

rhetoric” and doubtful that “justice is entirely on our side. But Fish’s postmodernist is no wimp: He can vigorously defend our way of life and oppose that of our enemies.”

It’s the two relativist “siblings” of the Fishian postmodernist—the empty-minded “freshman relativist,” who thinks all opinions equally valuable, and the destructive relativist, who sneeringly debunks others’ lofty claims, oblivious to his own intellectual limitations—that “have brought the relativist family into disrepute.” They shrink from convictions and causes, and from “politically incorrect” expressions of opinion. “Fish is right to disown them,” Blackburn says, “but wrong to pretend that they are figments of right-wing imagination.”

Fish is guilty of “rank sophistry,” charges Peter Berkowitz, a professor of law at George Mason University, writing in *The New Republic* (June 28, 2002). “Either Fish is confused about exactly what postmodernism means, or he is willing to say anything—no matter how internally inconsistent—to win an argument. Or maybe both.” As Fish now presents it, Berkowitz says, postmodernism stands for “the sensible though

innocuous proposition that not everybody will always grasp what universal standards require. Now, if this is what postmodernism teaches, it is hard to understand what all the fuss has been about.” But “the guiding theme of postmodernism is that objectivity, especially in morals, is a sham—in other words, precisely the definition Fish was disavowing.”

Benjamin R. Barber, author of *A Passion for Democracy* (1998) and a participant in the *Responsive Community* symposium, agrees. “We can’t have it both ways: the courage of skepticism, the boldness of anti-foundationalist reasoning, the novelty of irony—but all without consequences. Yet Fish has it both ways.”

“A commitment to the very abstractions that Fish wants us to drop is, for some of us, the most appealing element of ‘our way of life,’” observes another symposium participant, Joshua Cohen, a professor of philosophy and political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “The country, Lincoln said, was conceived in an idea, and dedicated to a proposition. Drop those (contested) abstractions, and you lose what is arguably best in the American tradition.”

Revisiting the Crusades

“The Real History of the Crusades” by Thomas F. Madden, in *Crisis Magazine* (Apr. 2002),
1814 ½ N St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Thanks to Osama bin Laden, the Crusades have been getting a lot of bad press lately. The terrorist warlord has often alluded to them—denouncing the U.S. war on terrorism as a new Crusade against Islam, for example—and some Westerners seem to accept his notion that the West committed a grievous injustice.

All this talk leaves Madden, a Saint Louis University historian, dumbfounded. The notion that the Crusades were “brutal and unprovoked attacks against a sophisticated and tolerant Muslim world” smacks of historical revisionism. Yes, the Crusades were bloody and the Crusaders at times merciless, but far from being wars of aggression, the Crusades were defensive measures taken to

protect the Christian world from overthrow by warmongering Muslim rulers.

Following the death of Muhammad in the seventh century, Muslim conquerors rapidly spread their faith with the sword, toppling Christian regimes in Egypt, Palestine, and Syria. By the 11th century, Islam had replaced Christianity as the dominant world religion, spreading across most of the Middle East, as well as North Africa and Spain. After Muslims conquered Asia Minor (modern Turkey), vastly reducing the extent of the Byzantine Empire, Pope Urban II convened the Council of Clermont in 1095 to rally “the knights of Christendom.” Their mission was to liberate Jerusalem and other holy

places, and to rescue the Christians of the East from Islamic rule. The First Crusade was an ad hoc and ill-funded affair, yet it ended in victory in 1099 when the Crusaders took Jerusalem and began to establish Christian states in the region. Few would last more than a century.

Although it's been said that the Crusaders were little better than pirates "who took advantage of an opportunity to rob and pillage in a faraway land," Madden observes, recent scholarship suggests otherwise. Crusaders were generally wealthy landholders who sacrificed their lives and material possessions

in the name of God and their fellow Christians in the Holy Land. Crusading was considered "an errand of mercy to right a terrible wrong." While a few Crusaders returned rich, most went home with nothing.

It's true that there was brutality on both sides. In 1204, Crusaders even sacked the Byzantine capital of Constantinople after a dispute with a claimant to the throne, closing an "iron door between Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox" that has never been reopened, Madden notes. (Pope Innocent III excommunicated all those who participated in that Crusade.) But Muslims in the



French illustrator Gustave Doré created this engraving of "Priests Exhorting the Crusaders"—an event from the First Crusade (1096–99)—for a history of the Crusades published in 1877.

conquered lands were never required to surrender their property—or their faith.

Each successive Crusade was better funded and organized, yet each was less effective than the one before it. By the 15th and 16th centuries, “the Ottoman Turks [had] conquered not only their fellow Muslims, thus further unifying Islam, but also continued to press westward, capturing Constantinople and plunging deep into Europe itself.”

Only happenstance prevented Islam from moving farther west: Sultan Mehmed II had

gained a foothold in Italy when he died in the late 15th century; Suleiman the Magnificent failed to take Vienna in 1529 only because freak rainstorms forced him to abandon much of his artillery.

The real field of battle, meanwhile, was shifting from the military realm to industry, science, and trade. With the Renaissance and then the Protestant Reformation, European civilization entered a new era of dynamism, and the balance of power shifted decisively to the West.

Twelve Tribes under God

“The Jewish Roots of Western Freedom” by Fania Oz-Salzberger, in *Azure* (Summer 2002),
22A Hatzfira St., Jerusalem, Israel.

Ask a political theorist to name the historical foundations of Western liberalism, and the reply will be predictable: the polis of Athens, the Roman Republic, the Magna Carta, etc. Few are likely to mention the Torah—the first five books of the Hebrew Bible—or the Talmud. Yet during the birth of liberalism in 17th-century Europe, intellectuals of all kinds found political inspiration in the Old Testament, and many used the Bible in surprisingly inventive and critical ways.

Oz-Salzberger, a historian at the University of Haifa in Israel, argues that many influential “Hebraist” thinkers of this crucial period recognized the Old Testament as a political document—in essence, as the Israelites’ constitution. The English jurist John Selden, for example, argued that national sovereignty was derived from biblical concepts of fixed borders and the division of peoples. Selden helped destroy the last remnants of feudalism and pave the way for nation-states: “Total borders made total sovereignty, and fostered the modern system of international relations.” Petrus Cunaeus, another prominent Hebraist, found in the Bible “what Aristotle, Cicero, and the Stoics all lacked: a clear notion of social responsibility and communal justice.” The godfather of liberalism himself, John Locke, was a noted Old Testament scholar who based his *Two Treatises of Government* in part on an interpretation of the Book of Genesis. Locke’s

famous commitment to the “pursuit of life, liberty, and property,” Oz-Salzberger asserts, was grounded in a theory of responsibility and charity drawn from the Bible.

These philosophers tended to find in the ancient “Hebrew Republic” an example that could correct for deficiencies in the Athenian and Roman models. Three features of the Hebrew Bible held particular interest: its emphasis on national borders, its concern for social equity, and the unique federal structure it prescribed for the Israelites, decentralized into 12 tribes and yet unified in one people. If the West now views liberty as more than the freedom from government intrusion—in other words, if we strive for a free community, governed under a just system of law—then, Oz-Salzberger writes, we owe a great deal to the Bible and its 17th-century readers.

With the notable exception of Locke, however, few Hebraist thinkers are widely remembered, and even Locke’s thought was largely purged of its religious themes in subsequent interpretations, especially during the 18th-century Enlightenment. Under the cultural reign of rabid anti-traditionalists such as Voltaire, and with liberalism acquiring a focus on political institutions, the Bible’s role shrank markedly. The “book of books had been removed from the desk of the political philosopher. It is back in its late-Renaissance place, on the preacher’s pulpit or under the philol-