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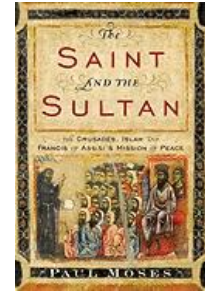
Book Review

The Saint and the Sultan: The Crusades, Islam and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace

Paul Moses

New York: Doubleday, 2009

The *Saint and the Sultan* takes us back to the Middle Ages to relate an unusual encounter between two dynamic personalities of the day. Journalist-author Paul Moses untangles for us the various written accounts of a little-known meeting between a beloved Christian saint and a powerful Egyptian sultan, placing the meeting in the geopolitical context of its time. The judges who chose *The Saint and the Sultan* for the 2010 Catholic Press Association Award for best history book called it “a valuable historical resource for Westerners and Muslims seeking understanding across religious and cultural frontiers.”



The Ayyubid dynasty's Sultan Malik Al-Kamil Mohammad is not a particularly well-known figure in the Islamic world. In fact, many Muslims may be relatively more familiar with the name of Saint Francis than with Sultan Al-Kamil. There are very few historical writings on Sultan Al-Kamil compared to Saint Francis of Assisi. The encounter itself is even less known in the Islamic world. A few American Muslims came to know of this interfaith meeting through a docudrama recently released by Unity Productions Foundation called *The Sultan and the Saint*,¹ which not only shows the story of Francis and Malik but also “explores the psychological and even neurological roots of religious warfare and the way that otherwise reasonable people behave when they are encouraged to destroy a dehumanized foe in the name of their own particular god.”²

Given this lack of exposure, one appreciates the author's meticulous explanation of the historical backdrop to the incident, the political milieu of European power brokers of the time, and the societal norms of 800 years ago. In addition to being a compelling read, the book provides several examples of attempting to see “through the eyes of the other.”

Since stories about Saint Francis are legion, an ongoing question on reading this book was “Why isn't this story already well known?” Francis made the first Christmas crèche, with live animals (!); he introduced the idea of the Stations of the Cross in church buildings; he tamed the wolf and preached to the fish. His peace prayer has been sung regularly in the West ever since the vernacular was allowed at Mass. His statue adorns countless gardens. Just five years ago, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, on being elected pope, took the name Francis, the first pope ever to do so, inspiring a fresh retelling of all the Francis of Assisi stories. But the story of the encounter between the saint and the sultan – a concept, by the way, that the same Pope Francis recommends often – is largely unknown. So, why?

In the introduction, Moses makes it quite clear that he has made choices about “which portions of the medieval documents to accept as historical and which to reject.” He applies his skills as “an investigative reporter” to “decode the early documents and uncover the story

¹ Alex Kronemer (writer and director) and Jeremy Morrison (producer), *The Sultan and the Saint* (Potomac Falls, VA: Unity Productions Foundation, 2016), film. See www.sultanandthesaintfilm.com

² Waco *Tribune-Herald*, cited in www.sultanandthesaintfilm.com/press

... and what [it] can mean today.” These choices are necessary because the documents in question were not meant to provide a true history as we understand *true* and *history* today. Rather, they were meant to respond to the political pressures and theological goals of specific audiences in the late thirteenth century CE.

Herein lies the primary instance of “through the eyes of the other.” We now view Francis of Assisi as an established and well-known saint, a person whose story is edifying and whose example is worth emulating. Those for whom the medieval documents were written had no such predilection. Francis and his followers were instead a possible source of heresy and a clear example of countercultural behaviour.

Herein lies also the underlying reason for widespread unfamiliarity. The parts of the story of Francis that were emphasized in the medieval documents and consequently informed his image in subsequent centuries focused on his obedience and orthodoxy. They sought to rid Francis and his followers of any hint of conflict with authority. There was no place for details of mutually respectful and informative, not to say transformative, encounters with nonbelievers.

Moses spends the first section of his book giving background information on Francis and his life journey from soldier to prisoner of war to vagabond to peacemaker in the part of the world we now call Italy and in the time we call the Crusades. He also offers background on the political and familial situation that shaped Al-Kamil and brought him to power as the twenty-year-old viceroy of Egypt in the year 1200 CE. Moses gives many examples of Al-Kamil interacting with Christians, both Roman and Coptic, noting that “Christian ways would have been much more familiar to al-Kamil than Muslim customs were to Francis.”

In the second section, Moses describes not only the encounter between Francis and Al-Kamil but also the events preceding and following it. It is interesting to note that there seems to have been as much fighting and betrayal within both Christian and Muslim ranks as there was between them. Al-Kamil was distracted from his defence of the strategic port city of Damietta by an attempted coup staged by one of his own aides when Al-Kamil’s father died. The attackers were distracted by the class distinctions of medieval life translated unfortunately to the battlefield.

In their encounter, both Francis and Malik broke the norms of the day. They were rebels who were guided by their respective faiths. There was no need for the Sultan to welcome a preacher from the attackers’ side in the heat of the battle. One wonders how common it was to have a member of the opposing army stay with them as honoured guests for several days and be able to preach to the soldiers. Similarly, Saint Francis took the risk of trusting the humanity of the other side at a time when the dominant image of Muslims in Europe was very problematic. It speaks to the Saint’s willingness to apply his faith to all aspects of his reality and not to be selective in his espoused principles.

One aspect that stands out was the approach to peace by the Saint and the Sultan. Saint Francis believed that the way to peace would be achieved only if the Sultan converted to Christianity. Paul Moses suggests in this book that Saint Francis was frustrated with Sultan Al-Kamil’s refusal to convert, which Francis believed would end the bloodshed of war. Here lies another instance of trying to see “through the eyes of the other.” Given the spiritual awakening of Saint Francis which led him from the life of a soldier to the life of a monk, and given what we know today of post-traumatic stress disorder, which it is likely Francis experienced in his time in Egypt, it may well be that Francis’s real frustration was at the continuation of the horrors of war. At the same time, Sultan Al-Kamil repeatedly reached out

to promote peace and was even willing to negotiate handing over the rule of the holy city of Jerusalem to the crusaders for twelve years in return for a cessation of hostilities. Unfortunately, the leaders on Francis's side did not agree.

In the final section, Moses describes machinations that resulted in the story of Francis's encounter with al-Kamil being buried. This twisting of the truth by friars, cardinals, ministers general, and popes is not a pretty image.

But even though the story of the encounter between Francis of Assisi and Malik Al-Kamil was successfully lost or hidden or ignored for centuries, it sowed a seed which has now grown and begun to bear good fruit. In the last chapter, Moses sketches the work of early adopters of the idea of dialogue, like Charles de Foucauld and Louis Massignon in the nineteenth century. He also mentions organizations like the Badaliya Prayer Movement, Assisi Pax, the Damietta Initiative and the Pace e Bene Nonviolence Service.³ Indeed, Pope Saint John Paul II's World Day of Prayer for Peace, held in Assisi on October 26, 1986, "was a symbolic testament to the ongoing rediscovery of Francis's legacy as a peacemaker who tried to build a bridge to Muslims during the Crusade."

Moses spent seventeen years as a staff writer for *Newsday*, and this background is quite evident in the style of his prose. Instead of the more academic structure of thesis, exposition, and conclusion, the chapters unfold like newspaper articles with the most important information first followed by supporting detail. They often conclude with a kind of "cliffhanger" introduction to the following chapter. It makes for lively – if sometimes a little disjointed – reading. And one quibble: in describing the joy of the Muslim world streaming to visit the Dome of the Rock, Moses refers to it as the location of Abraham's binding of his son Isaac as a sacrifice. This reference is at best distracting since it is Abraham's other son Ishmael who takes pride of place for Muslims.

Of course, no book can be expected to tell the whole story of any encounter. In this book, Moses focuses on the two protagonists and their immediate colleagues and opponents. The author has done a superb job in weaving together for us the various versions of this encounter throughout history from a European-Christian perspective. However, we are not told too much about how the historical writings on Al-Kamil have portrayed this meeting. Is it because not much has been written about it, or did the author not pay too much attention to tracing those details?

It would also have been good if Moses's investigative journalism had reached as far as including voices of the *anawim* – the poor, the humble. We don't hear about the role of women, or of the common foot soldier, or of the descendants of the Hebrew people who, though they had been expelled from Jerusalem, were still resident in the lands in question. Perhaps Moses looked and found no extant voices. In that case, it would be helpful to know that he had tried. Furthermore, one wonders what future readers, perhaps two hundred years from now, will think of the way the author Paul Moses interpreted the encounter and which lenses he used to weave the story.

In the epilogue, Moses names "the value of uncovering the true story of Francis as peace-maker: from the depths of his deep piety and his personal experience as a soldier and POW, he gave an authentic religious response to war ... Francis believed that God instructed him to befriend and love his enemies and to see war as the devil's work ... He approached the

³ See <http://www.dcbuck.com/Badaliya/index.html>, <http://www.assisipax.org/about-us/>, <http://www.capuchinfranciscan.co.za/damietta>, and <http://www.paceebene.org>

sultan in that spirit, hoping not only to win over an enemy but to show fellow Christians that warfare was the wrong way to approach Islam.” Moses contends that “Francis’s example is that the road to peace is for all of us, not just the government officials who lead in our name. Francis took matters into his own hands by bravely seeking out a personal relationship with the sultan ... Peace gets a chance when the divide between peoples is bridged through personal relationships.” Moses also notes that Al-Kamil’s example is worth emulating: “Al-Kamil listened to Francis – and was open to a dialogue – even though he had much else to worry about.”

Although we have progressed in interfaith dialogue to the extent that preaching and trying to convert the other is not the usual approach for most, our situation today is not so different from that of eight centuries ago. Could any aspect of this historical episode apply to our times? Will those on whom war is waged in Afghanistan and Iraq be able to welcome, respect, and honour an emissary of peace in their midst, or will they label them all as invaders, thus restricting dialogue? In the heat of the gunships and bombs in Iraq, was there a chance to show mercy as Sultan Al-Kamil did when he fed the enemy?

The Saint and the Sultan is worth a read because the story Moses tells “resonates with various levels of meaning rather than with a single precise moral. It doesn’t so much prescribe a course of conduct as suggest hope that the right path still can be found.” Muslim readers will relate well to the story of Saint Francis’s abandonment of entitlement and luxury, finding echoes of many similar stories of the companions of Prophet Mohammad and the mystics in their own tradition. Even though the mercy, compassion, and forgiveness that the two faithful individuals demonstrated may not have stopped the war and bloodshed immediately, these qualities do make a difference somewhere down the line. Mohammad’s unprecedented action in completely forgiving his persecutors at the time of the conquest of Mecca and Jesus’ actions in loving one’s enemy were kept alive by these men of character.

In the words of Francis himself, “Where there is charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor disturbance. Where there is poverty with joy, there is neither covetousness nor avarice. Where there is inner peace and meditation, there is neither anxiousness nor dissipation ... Where there is mercy and discernment, there is neither excess nor hardness of heart.”⁴ Had we access to recorded words of Malik al-Kamil, we would doubtless find echoing sentiments. In their encounter, Francis and Malik succeeded, to at least some degree, in seeing “through the eyes of the other.” It is of critical importance that such extraordinary moments be remembered and emulated.

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⁴ Francis of Assisi, “How Virtue Drives Out Vice,” Admonition XXVII, in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, translated by Regis J. Armstrong OFM Cap. and Ignatius C. Brady OFM (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 35.