

The Tenth Crusade

By Dennis O'Brien (Fall 2002)

The United States and Great Britain are currently engaged in the Tenth Crusade, an effort to assert control over the Middle East. This crusade began for the United States in 1983, when Ronald Reagan sent troops into Lebanon to prop up a Western-leaning Christian government after Israel had invaded the country. Up till then the U. S. had not been the target of terrorist attacks. But within months the Marine barracks in Beirut were car-bombed, killing hundreds, and the United States has since been lumped in with earlier Crusaders as an invader deserving of counterattack.

What is the source of such a conflict? Although some see it as a struggle for control of oil, that is only the latest wrinkle of a centuries-old conflict that is deeply seated in the psyches of all concerned. It is the spiritual aspects, not the economic, that hold the key to its resolution.

Three great religions trace their origins, both physical and spiritual, to Jerusalem: Judaism, Christianity (both Western and Eastern Orthodox), and Islam. It is where the one God entered into a covenant with Abraham, the patriarch of all these faiths, at the rock where Abraham had been willing to sacrifice his only son in the name of that God; where Solomon built the Temple that held the Ark of the Covenant; where Jesus suffered and died for the sins of mankind and rose triumphant from the dead; where the prophet Mohammed conversed with Allah and ascended into heaven; and where now stands the Dome of the Rock, built on the very ruins of the Temple. It is the city of prophecies; even now, certain Christian groups in the United States are urging Congress to support Israel because "God is not yet done with the Jewish people," voicing a near-apocalyptic desire to found the New Jerusalem after the final conflict.

These religions have formed the basis of civilizations that now encompass most of the world. They have each in their time sought to expand through physical force rather than moral persuasion. The current world crisis is the latest chapter of that conflict, with the potential of being the deadliest. Yet even if these civilizations are not bound by the moral imperative that any conflict should be resolved without violence, they should at least accept the historical lessons that toleration and diversity are ultimately in their own self-interest. The time has come for all parties in the conflict to accept each other and to share the one city that cannot be conquered: Jerusalem.

In his multi-volume opus *A Study of History*, Arnold Toynbee suggests that history is the study of civilizations, both their internal development and their relationship with others. He identified five civilizations, evolved from both a universal political state and a unifying religion, that currently encompass most of the world's population:

1. The Far Eastern, or Sinic, society, which formed its first nation-state in the third century B.C., with Buddhism as its spiritual basis. It includes China, Japan, and most of southeast Asia.
2. Western Christianity, which grew out of the Roman Empire of the first century A.D., and extends from central Europe around the globe through the Americas and on to

Australia.

3. Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which evolved from a split in both the Roman Empire and the Christian church, and extends from southeastern Europe eastward through Russia to the Pacific.
4. The Indic society, centered in the sub-continent of India, which formed its first nation-state in the fourth century A.D. with Hinduism as its spiritual basis.
5. The Islamic society, extending from northwest Africa through the Middle East to Indonesia, which began in the eighth century A.D.

Most post-colonialists would add sub-Saharan Africa to this list, even though it has not developed a unified political structure, especially since one of its offspring, Kofi Annan, has emerged as a conciliator for the rest.

These civilizations have survived the bi-polar world of communism versus capitalism. They are even more complex than [George Orwell's](#) tripartite world of Eurasia, Eastasia, and Oceania as envisioned in *1984*. Yet they still follow the pattern described in *1984's* pivotal chapter, "War is Peace": they are, for the most part, constantly maneuvering in an effort to extend their control over the fringes of the others' spheres of influence.

It was probably easy for Orwell to lump together India and the Far East. But he underestimated the resilience of the Islamic society and its ability to maintain the cultural identity of a broad swath of humanity, one that refuses to be absorbed by the dominant societies around it. The dynamic tension remaining between these societies is now the greatest problem facing the world.

The resolution of the current crisis thus requires not only that the Islamic world share Jerusalem with Israel, but also that the Western world shares Jerusalem with Islam. We cannot pretend to be uninvolved with that decision. It is the box outside the box that must be addressed with wisdom, compassion, and courage.