

Christian discourse on violence in the Middle Ages

What is violence?

“Actions that inflict, threaten or cause injury.
Actions that maybe corporal, written or verbal.
Injuries maybe corporal, psychological, material or
social”

Mary Jackman (2002)

Why is violence so important?

“No one engaged in thought about politics and history can remain unaware of the enormous role that violence has always played in human affairs, and it is at first glance rather surprising that violence has been singled out so seldom for special consideration”
(Hannah Arendt, 1970)

Why violence is so important?

Violent acts have their own implicit or explicit rationality, this is why besides being horrible they are dangerous
(Michel Foucault)

Just War

They who have waged war in obedience to the divine command, or in conformity with His laws, have represented in their persons the public justice or the wisdom of government, and in this capacity have put to death wicked men; such persons have by no means violated the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill"
(St Augustine, the City of God, book One)

Bernard of Clairvaux and heresy

What is the Church to do but remove the man who will not remove the scandal, unless like him, she is to be disobedient? For she has this command from the Gospel, not to spare her own eye if it gives offence, or her hand, or her foot, but to pluck it out or cut it off and cast it away from her. “If he will not listen to the Church”, it says, “let him be to you as a stranger and a tax collector”. (Matthew 18:17)
(On the Song of Songs, sermon 65)

Bernard of Clairvaux and crusade

But as they have now began to attack us, it is necessary
for those of us who do not
carry a sword in vain to repel them with force.

(Letter to the English People)

An extraordinary danger demands an extraordinary effort.

It is as if the very foundations of the
Church have been shaken and we must put forth all our
strength to prevent the building from
Falling.

(Letter to Pope Eugenius)

Bernard of Clairvaux and crusade

...if I may say so, the might of Christendom has endured too long, shutting its eyes to those who with evil intent lie in wait, without crushing their poisoned heads under its heel. But the Scriptures say: "Presumption comes first, and ruin close behind it". And so God grant that the pride of these peoples may be speedily humbled and the road to Jerusalem not closed on Both of Peter's sword must be drawn whenever necessary
(Letter to the Pope Eugenius)

Bernard of Clairvaux and Jews

The Jews are not to be persecuted, killed or even put to flight. Ask anyone who knows the Sacred Scriptures what he finds foretold of the Jews in the psalm. “Not for their destruction do I pray”, it says. The Jews are for us the living words of Scripture, for they remind us always of what our Lord suffered, they are dispersed all over the world so that by expiating their crime they may be everywhere the living witnesses of our redemption. Hence the same psalm adds, “only let thy power disperse them”. And so it is: dispersed they are. Under Christian princes they endure a hard captivity, but “they only wait for the time of their deliverance”. Finally we are told by the Apostle that when the time is ripe all Israel shall be saved
(Letter to the English People)

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