

Book Review: Tom Holland: The Forge of Christendom:  
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Tom Holland: The Forge of Christendom: The End of Days and the Epic Rise of the West, Anchor Books, 2008.

One of the most fascinating Medieval centuries was the 11th. The year 1000 was ushered in with near hysteria that this millennium year since the birth of Christ would be the beginning of the end for humanity. When the skies didn't open up to the end of days in 1000, the next date chosen was 1033 the millennium of Christ's death and resurrection. That year also came and went, and many Europeans finally decided that it was not going to happen now and that they had better try to make their own heaven on earth.

Making a heaven on earth was very difficult indeed. Western Europe had no central governments a problem that dogged them since the collapse of the Roman Empire in 395 AD. Instead, every warlord with horses and men built competing castles on every bluff with two aims: the first to intimidate every other warlord, but more important, to intimidate the peasants on whose labor they depended. Free peasants don't need nobility; but in a world of anarchy, peasants need protectors and they exchanged their freedom for serfdom.

The nobles accomplished this with an unremitting campaign of terror. They threatened, extorted, tortured, raped, and punished any peasants who tried to escape them. Peasant villages were transformed from prosperous to prisons throughout that century.

Holland notes that the only protection from their predators that peasants had were the newer monasteries, one in particular famous for its holiness: Cluny, in central France. But the protection was only spiritual and moral. Without the protection of the nobility (who did fear Hell), they could not have survived the thuggish savages ready to loot and murder them.

England and Ireland suffered such depredations at the hands of the Vikings that horrified the superstitious population. The same was true for north-west France, a problem that was finally resolved by converting one of the Viking warlords to Christianity and giving him a province to rule (Normandy). Marriages to local women also helped to tame these savages.

The last three years of the century brought the first Crusade a monumental endeavor that changed Europe and the world forever.

Holland is a skilled historian with the gift of making the period come alive. He writes, with wit and insight:

The second millennium (today) has ushered in the same fears of the end of days, both from the usual religious fanatics addicted to prophetic scriptures, and from the learned warning of global warming. Holland quotes one who has selected 2030 for the end of the world (since 2000 didn't do it for him).

Muslim terrorists were aware of the significance of the second Christian millennium and tried to create a disaster for us in 2000. It failed, but they managed to do so the next year: 9/11/2001. It failed to end the world, however..

In looking for the Antichrist whom predictions said would usher in the end of days, one Medieval man appeared who seemed to meet that description: the Prophet Mohammed. Church fathers were convinced that Mohammad combined violence and sanctimony, ordering his followers to "Fight those who believe not in Allah." The Byzantines, who were on the receiving end of Islamic violence, considered that religion the most vicious hypocrisy, merely "a license to loot in religion's name."

At the beginning of 1000, Christians were fighting for their very survival at the hands of Islam. The whole of southern Europe had been depopulated by the insatiable need for slaves in Islam. Even Christian barons in Sicily cashed in by selling their own citizens to the Muslim slave traders for ready cash. And to make things worse, Viking thugs (not yet Christian) from the north made life hell in their depredations in Northern Europe. They not only looted church treasures, but sold their captives to the Muslims by the thousands. The slave trade was conducted in almost industrial efficiency.

By the end of that century, not only had Europe begun to recover, but in deciding to fight back against Islam, they started to adapt some of the practices and values that had originally shocked Catholic churchmen. They picked up the Muslim concept of \223Holy War,\224 of punishing by death apostasy, and of granting forgiveness for sin for those who engaged in Holy War. Christianity, which began as a religion of pacifism, became militant. The Cross became bloody.

The Byzantine Empire had little taste for battle. They preferred diplomacy, buying off an enemy, and Machiavellian techniques of divide and conquer. This worked for a while, but it was increasingly evident that the much more determined Muslims\227Turkish Muslims\227would ultimately do them in. You cannot buy off predators forever.

Christian Europeans had been fighting Muslims for several centuries before the Millennium century. The emerging sense of a coming apocalypse identified Muslims (and their Prophet) as the Antichrist. But as Muslims were not readily available to Christians in central and northern Europe, a local target was found: Jews.

Holland notes that Bishops in the west had not been in the habit of harassing Jews; they followed St. Augustine\222s advice to affect a lofty blend of contempt and indifference, even though their ancestors had the blood of Christ on their hands. Jews were offered protection and special privileges so that their talents might be exploited\227as court officials, physicians, and go-betweens in the lucrative slave trade with Islam.

\223Not only did they live cheek by jowl with their gentile neighbors, but they tended to wear the same clothes, speak the same language and even give their children the same names. There was nothing, in short, in centuries of peaceful co-existence with the Franks, that could have prepared them for a sudden pogrom of ethnic cleansing in the town of Limoges\224 in 1010.

A \223great debate\224 was held with Jews being forced to listen to a Christian harangue, after which they were told they lost the debate and must convert. A handful did\227while the rest either slit their own throats or were expelled. This was followed by parallel incidents throughout \223the whole of Christendom\224 which contemporary observers called a blood lust.

By 1022, not only Jews were recipients of this blood lust, but heretics as well. People had dreams, visions, and visitations by the devil, \223who would appear to them sometimes in the guise of an Ethiopian, and sometimes in the form of an angel of light.\224 This turned into attacks on churches and monasteries by mobs who had come to scorn the rituals and doctrines of the church, which they saw as \223not Christian enough.\224 This sort of \223fundamentalism\224 shocked the Catholic hierarchy..

All of this was brought on by \223the endless warfare and the famine, and the pestilence, the terrors seen in the heavens, and all the other signs\224 of the coming apocalypse. Dire times indeed.

The rest of the book covers the other important events in that century\227such as the Norman conquest of England, the final conversion of the remaining (and dangerous) pagan peoples of Europe, and the conversion and opening of Russia.

Also covered were the power struggles between popes and kings, between Western and Eastern Christianity, and the coming collapse of the Byzantine Empire several centuries later.

The book culminates in the start of the first Crusade, to take back Jerusalem from the Muslims who had taken and despoiled it earlier. That Crusade launched major changes in Christian Europe that ushered in the beginnings of the institutions and qualities that differentiated Europe from the rest of the world until nearly today.

I hope that Holland will continue the story into the 14th century, in which such monumental events as repeated incursions of the Black Plague changed everything and paved the way for the religious transformation of Christendom.

-----Laina Farhat-Holzman