

Francis of Assisi meets Sultan Malik al-Kamil

One of the problems in dealing with any historical event eight hundred years ago is to sift the various later accounts to attempt to pare things back to as accurate an account as possible. This is especially difficult when one or more of the people involved have become global figures held up for the admiration and emulation of multitudes. As time goes by, historical facts are overlaid with stories and emphases that aim to paint someone in a fantastic or miraculous light, to bring out elements displaying heroics and to elevate the piety and fearlessness of the individual. This has happened to a significant extent in the case of the life of Francis of Assisi (1182-1226).¹ We will endeavour to stay as close as possible to the most likely facts of the encounter between Francis and the Sultan Malik al-Kamil (c.1180-1238). In addition, we will look at the impact that this experience had on the life and vision of Francis, his radical guidance for Christian mission amongst Muslims, and then consider possible lessons for today.

The principal characters

Francis was born into a rich mercantile family in Assisi and, as a member of such a family, was drawn like many others into seeking fame and honour on the battlefield in the frequent disputes that characterised Italian life at that time. In one such battle, with the neighbouring city of Perugia, Francis was taken prisoner and had to spend a year in prison before he was ransomed and able to return to his family in November 1203. He was physically and mentally in poor condition after his imprisonment, which led to him spending time alone, often communing with the natural world around him. A slow spiritual awakening took place during this time, which culminated in a dream-vision as he was setting off for another battle. In this he saw a place of shining honour for 'Francis and his knights' but the meaning of this eluded him. After more uneasy reflection, a subsequent dream made him realise that he was being called to abandon the ideas of battle, honour and knighthood. He returned to Assisi and on the way sold his fine horse, armour and clothing.

Francis' calling took on more positive shape in 1205 when he received the vision to repair the run-down church of San Damiano outside Assisi and interpreted this as having a wider aspect, to set out a different way of Christian living as a sign to the wider institutional Church. He felt called to a life of radical simplicity, compassion and care for those rejected by society; the symbol of this was his embrace of a leper, widely regarded as a social outcaste. The challenge of his new way of life brought ridicule and indeed persecution from those around him, including his father, who beat him and confined him in the home so that he would 'regain his senses'. As Francis' radicalism was clothed in religious practices, his father brought him before the bishop in 1206. It

¹ A helpful exploration of this can be found in John Toland, *Saint Francis and the Sultan: the curious history of a Christian-Muslim encounter*, Oxford: OUP, 2009

was on this occasion that Francis removed his clothes in the assembly before the bishop, thus symbolising the renunciation of everything that belonged to his former way of life: money, position and privilege. From this time onwards, Francis would live without material possessions in a radical way of poverty.

There is a double rejection to be seen in this. Not only was Francis rejecting all that the life of his privileged family represented but he was also throwing down a living challenge to the institutional Church, especially the clergy within it, who were seen to be possessed by an avaricious desire to acquire wealth and possessions and thus enhance their social status, all at the expense of the poor. The key to understand Francis' thinking is to grasp the virtue of poverty. If one possesses nothing, then one has nothing to defend and protect, therefore there is no need of force, defences and men-at-arms. Poverty and peaceful living are intrinsically linked together, much as the Buddha taught: all suffering is rooted in desire, if one removes all desires, then one has removed all the causes that can lead to suffering. Francis wanted those who followed his way of life to be free of all property and possessions, including residences, churches and money, so that they could live a life of radical insecurity, following the Gospel message, and thus naturally be instruments of peace. Once this realisation of the intrinsic link between poverty and peace had come to him, he was open to receive a revealed greeting: he was to greet all those he met by saying 'May the Lord give you peace', as Jesus was recorded as greeting people, especially after his resurrection. From now on, the radically poor and insecure Francis, who would own nothing, was truly liberated to be a 'man of peace'. Francis' greetings to the animals and other elements of creation are only extensions of this inner disposition. This inner peace led to a nonviolent way of life, a desire to be a peace-maker, to be reconciled to not even possessing one's own life, which can be laid down willingly if God so wills, and thus a full conversion of the heart to becoming Christ-like.

Malik al-Kamil was the nephew of the great Muslim liberator of Palestine and surrounding lands, Salah ad-Din or Saladin (1138-1193). He was raised for chivalrous leadership and had the distinction of being knighted in 1192 by the crusader king, Richard the Lionhearted, as the diplomatic peace-sealing conclusion of the Third Crusade. In 1200, he was appointed Sultan of Egypt and was noted for his fair and generous dealings with the Coptic Christians of that land. There are many legends of his kindness towards them and his encouragement that they should open up trading links with European merchants. He was a man of a religious temperament and was noted for his sufi advisers at court. He was used to hosting discussions on religious topics in his residence and welcomed Christians as well as Muslims to enter into conversation together.

The spirit of crusading

The First Crusade was called by Pope Urban II (r.1088-1099) in 1095 and the age of crusading came to a close in 1291 with the fall of the crusader castle of Acre. When Urban II issued his call to the noblemen and ruffians of Europe to arm themselves and take part in the crusade, he did so by means of a formal papal edict or 'Bull', in which he pledged forgiveness of sins and remission of the sufferings of purgatory to all those who took part. Those who lost their lives in the process were promised the ultimate 'plenary indulgence' which connoted full pardon and remission of sins. The call to go crusading therefore had a religious dimension at its centre, a call to pilgrimage, to penance and seeking God's forgiveness, and a call to do a 'Christian act' in liberating the Holy Places from Muslim rule, thus opening them up for western Christian pilgrims to make pious visits in safety. To gain this end, the use of force and the shedding of the blood of the enemy, was justified under the banner of the cross.

The sanctioning, indeed inciting, of violence in the name of the Church took root through the twelfth century and can be seen in a new light with the launching of the Albigensian Crusade in 1208 against the Cathars, who emerged in 1143 and who were regarded as Christian heretics. They were pacifists who opposed the crusades; they sought perfection and came to regard matter as evil; they wanted to live a life of austerity and were critical of the corruption of the Church at that time. Indeed, Francis was taken by some of his contemporaries as having Cathar leanings. The pope of that time, Innocent III (r.1198-1216), resolved to destroy the Cathars by force. It was Innocent III who summoned the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Two decrees of the council had a profound impact on Francis. First, it decreed that God willed the Fifth Crusade and whoever refused to take part would have to answer to Pope Innocent and God on the Day of Judgement. Crusading was a godly act and the promises of indulgences were reinforced. Second, it declared that there was no salvation for people who did not belong to the Church in communion with Rome. The first decree pointed to a tension for Francis from the time of his conversion onwards. He received visions from God, like his call to a life of radical poverty, which were not in keeping with the papally sanctioned decrees and way of life of the time; obedience to God in conscience must have priority. The second decree spurred a thirst to convert people to the Christian faith, especially Muslims, in order that they might be spared the awesome torments of hell.

Francis made at least two attempts prior to his meeting with the Sultan to reach the Muslim lands to try to win them over to the Christian faith. In 1211, he set sail for Palestine but was blown off course by contrary winds, and in 1213/14, he attempted to reach Morocco but only made it as far as Spain.

The setting for the encounter with the Sultan

Crusaders setting off for the Fifth Crusade made their way to Acre in the spring and summer of 1217. In September 1217, it was decided to attack and conquer Egypt, thus depriving the Muslims of the wealth of the Nile and providing a base for a new front to attack Jerusalem. The crusaders took ship from Acre and landed in May 1218 about two miles from Damietta in the Nile Delta region of Egypt, where they set up and fortified their camp.

There were, in effect, two centres of leadership within the crusader ranks. The pope had appointed Cardinal Pelagius Galvani (c.1165-1230) as his legate, which means that he carried the ecclesiastical authority and also controlled the supply of funds. Most of the money to support the crusade came from church prelates, monasteries and a levy upon the clergy. The military leadership focused on John of Brienne (c1170-1237), a French nobleman, who had married Queen Maria of Jerusalem and thus become the Latin King of Jerusalem. Pelagius knew that the European nobility were fickle and thus it was important to achieve a swift and profitable victory. John of Brienne was concerned to wait for the arrival of reinforcements.

The crusaders laid siege to Damietta and the Muslims reinforced their defences. Periodically there were battles between the two sides. The crusaders were led towards the battle by the cardinal, carrying what was thought to be a relic of the cross on which Jesus had died, accompanied by the bishops present and the clergy, often walking barefooted as a penitential sign. They would stand overlooking the soldiers and remain at prayer during the fighting. A prayer attributed to Cardinal Pelagius conveys the sentiment, calling upon God to help the crusaders “so that we may be able to convert the perfidious and worthless people, so that they ought duly to believe with us in the Holy Trinity and in your nativity and in your passion, death and resurrection”.²

The battles soon reached a stalemate and eventually Malik made a peace offer. He would give Jerusalem to the crusaders plus the money to rebuild it if they would leave Egypt. The German nobility, John of Brienne and the residents of Jerusalem were delighted and wanted to accept. The Italian nobility, Cardinal Pelagius, the clergy and the military religious orders, the Knights Templar and Hospitaller, were opposed to acceptance. They wanted control of Egypt to open up secure trade routes and strike a heavy blow against Islam. This stand-off was still in place when Francis of Assisi arrived.

Francis landed by sea at the end of July 1219. He saw the terrible after-effects of the battles all around: dead bodies rotting in the heat, mangled bodies of those slowly dying and many suffering from terrible injuries. He was present in the crusader camp as preparations were being made for another battle on 29th August. Francis had a dream-vision, in which he believed that God had made clear to him that this battle was not

² A recent and accessible book on the encounter is by Paul Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan*, New York: Doubleday, 2009; here p. 89

according to the divine will. Following his conscience, Francis sought an interview with Cardinal Pelagius to convey this message; he was heard but ridiculed. The battle was a disaster with several thousand crusaders killed and taken captive.

Francis meets the Sultan

Francis' response to this battle was to decide to go on a peace-mission into the Muslim camp to 'show Jesus' to the Sultan. He sought the approval and blessing of Pelagius, who eventually agreed that he could go, with the consequences, expected to be certain death, on his own head. Francis, probably accompanied by just one of the Brothers, called Illuminato, walked into the Muslim camp, where they were stopped by sentinels, who eventually led them into the presence of Sultan Malik. This encounter has been the subject of much embellishment so that it is hard to discern the events beneath them. Perhaps it is best to stay with the contemporary account, written by James of Vitry (c.1160-1240), the Bishop of Acre:

And so they brought him [Francis] to him [Malik]. On seeing the man of God, the sultan, that cruel beast, became sweetness itself, kept him with him for a few days and with a great deal of attention listened to him preach the Faith of Christ to him and to his followers. But in the end, he was afraid of seeing some of his soldiers, whom the effective words of this man would have converted to the Lord, go over to the army of the Christians. He, therefore, had Francis led back to our camp with many signs of honour and with security precautions, but not without saying to him: "Pray for me, that God may reveal to me the law and the faith that is more pleasing to him."³

Other accounts have Francis refusing gifts that Malik would have pressed upon him, and also both parties invoking the prayers of the other as they parted. As Malik was well used to spiritual discourse with Christians and sufis, it seems likely that this was much more two-sided than just a monologue. Given the poor attire and necessarily dishevelled condition of Francis on reaching the camp, he may well have been thought to be a Christian mystic (*faqir*), given to a life of poverty, and thus safe to admit to the camp. Francis was no philosopher or theologian, so the nature of the discussion was more likely to be a spiritual 'heart-to-heart'.

Francis understood that he had preached the Gospel of love by his actions in the midst of a warring situation. He is recorded to have been saddened that he had not succeeded in converting the Sultan, which would have led to the latter's eternal salvation. There is good reason to believe that, in the closing days of his life, Francis had the Sultan and his eternal salvation to the forefront of his consciousness. Francis had received papers from Malik to guarantee him safe passage through the Muslim lands, to Jerusalem and eventually back to Assisi. The crusaders soon took Damietta and began a time of debauchery, looting and abuse, which hastened Francis' desire to leave their camp at the earliest possible moment.

The impact of the encounter

³ Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan*, p. 133

During his time in the Muslim camp, Francis had noted the effect of the call to prayer (*adhan*) on the Muslims: some had immediately broken off their work for prayers, others had been reminded that the window for prayers had begun and others were reminded that they ought to pray, even if they didn't. In his *Letter to the Rulers of the People*, written after his return to Italy, Francis requested them to see to it that a signal is given to the people "by a herald" to inform them it is time for prayers and warn them that they would be answerable as to whether or not they prayed on the Day of Judgement.⁴ There is evidence to see this as the forerunner to the ringing of angelus bells and thus punctuation of the day with prayer, which is first recorded in Franciscan usage within twenty years of the death of Francis.

During his interaction with Muslims, Francis was always careful to show respect for their faith and never to speak disparagingly of the Qur'an or the Prophet Muhammad. It is interesting to contrast this with the group of Franciscan Brothers who went to Morocco in 1220 to preach and insisted on ridiculing Muhammad in public until they forced the authorities to have them executed. Francis acknowledged them as martyrs but did not celebrate their methodology.

One of the forms of devotional writing that is associated with Francis is his style of canticles of praise, which, for example, in *The Praises of God* (1224), heap up praises of God through repetition in an exuberant way (see the appendix). Some scholars have traced the influence here of Francis' exposure to the recitation of the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God in Muslim practice, which he must have experienced during his time amongst the Muslims.

When Francis returned to Assisi, he wanted to have his brotherhood officially recognised by Rome as a religious order. To this end, he wrote a rule of life in 1221, which is referred to as the *Regula non-bullata* (the Rule that was not approved) or the Earlier Rule.⁵ This Rule contained a chapter (16) specifically dedicated to "Those who are going among the Saracens and other unbelievers". It saw this as an individual call by God to some Brothers, which should be tested by the elders of the community. Such Brothers were to go in all humility to live a life of exemplary goodness and service to all. It is significant that in his *Praises of God*, Francis included the particular address to God, "You are humility" (*Tu es humilitas*). This sense of the humility of God, expressed in the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of the incarnation, was a central theme in Francis' understanding of the Christian way of life. The life of service was expressed in the starkest of terms; the Brothers were to be subject (*subditus*) to all human creatures as a sign of their imitation of the humility revealed in Christ. The life of exemplary goodness, humility and service should eventually provoke questions amongst the Muslims that would permit the Brothers to speak about their faith guided by the virtues of charity and wisdom, using beautiful words. The Rule that was finally approved by Rome in 1223 had been shortened from the original thirty-six pages, containing many biblical quotations, to eight pages of legal text. Chapter 16 had been omitted, one reason

⁴ Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan*, p. 160

⁵ A thorough study of this Rule has been conducted by J. Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam*, Quincy IL: Franciscan Press, 1997

for which was that Francis had already lost control of his brotherhood. He had been determined that they should own no property and should not be ordained as priests, but when he returned to Italy, he found that they had buildings and there was almost a 'clerical take-over' of his brotherhood. As far as Roman Canon Law was concerned, clergy could only be subject to church law and therefore the idea of being 'subject to all human creatures' was quite unacceptable for them.

Francis spent the last phase of his life in near-solitude in a cave in La Verna. His eyesight had weakened considerably, therefore he spent his time in near darkness. He was much given to fasting and meditation, and it was during this time that he wrote his canticles and received the stigmata, the signs on his own body of the marks of Christ's crucifixion. His faithful companion during this time was Brother Leo. Francis wrote out his canticle of the Praises of God on a piece of parchment, then turned it over and wrote a blessing from the Book of Numbers. Under this he drew a head as though lying on its back. The head is bearded and wears a thrice-turned turban. The *tau* (the T-shaped letter associated with the mark of God's protection in the writings of Ezekiel) is seen above the mouth preceded by the word *fleo*. The meaning of this Latin word changes according to whether one includes the *tau* as part of it or not: *fleo* would be 'I weep' and *fleo te* (in the rather imperfect Latin grammar that Francis would have used) would be 'I am weeping for you'. Scholars are divided about the interpretation of this drawing but, especially for those who have viewed the original parchment, the figure is so clearly bearded and beturbaned that the opinion that it refers to Sultan Malik al-Kamil, and suggests that Francis is seeking God's protection on him, is inescapable. If this is so, then the encounter with the Sultan left such an indelible mark on Francis that he carried it with him to his death.

Appendix: The Praises of God, Francis of Assisi (1224)

You are holy Lord God, who does wonderful things
You are strong
You are great
You are most high
You are the almighty king
You holy Father, King of heaven and earth
You are three and one, the Lord God of gods
You are the good, all good, the highest good
Lord God living and true.

You are love, charity
You are wisdom
You are humility
You are patience
You are beauty
You are meekness
You are security
You are rest
You are gladness and joy
You are our hope
You are justice
You are moderation
You are all our riches to sufficiency

You are beauty
You are meekness
You are the protector
You are our custodian and defender
You are strength
You are refreshment
You are our hope
You are our faith
You are our charity
You are all our sweetness
You are our eternal life
Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful Saviour