps that is a characteristic of his British heritage. The book deserves study. Yet, *caveat emptor*.