

FRANCIS AND ISLAM

The theologian Hans Kung has spoken of inter-faith dialogue as the most pressing need of our time. Inter-religious dialogue involves not simply a process of talking between members of different religious faith (Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus etc) but a meeting of minds and hearts in a true spirit of earnest seeking for truth. It is important that the practice of inter-faith dialogue be based on good theological foundations. And if there is to be a true meeting of minds and hearts, it would be appropriate if those foundations drew their inspiration from the experiences of human persons who have been engaged in inter-faith dialogue, in this case the experiences of St Francis of Assisi and Sultan Melek-el-Kamil. In this context, religious experience forms a vital role in the formulation of a theology for inter-faith dialogue.

In the year 1219, possibly during the month of September, an encounter took place between a Christian from Italy, Francis of Assisi, and the Muslim Sultan of Egypt, al-Malik al-Kamil. The place of encounter was in Northern Egypt, near the town of Damietta. The historical context was the Fifth Crusade, at the height of the prolonged wars between the Islamic and Christian worlds.

The meeting between Francis and the Sultan took place within the context of the Fifth Crusade. As an historical phenomenon, the Crusades were triggered by the Clermont Address of Pope Urban II in 1095. Successive Crusades were launched throughout the twelfth century but despite the initial success of the first Crusade, politically they proved a failure. Islam, previously divided into warring factions, grew into a powerful, united force under the challenge of European invasion. In 1187, Saladin recaptured Jerusalem which then became for Islam, too, a holy city.

Saladin had captured Jerusalem on October 2, 1187. Later that month, Pope Gregory VIII called for a crusade to recapture Jerusalem - it would be the third of such Crusades. Despite some success on the part of the Crusaders Jerusalem remained under the control of Saladin. Innocent III called for a fourth crusade in 1198, which ended up in a complete failure, the Crusaders instead capturing and looting Constantinople. In 1213, Innocent called for a further Crusade, the fifth, to take place in 1217-1221. Pope Honorius III who succeeded Innocent in 1216 pledged to carry on the Crusade as a tribute to his predecessor. Eventually, in 1218, the army of Crusaders landed on the coast of Egypt and laid siege to the city of Damietta. Their opponent was Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil, Saladdin's nephew, described as brilliant, devout, the very epitome of the culture of his day. It was to Damietta that St Francis came in 1219.¹

The Battle for Damietta was indeed a prolonged affair. After the Crusaders had laid siege to the city, they suffered various defeats before finally capturing Damietta in November 1219. In 1221 al-Malik al-Kamil recaptured

¹ Kathleen Warren, *Francis of Assisi Encounters Sultan Malik al-Kamil* (St Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2003), pp.21ff.

the city, it was once again seized by the Crusaders in 1249, surrendered by them in 1250 and finally laid waste by the then Sultan in 1251. Francis had most likely reached the Crusader camp just prior to their defeat by the Muslim forces on 29 August. It would seem that his visit to the Sultan took place during the three week truce that followed.²

A number of accounts exist concerning Francis' arrival in Damietta and his meeting with the Sultan, some of these accounts being of Franciscan origin and others non-Franciscan. I shall first mention some of the Franciscan accounts, namely those given by Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure.

In 1228, Thomas of Celano was commissioned by the Pope to write a Life of Francis, to serve for the edification of people after Francis had been canonized. This is known as the *First Life of Thomas of Celano*. In 1247 there appeared Celano's *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, also known as *Second Celano*.³ This life offers a much fuller life of Francis than does his earlier work and both serve to provide us with some information. Celano presents Francis and a companion in 'the region of Syria', being taken captive by Saracen soldiers and brought before the Sultan, who received them 'very graciously... and listened to him very willingly.' It is important to note the location of the report in Chapter 20 of Celano's *Life*, which is entitled 'The Desire to Undergo Martyrdom'. Celano concludes this chapter "In all this, however, the Lord did not fulfil his desire, reserving for him the prerogative of a unique grace."

Celano Chapter 4 recounts Francis' voyage to Damietta, but makes no mention of his meeting with the Sultan. Chapter 4 is entitled 'How he foretold the massacre of Christians at Damietta'. Francis comes to the Crusader camp with his companion but, on hearing that the Christian forces were preparing to attack the Muslim army, attempts to dissuade the soldiers from engaging in combat. The soldiers, however, scoffed and mocked him, treating him as a fool. By way of contrast with the attitude of the soldiers, Celano presents him as one inspired by God's Spirit, prophesying their defeat, which was what in fact occurred.

In 1260, the Chapter of the Order asked for a definitive life of Francis, which would present Francis clearly as the Founder of the Order. The task was given to the Minister General, Bonaventure. Bonaventure presented his *Legenda Maior*, more of a theological vision of Francis than a historical one, and also a *Legenda Minor*, a shorter work whose purpose was liturgical in nature.⁴

In Chapter 9 of his Major Life, significantly entitled 'On the Fervour of his Charity and his Desire for Martyrdom', Bonaventure presents Francis and his

² Warren, 49

³ For Celano's *First Life*, cf. Regis Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman, William Short (eds), *Francis of Assisi Early Documents*, vols. I-III (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1999-2001), I:171ff. For Celano's *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, cf. *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents II*: 233ff.

⁴ For Bonaventure's *The Major Legend of St Francis*, cf. Armstrong, 525ff. *The Minor Legend*, cf. Armstrong, 684ff.

companion Illuminatus taken before the Sultan where Francis proceeds to preach. The Sultan willingly listens and Francis goes on to propose as a test of faith an ordeal by fire to be endured by both Francis and the Sultan's advisers. Note that this finds no mention in Celano. The Sultan rejects the proposal but continues to respect Francis who eventually returns to the Christian camp.

Chapter 11 of the Major Life , 'On his Understanding of Scripture and His Spirit of Prophecy' recounts the story given in 2 Celano 4, namely how Francis had come to the Crusader camp at Damietta, had foreseen their imminent defeat, sought to persuade them not to fight but was unheeded, followed by the consequent Crusader defeat. As in 2 Celano, the story is seen as an illustration of the prophetic spirit and wisdom of Francis.

We can also take into careful consideration the non-Franciscan account of Jacques de Vitry, who wrote while Francis was still alive and who actually met Francis in Damietta. De Vitry speaks of Francis continuing on from Damietta, unarmed, to the camp of the Sultan. On the way, Francis was captured by the Saracens, but with the proclamation, 'I am a Christian' and with a request to be led to the Sultan, he was taken to appear before Malek al-Kamil. The Sultan appeared to be fascinated with Francis and listened to his preaching about Christ. Finally he guaranteed a safe passage for Francis back to the Crusader camp and asked Francis to pray that he might receive from God a revelation as to which faith is most pleasing in God's sight.⁵

There is also an Arabic source that testifies to the meeting between the two. Ibn-Al-Zayatt, an Arab author of the fifteenth century, mentions a mystic named Fakr-El-Din-Farsi, one of al-Malik al-Kamil courtiers. His tomb bore the epigraph: 'This man's virtue is known to all. His adventure with al-Malik al-Kamil and what happened to him because of the monk, all that is very famous.'⁶

Our historical sources may differ in detail, but what can be said with historical certainty is that Francis crossed the lines with the intention of seeking to convert the Sultan by preaching and returned unharmed to the Crusader camp.

So far I have wanted simply to present some of the main historical accounts of the encounter, without commenting on their significance. Indeed, if we are to draw conclusions concerning its significance, we join a long line of those who have seen this in a multiplicity of ways, as has recently been pointed out by John Tolan in his book *St Francis and the Sultan: An Encounter Seen through Eight Centuries of Texts and Images*. One artistic portrayal from the 1240s (in the Bardi chapel of the church of Santa Croce in Florence) has Francis preaching to a very attentive audience, with no suggestion of a desire for martyrdom - Francis is rather depicted as a model for the friars in their mission to preach to the infidels. At the end of the thirteenth century, Giotto

⁵ Francis De Beer *We Saw Brother Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1986), pp.131ff.

⁶ De Beer, 14ff.

and his school depict Francis before the Sultan and his priests, preparing to step into the flames (not the same as Bonaventure's account). This is seen as a moral victory on the part of Francis - as well as depicting the persistent stubbornness of the Saracens.

In the 1480s, however, in the same church of Santa Croce, Benedetto de Maiano shows the Saracen priests, without fear, confronting Francis. As Tolan comments,

In the 1480s, as the Ottomans conquered large swaths of Europe and gained a foothold in Italy, it was harder to present Muslims as cowards who flee confrontation with Christians.⁷

By the end of the 16th century, a painting in the Gesu in Rome has Francis and his companions led bound before a powerful Sultan - his mission, while heroic, seems quite futile.

By the 18th century and the birth of the Enlightenment, Islam was looked upon more favourably by Western intellectuals. Voltaire sees Francis as a reckless fanatic who insults the Sultan, while the Sultan is one who, despite this, treats Francis kindly and ensures his safety. The 19th century ushered in the age of colonialism and romanticism. The historian Joseph-Francois Michaud uses Francis to emphasise the importance of carrying the fruits of European civilisation to the East. Tolan's survey concludes with the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries, where, with different concerns, the encounter between Francis and the Sultan is seen as a model of peaceful dialogue in order to 'avoid a clash of civilisations'.

But this is a matter of historical interpretations of an event. I wish to move on to discuss its possible theological significance. In order to do this, I shall focus upon the figure of Francis and what we might be able to discern concerning the effects of this experience upon him. The Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel lamented the fact that too much theology begins with the principles of the philosophers rather than the experience of the prophets. So perhaps in this case, Francis' experience can provide a valuable starting point for theology.

It is possible to discern that the encounter had considerable impact upon the religious life and practice of St Francis. His writings after his visit to Egypt show that he went through an experience there which profoundly influenced his life. He is definitely struck by the religious attitudes of the Muslims, the call to prayer, the approach to a transcendent God, the deep respect for the sacred book of the Qur'an.

Francis may have spent up to three weeks in the company of the Sultan. What he certainly would have experienced in that environment is the *Salat*, the ritual prayer of Muslims performed five times each day. The regular call to prayer of the muezzin deeply impressed him. In his *Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples*, he writes

⁷ Tolan J., *Saint Francis and the Sultan: An Encounter Seen Through Eight Centuries of Texts and Images* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p.121

You should manifest such honour to the Lord among the people entrusted to you that every evening an announcement be made by a town crier or some other signal that praise and thanks may be given by all people to the all-powerful Lord God.⁸

The muezzin could be replaced by a bell or any other sign commonly used in the West to call people to prayer:

at every hour and whenever the bells are rung, praise, glory and honour are given to the all-powerful God throughout all the earth.

In this way Christians and Muslims, all over the world, might be united in prayer - a powerful sign in a society where so many were blinded by hatred for Islam.

Francis also observed the way Muslims prostrated themselves on the floor or with deep bows paid reverence to Allah. In *A Letter to the Entire Order* he wrote,

At the mention of His name you must adore Him with fear and reverence, prostrate on the ground ... so that in word and deed you may give witness to his voice and bring everyone to know that there is no one who is all-powerful except Him.⁹

The latter expression is very similar to the first part of the Islamic Shahada or profession of faith.

A deepening awareness of the transcendence of God also became clear during this period. Islam emphasises the 'otherness' of God - this is in contrast to the Christian belief in the Incarnation of God in Jesus. In his earlier writings, Francis had very much emphasized the humanity of Christ, as expressed in his creation of the Christmas crib at Greccio. Yet there is a clear development towards the Transcendent after his return from Damietta. In Chapter 23 of the *Rule of 1221* we find,

... the one true God... without beginning and without end, unchangeable, invisible, indescribable, ineffable, incomprehensible, unfathomable, blessed, worthy of praise.¹⁰

The shock of the encounter awakens latent values in him. Francis was driven to rethink his entire faith and reinvest it with a transcendent element.

A further result of Francis' experience among the Muslims is the way he speaks about the writings of the Christian Scriptures. These, too, reminded him of the deep respect the Muslim has for the written word of the Qur'an. Shortly before his death in 1226, Francis wrote in his *Testament*

Whenever I come upon His most holy written words in unbecoming places, I desire to gather them up and I ask that they be collected and placed in a suitable place.¹¹

What we find in Francis is the attitude of change or conversion. Bernard Lonergan sees 'conversion' as fundamental to theology, 'conversion to the

⁸ Regis Armstrong and Ignatius Brady, *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works* The Classis of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) p.78

⁹ Armstrong and Brady, 56

¹⁰ Armstrong and Brady, 133,134

¹¹ Armstrong and Brady, 154

transcendent'. Conversion to the transcendent implies a turning away from faith in the human constructs which often surround central religious commitment to a searching for the truth which lies in the heart of Ultimate Reality, God. As conversion, it involves a letting go and a radical openness to the future as it eventuates.¹²

Francis' changed attitude, his attitude of 'conversion' is expressed in Chapter 16 of his *Rule of 1221* when he tells his brothers who wish to go as missionaries to the Muslims that they should testify to their Christian faith by a simple, peaceable presence and a disposition of service.¹³ Cusato and others place the composition of this text after his return from Egypt.¹⁴

It is important here to consider the context within which Francis undertook his journey to the Sultan. Pope Innocent III had called for the Fifth Crusade in his Encyclical Letter *Quia maior*. In this encyclical we find Innocent making all sorts of effort to stress the importance of supporting the Crusade, both materially and spiritually. Monthly processions were to be held to pray for the liberation of Jerusalem. During the celebration of all masses, members of the congregation were to prostrate themselves on the ground before Communion. Psalm 79 would be sung 'God, the pagans have invaded your inheritance' and at the end of the psalm the priest would pray a special prayer for deliverance of the Holy Land from the 'hands of the enemies of the cross'. In each church coffers were placed into which all the faithful could put contributions to the war effort. If they contributed, they were promised an indulgence of remission of sins, according to the amount given and the depth of their devotion. The crusade indulgence was confirmed in the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council two years later.¹⁵

In this period of preparation for the Crusade, the Muslims were presented as the enemies of God, even as evil. This was in keeping with the approach taken by Bernard of Clairvaux in his call for the second crusade (1146). According to Bernard, a crusade gave Christians the opportunity of showing they were true disciples of Christ by taking part in the crusade.

The knight of Christ serves Christ when he kills the enemy. The knight of Christ does not bear the sword without reason, for he is the minister of God for the punishment of evildoers. If he kills an evildoer, he is not the killer of a human being, but, if I may so put it, a killer of evil. The Christian glories in the death of the pagan, because by his death Christ is glorified.¹⁶

Note that not all Christians advocated violence against the Muslims. In twelfth century England, Isaac of Stella, Walter Map and Ralph Niger objected to

¹² Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), p.241

¹³ "(The brothers) are not to engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake." Armstrong and Brady, 121

¹⁴ Michael Cusato, "Healing the Violence of the World: Francis, the Crusades and Malik al-Kamil" in *Spirit and Life*, volume XII (St Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2008) p.33

¹⁵ Jan Hoeberichts *Francis and Islam* (Quincy, Illinois: Franciscan Press, 1997) p.4

¹⁶ Bernard, of Clairvaux *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, volume VII, *Treatises III*. Trans. Conrad Greenia, (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), pp.134-135

violence as the means to conversion and espoused preaching of the Christian faith. Joachim of Fiore (d.1202) believed that the New Age of the Spirit should be ushered in more by preaching than by war.¹⁷

The first four verses of Chapter 22 of the *Earlier Rule* are quite significant. Michael Cusato and David Flood see them as a farewell message that Francis left to his brothers prior to his departure to Egypt in 1219.¹⁸

Let us pay attention to what the Lord says: Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you, for our Lord Jesus Christ, whose footprints we must follow called his betrayer 'friend' and gave himself willingly to those who crucified him. Our friends, then, are all those who unjustly inflict upon us trials and ordeals, shame and injuries, sorrows and torments, martyrdom and death; we must love them greatly for we will possess eternal life because of what they have done for us.¹⁹

Such words are a striking contrast with the general attitude of the Christian authorities towards the Muslims. It would appear that Francis did not share this mentality. Hoerberichts notes that while the influence of the Fourth Lateran Council is evident in Francis' writings concerning such topics as preaching, penance and the eucharist, no trace of the call for the Crusade can be found in his writings.²⁰

It can be argued that Chapter 22:1-4 express the fruition of the transformation within Francis' life that originated in an event that took place some time between 1206-1209. In his *Testament* written shortly before he died, Francis attributes the beginning of his conversion process to his embrace of a leper:

While I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers. And the Lord himself led me among them and I had mercy upon them. And when I left them that which seemed bitter to me was changed into sweetness of soul and body; and afterwards I lingered a little and left the world.²¹

Francis had had a revulsion for lepers, their presence he described as something 'bitter to me'. It was not his natural inclination to go among the lepers. His upbringing had led him to believe that lepers were to be feared, avoided, even despised. But through this embrace of that which he had feared most, Francis began to realise a bonding of the heart between himself and all creatures, even those he had been taught to fear. By 1219, the continuing spirit of conversion within the life of Francis had brought him to see that those who were regarded by so much of the Christian world as evil or cruel beasts were in fact 'amici' - friends. Like the leper, they share with him a common dignity as sacred creations of God, all members of the one human family.

¹⁷ Warren, 29,30

¹⁸ David Flood *The Birth of a Movement* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1975), 45-46, 95. Cusato, 15ff.

¹⁹ Armstrong and Brady, 127

²⁰ Hoerberichts, 4

²¹ Armstrong and Brady, 154

Let us return to our consideration of Chapter 16 of the *Earlier Rule*. The chapter begins with the scriptural quotation 'I am sending you as lambs in the midst of wolves.'²² Much of the crusading propaganda, to which Francis and the brothers would have been exposed, spoke of the Saracens as 'wolves' and 'beasts' whom it was necessary to attack. But Francis had discovered through his engagement with Islam that such images were wrong. Francis had gone as a lamb - in the words of Jacques de Vitry, he went unarmed, carrying nothing but the 'buckler of faith' - and he had experienced that the 'wolves' were not cruel beasts.

Francis decrees that the brothers were to live 'spiritually' among the Saracens. This is a theme that frequently occurs in Francis' writings, that the brothers are to live 'in the Spirit of the Lord'. As Dominic Monti points out, this means to live out the qualities expressed in the life of Jesus.²³ Here, Francis' religious experience is central, his experience of the one whom he believed in as the revelation of God's purpose for humanity, Jesus Christ and the way Christ actually lived. For Francis, a presence 'in the spirit of the Lord' is a presence which expresses the qualities of the life lived by Jesus Christ, the qualities of humility and peace. Consequently, as Francis writes in Chapter 16, they were not to engage in arguments or disputes, but were to be 'subject to every human creature' as Christ himself was subject. This notion of 'being subject' is crucial and marks a new approach in Christian attitudes towards Muslims. Warren comments:

This was not only a radical departure from the practice of the day, it was in direct opposition to Canon Law. Several decrees regarding relations between Christians and Saracens, composed between 1188 and 1217, presupposed or even stated explicitly that Christians may not be subject to Saracens.²⁴

To live as 'subject to' is a new way of dealing with people and with the world, not on the basis of violence and power, but in a spirit of love and humility.

We might note the similarity of vision in the sermon that Francis preached at Bologna in the year 1220, not long after his return from Egypt. An authentic testimonial to this sermon is taken from the Archives of the Church of Spalatro and it is found in the history of the Bishops of Bologna, written by Signomius. Thomas, archdeacon of the cathedral of Spalatro, provides an account of the sermon:

(St Francis) did not diverge to draw a moral from different subjects, as preachers usually do, but as those who dilate on one point, he brought everything to bear upon the sole object of restoring peace, concord, and union which had been totally destroyed by cruel dissensions... God gave such force and efficiency to his words, that they led to the reconciliation of a great number of gentlemen who

²² Armstrong and Brady, 121

²³ Dominic Monti, "The Experience of the Spirit in our Franciscan Tradition", *The Cord* 49,3 (1999): 114-129

²⁴ Warren, 74

were greatly exasperated against each other, and whose irritation caused the shedding of no small quantity of blood.²⁵

Francis' vision of the Muslim as 'amicus' was not a sociological, intellectual conclusion. It was a heartfelt conviction that drew its passion from what he believed to be a God-initiated experience, one which initiated him into the path of conversion and one which bore the fruits of reconciliation and peace.

One final point that I wish to raise is the question of Francis' motive for going to Egypt. Both Bonaventure and Celano speak of the desire for martyrdom. They also make a connection between the fact that Francis was not killed by the Muslims and his later experience of the stigmata, the imprint of the wounds of Christ on his own body (an event that occurred on Mount La Verna in September 1224).

It is not too fanciful to suggest that the process of conversion that began with Francis' embrace of the leper led to a continuing transformation in his life that forced him to reassess all of his relationships. The leper experience had shattered his preconceptions concerning social divisions - the former outcast was no longer outcast but 'amicus'. So it could have been that Francis was gradually led to a reassessment of his attitudes towards all whom he had regarded as outcast or enemy. It may well have been his growing conviction that all men and women are created by God to be part of the one family that led him to seek to dissuade others from the paths of hostility and violence. Hence his burning desire to travel to Egypt, to call both Christians and Muslims to forsake the way of warfare and realise their common bonding. If this were to lead to his death, so be it; but the primary motivation was not so much to die, but to proclaim the universality of God's will, not to destroy, but to reconcile and to save.

What of the connection between Francis' 'desire for martyrdom' and the Stigmata. Cusato notes the context in which the experience of the Stigmata took place.²⁶ Francis had returned to Italy from Damietta (perhaps via the Holy Land) in 1220. In April 1223, Pope Honorius III had announced that a new military campaign be launched against the Saracens, this time including the mighty army of Emperor Frederick II. By July 1224, it was common knowledge that Frederick's preparations were nearing their completion and that he was making final arrangements to depart. Given this news, Francis went with a few of his closest companions to La Verna, extremely worried about the events about to unfold. Cusato suggests that he goes to La Verna to do a "Lent of St Michael" - an intense prayer of fasting dedicated to St

²⁵ Candide Chalippe *The Life and Legends of Saint Francis of Assisi*. Translated and edited by Hilarion Duerk (Echo Library, 2007), p.137

²⁶ Michael Cusato "Of Snakes and Angels: The Mystical Experience Behind the Stigmatization Narrative" in Jacques Dalarun, Michael Cusato and Carla Salvati, *The Stigmata of Francis of Assisi: New Studies New Perspectives* (St Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2006), pp.29-74

Michael the Archangel, who, by tradition, has been regarded as the guardian in battle *par excellence* - on behalf of his Muslim brother al-Malik al-Kamil.

It is during this time of intense prayer that Francis has the stigmata. This is the theological expression of martyrdom - identification with the reality of what is signified in the cross of Jesus. The cross is a symbol not simply of death but of what this death means. Francis had a deep familiarity with the scriptures and would have meditated on the words of St Paul writing to the Ephesians:

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.” (Ephesians 2:14-17)

Theologically, then, we might say that ‘conversion to the transcendent’ suggests the theological significance of this encounter between Francis and Malek al-Kamil. Such a conversion makes possible any future fruitful dialogue. Perhaps it is here that we find the reason for the inclusion in the reports of both Celano and Bonaventure the two stories concerning Francis’ time in Egypt: his sermon to the Crusaders and his dialogue with the Sultan, in both of which he urges a fundamental change in outlook. Francis invites Christians and Muslims to forsake war and achieve reconciliation by undergoing a process of conversion. Hence the theological significance of this encounter.

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