

CATHOLIC

Q & A

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What were the Crusades? What caused them to come about? Why does the West have such a sense of guilt about the Crusades?

Let us begin with a historical overview. Christianity had been in existence for over 500 years before the birth of Mohammed, the prophet who founded Islam. During the time of Mohammed, the two dominant powers in the region were the Byzantines and the Persians. They had been warring with each other for decades and as a result exhausted themselves, thereby creating a power vacuum at the time of Islam's birth early in the 7th century.

With the region lacking a strong military presence, Islam expanded quickly and by the death of Mohammed in 632 AD, it dominated the Arabian Peninsula. A few years later, followers of Islam had captured Jerusalem. Shortly thereafter, Muslim warriors swept up all of Christian North Africa. Early in the 8th century, the religion of Islam crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and swallowed up Spain, then crossing the Pyrenees, the Muslim expansion entered France, where they were finally turned back only after their defeat at the Battle of Tours by the Frankish General Charles Martel.

The need for Islamic expansion can best be explained by the Muslim worldview, which separates the world into two spheres, known as the "house of Islam" or "house of submission" to God – and the "house of war"- those who are at war with God. Islam believes it has a divine mission to bring the "house of war" under Muslim control by any and all means - economic, political or military.

During the expansion of Islam, the prayer heard for centuries in Churches of central and southern Europe was "From the fury of the Mohammedan, spare us, O Lord". Muslims conducted raids to capture slaves as far west as England and Ireland. They attacked Iceland and plunged deep into Europe. They captured Sicily and invaded the

Italian mainland. The Muslims even looted the Churches of St. Peter and St. Paul in Rome.

In the early Christian period before the rise of Islam, Christian Syrians had introduced the religious ideas, art and culture of the East into the large cities of France and Italy. The Western Christians in turn journeyed in large numbers to Syria, Palestine and Egypt, either to visit the Holy Places or to follow the ascetic life of the Monks of the East. Pilgrimages to the East continued over the centuries even under the occupation of the Holy Places by Islam.

This religious toleration changed in the 11th century when in 1009, Hakem, the Fatimite Caliph of Egypt, in a fit of madness ordered the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and all the Christian establishments in Jerusalem. Hakem persecuted Christians, Jews and Muslim Sunnis, but particularly Christians. By 1014, in his two-decade reign, 30,000 Christian buildings were in ruins.

In 1070 Jerusalem fell to the Muslim Seljukian Turkish warriors. Pilgrimages of Christians to the Holy Land became dangerous and difficult. In 1091, the Seljukian Turks defeated the Byzantines at Mantzikert thus putting all of Asia Minor and Syria under their control. The Emperor of the Byzantine Empire implored the Pope to repulse the Turks. In 1095, Pope Urban II issued an appeal to the people of Europe to put aside all their petty squabbles in favor of defending the Eastern Christians and making safe the Holy Places, Thus began the first Crusade.

The term "Crusades" and "Middle Ages" were coined in the 18th Century Enlightenment period as propaganda tool against the Roman Catholic Church. History has been rewritten to describe the Middle Ages as darkness and fanaticism between

the splendors of classical civilization and the Renaissance.

G. K. Chesterton wrote a significant insight about the modern contempt for the Crusades: “ In that sense alone it is foolish for us in the West to sneer at those who kill men when a foot is set in a holy place, when we ourselves kill hundreds of thousands when a foot is put across a frontier. It is to reverse all reason to suggest that a man’s politics matter and his religion does not matter.”

Michael Dosen

SOURCES: Catholic Encyclopedia, Catholic Answers