

St Francis of Assisi and Islam: a theological perspective on a Christian-Muslim Encounter

Abstract

In 1219 an encounter took place between a Christian from Italy, Francis of Assisi, and the Islamic Sultan of Egypt, al-Malik-al-Kamil. This meeting took place at Damietta in northern Egypt during the progress of the Fifth Crusade. Over a period of perhaps three weeks, religious dialogue took place between Francis and Al-Kamil, after which time the Sultan had Francis escorted safely back to the Christian camp.

It is possible to discern from the writings of Francis after his return from Egypt that the meeting had a deep religious impact upon him in the latter years of his life. It can be said that both Francis and al-Kamil experienced through their encounter what the Christian theologian Bernard Lonergan has spoken of as a conversion into a new horizon. The historical encounter between Francis and the Sultan witnesses to the fact that through religious conversion, it is possible for members of different religious faiths to arrive at a common vision of universal peace and reconciliation.

In the year 1219, possibly during the month of September, an encounter took place between a Christian from Italy, Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and the Muslim Sultan of Egypt, al-Malik al-Kamil (577-635/1180-1238). 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 First Crusade was 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. On October 2 1187, Saladin recaptured Jerusalem which then became for Islam, too, a holy city. 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.¹ 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 and devout, the very epitome of the Islamic culture of his day.² The battle for Damietta was 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 the city. It was once again seized by the Crusaders in 1249, surrendered by them in 1250 and finally laid waste by

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

² Fareed Munir, "Prophet Mohammad of Arabia and St Francis of Assisi in the Spirituality of Mission", *Islam and Franciscanism: A Dialogue* (St Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2000), p.34

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, 1219. It would seem that his visit to the Sultan took place during the three week truce that followed.³

It is important to appreciate the wider context within which Francis undertook his journey to the Sultan. Pope Innocent III's original call for the Fifth Crusade in 1213 came with his Encyclical Letter *Quia Maior*. In this encyclical Innocent stressed the importance of supporting the Crusade, both materially and spiritually. Christopher Tyerman comments, "*Quia Maior* established a comprehensive practical as well as religious framework for a new crusade."⁴ 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.⁵ Two years later at the Fourth Lateran Council when arrangements for the Crusade were finalised, it was decreed that "... crusaders shall assemble in the kingdom of Sicily" in order to proceed "... to fight against the enemies of the faith."⁶

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).

³ *ibid.* p.49

⁴ Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (London: Allen Lane, 2006) p.613

⁵ Jan Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam* (Quincy, Illinois: Franciscan Press, 1997), p.4

⁶ Fourth Lateran Council 71 in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman Tanner (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1990), p.267

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.⁷

Not all Christians, however, advocated violence against the Muslims. In twelfth century England, Isaac of Stella, Walter Map and Ralph Niger objected to 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.⁸

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. The Franciscan accounts are 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 Life of St Francis by Thomas of Celano*. In 1247 there appeared Celano's *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, also known as *Second Celano*.⁹ By this time, many changes had happened in the Order that Francis had founded. The Papal decrees *Quo elongati*, issued by Gregory IX in 1230 and *Ordinem vestrum*, issued by Innocent IV in 1245, confirmed what many who had come later into the Order had been seeking – a relaxation of the austerity, poverty and

⁷ Bernard of Clairvaux, "Treatises III" in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux*, volume VII, trans. Conrad Greenia (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), pp.134-135

⁸ Warren, 29,30

⁹ For "The Life of St Francis by Thomas of Celano", see *Francis of Assisi Early Documents*, volume I The Saint, ed. Regis Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman, William Short (New York: New City Press, 1999), pp.171ff. For Celano's "The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul", see *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* volume II The Founder, ed. Regis Armstrong, J. A. Wayne Hellman and William Short (New York: New City Press, 2000), pp.233ff.

humility that had characterised the life of Francis and his early followers. Celano believed that many of these changes had drawn the brothers away from the radical challenges of gospel life originally presented by Francis and that the way of life of the Order had become too settled and comfortable. In *Second Celano*, Thomas is urging the brothers to remember the original desire that fired the life of Francis and his early followers and to seek to rediscover this in their own lives. Francis' way of life is presented as far from comfortable; rather, emphasis is placed upon its prophetic nature.

Celano's *Life of St Francis* 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." The report is given 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."¹⁰ In *Second Celano* there is an account of Francis' voyage to Damietta, but no mention is made of his meeting with the Sultan. Chapter 4 is entitled "How he foretold the massacre of Christians at Damietta". Francis came to the Crusader camp with his companion but, on hearing that the Christian forces were preparing to attack the Muslim army, attempted to dissuade the soldiers from engaging in combat. The soldiers, however, scoffed and mocked him, treating him as a fool. In keeping with the overall vision of this work, Celano presents Francis as one inspired by God's Spirit, prophesying their defeat, which was what in fact occurred.¹¹

By 1260 a number of versions of the life of Francis were in circulation, often more concerned with justifying varying life styles than with presenting an accurate portrayal of Francis.¹² Differing accounts of Francis' life had become

¹⁰ "The Life of St Francis by Thomas of Celano" pp.229-231

¹¹ Thomas of Celano, "The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul" pps. 265,266

¹² An excellent account of the nature of these early *Lives* is to be found in Michael Cusato, "Talking about ourselves: The shift in Franciscan writing from hagiography to history (1235-1247)", *Franciscan Studies* 58 (2000) pp.37-75

a source of conflict within the Order and in 1260, the General Chapter asked for a definitive life of Francis to be written. The task was given to the Minister General, Bonaventure and in 1263 Bonaventure presented to the Chapter his *Legenda Maior*, more of a theological vision of Francis than a historical one.¹³ In 1266 the Chapter declared Bonaventure's *Legenda* to be definitive and ordered all other *Legenda* to be destroyed.¹⁴

In Chapter 9 of *Legenda Maior* entitled "On the Fervour of his Charity and his Desire for Martyrdom", Bonaventure presents Francis and his companion Illuminatus taken before the Sultan where Francis proceeded to preach. The Sultan willingly listened and Francis went on to propose as a test of faith an ordeal by fire to be endured by both Francis and the Sultan's advisers, a detail that finds no mention in Celano. The Sultan rejected the proposal but continued to respect Francis who eventually returned to the Christian camp.¹⁵ Chapter 11, which is entitled "On his Understanding of Scripture and His Spirit of Prophecy", recounts the story given in *Second 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 *Second Celano*, the story is seen as an illustration of the prophetic spirit and wisdom of Francis.¹⁶

An important non-Franciscan source is to be found in the 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

¹³ Bonaventure "The Life of St Francis" in *Bonaventure – The Soul's Journey into God ~ The Tree of Life ~ The Life of St Francis*, intro. and trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp.179-327

¹⁴ Although most copies of these other *Legenda* that were kept in Franciscan houses were destroyed, copies were preserved in Cistercian communities and these are the manuscripts that have come down to us today. See "Bonaventure of Bagnoregio: Introduction" in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents* Vol II The Founder, p.503

¹⁵ Bonaventure "The Life of St Francis", pp.268-271

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.282

with the proclamation, “I am a Christian” and with a request to be led to the Sultan, he was taken to appear before al-Malik 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.¹⁷ Moreover, an Arab author of the fifteenth century mentions a mystic named Fakr-El-Din-Farsi, one of al-Kamil's 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.”¹⁸

So far I have presented some of the main historical accounts of the encounter, without commenting on their significance. Indeed, if we are to draw conclusions concerning its significance, it is good to keep in mind that throughout history, many have seen this in a multiplicity of ways, as has 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) had Francis preaching to a very attentive audience, with no suggestion of a desire for martyrdom – Francis was rather depicted as a model for the friars in their mission to preach to the infidels. At the end of the thirteenth century, Giotto and his school depicted Francis before the Sultan and his priests, preparing to step into the flames of a fire and portrayed this as a moral victory on the part of Francis. In the 1480s, however, in the same church of Santa Croce, Benedetto de Maiano showed the Saracen priests, without fear, confronting Francis. 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.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Francis De Beer *We Saw Brother Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1986), pp.131ff.

¹⁸ *ibid.* pp.14ff.

¹⁹ John Tolan, *Saint Francis and the Sultan: An Encounter Seen Through Eight Centuries of Texts and Images* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.121

By the end of the sixteenth century, a painting in the Gesu in Rome had Francis and his companions led bound before a powerful Sultan – his mission, while heroic, seems quite futile. By the time of the birth of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, Islam was looked upon more favourably by Western intellectuals. Voltaire saw Francis as a reckless fanatic who insulted the Sultan, while the Sultan was one who, despite this, treated Francis kindly and ensured his safety. The nineteenth century ushered in the age of colonialism and romanticism. The historian Joseph-Francois Michaud used Francis to emphasise the importance of carrying the fruits of European civilisation to the East. Tolan’s survey concludes with the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, where, with different concerns, the encounter between Francis and the Sultan was 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. Heschel argued that philosophical abstractions concerning the nature of God “... can easily become a substitute for God”. The prophets’ understanding of God, on the contrary, “... was not the result of a theoretical inquiry... To the prophets God was overwhelmingly real and shatteringly present.”²⁰ For Heschel, the most valuable form of theology is that which derives from experience. In seeking to give a theological perspective on the encounter between Francis and al-Malik-al-Kamil, the experience of Francis can provide a useful starting point.

The Canadian Catholic theologian Bernard Lonergan in his renowned work *Method in Theology* sees ‘conversion’ as fundamental to theology. Lonergan

²⁰ Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* Part 11 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p.1

argues that each person lives within a particular horizon, a line that dictates the limits of one's vision and understanding of life. Different horizons may lead individuals or groups into conflict, when "...what in one is found intelligible, in another is unintelligible."²¹ In the face of such conflict, what is called for is the possibility of movement from one horizon to another. Movement into a new horizon may involve what Lonergan speaks of as an "... about-face... a new sequence that can keep revealing ever greater depth and breadth and wealth. Such an about-face and new beginning is what is meant by a conversion."²² Lonergan describes conversion as a process of sublation that keeps all the essential features of what is sublated but carries these forward to find fuller realisation within a wider and richer context. What enhances the possibility of conversion is 'encounter':

Encounter... is meeting persons, appreciating the values they represent, criticising their defects, and allowing one's living to be challenged at its very roots by their words and by their deeds... encounter is the one way in which self-understanding and horizon can be put to the test.²³

Through his encounter with the world of Islam, Francis of Assisi moved into a new horizon. Although he may originally have been motivated to go to Egypt through a desire for martyrdom, no such motivation was later given to his brothers. Francis' changed horizon, his attitude of 'conversion', finds expression in Chapter 16 of the *Earlier Rule*. Cusato and others place the composition of this text after his return from Egypt.²⁴ Here, Francis does not speak of martyrdom but tells his brothers who wish to go as missionaries to the Muslims

²¹ Benard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p.236

²² *ibid.* pp.237,238

²³ *ibid.* p.247

²⁴ 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. Laurent Gallant offers a refined analysis of the composition of Chapter 16, arguing for an evolution of the text from an earlier and shorter prescription of a general code of conduct (1217) to the present text as it was refined by Francis after his experience in Damietta. Laurent Gallant, "Francis of Assisi Forerunner of Interreligious Dialogue: Chapter 16 of the Earlier Rule Revisited" in *Franciscan Studies* 64(2006), pp.53-82

that they should testify to their Christian faith by a simple, peaceable presence and a disposition of service.²⁵ Moreover, it is possible to discern that the encounter had considerable impact upon his religious life and practice. An examination of his writings post-Damietta show that he went through an experience there that profoundly influenced his life. He was 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* (dated 1220), he wrote

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.²⁶

The muezzin could be replaced by a bell or any other sign commonly used in the West to call people to prayer, as is found in his *First Letter to the Custodians*, also dated 1220: "... at every hour and whenever the bells are rung, praise, glory and honour are given to the all-powerful God throughout all the earth."²⁷ 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* (1225) he wrote,

²⁵ "(The brothers) are not to engage in arguments or disputes, but to be subject to every human creature for God's sake." Francis of Assisi "The Earlier Rule" Chapter 16,6 in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, intro. and trans. Regis Armstrong and Ignatius Brady, (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p.121

²⁶ Francis of Assisi "A Letter to the Rulers of the People" 7 in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, p.78

²⁷ Francis of Assisi "The First Letter to the Custodians" 8 *ibid.* p.53

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 but Him.²⁸

The latter expression is very similar to the first part of the Islamic Shahada or profession of faith – “There is no god but God and Muhammad is the prophet of God”.

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, as found in Chapter 23 of *The Earlier Rule* (1221): “... the one true God... without beginning and without end, unchangeable, invisible, indescribable, ineffable, incomprehensible, unfathomable, blessed, worthy of praise.”²⁹ The shock of the encounter awakened latent values in him. Francis was driven to rethink his entire faith and reinvest it with a transcendent element. We can discern a further result of Francis' experience among the Muslims in 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.”³⁰ Even if, as Christopher Tyerman argues, Francis went to Damietta “... to convert, not to secure a lasting armistice... (seeking) no accommodation with Islam, rather its eradication through reasoned evangelisation”,³¹ Francis' writings post-Damietta indicate that his encounter with Islam had led him into a new horizon of religious

²⁸ Francis of Assisi “A Letter to the Entire Order” 4,9, *ibid.* p.56

²⁹ Francis of Assisi “The Earlier Rule” Chapter XXIII 9,11. *ibid.* pp.133,134

³⁰ Francis of Assisi “The Testament” 12, *ibid.* p.154

³¹ Tyerman, 638

vision that brought him to accommodate certain Islamic religious practices within his own Christian faith experience.

What can be discerned in Francis post-Damietta is what Bernard Lonergan spoke of as the experience of conversion. This was not an instantaneous event in his life, but could be described more as a process, the fruition of the transformation within Francis' life that originated in an event that took place some time between 1206-1209. In his *Testament*, 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.³²

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 prior to his departure for Damietta, it would appear that Francis' attitude to the Muslim world was different to that of many of his contemporaries. 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 1219.³³

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

³² *idem*

³³ David Flood *The Birth of a Movement* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1975), 45-46, 95. Cusato, 15ff.

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.³⁴

Such words are a striking contrast with the general attitude of the Christian authorities towards the Muslims. It would appear that by this time, 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.³⁵ 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.

His Damietta experience moved Francis into further new horizons. Chapter 16 of the *Earlier Rule*, which as mentioned earlier can be dated to after Francis' return from Egypt, begins with the scriptural quotation "I am sending you as lambs in the midst of wolves."³⁶ 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. It could be said metaphorically that Francis had gone as "a lamb" – in the words of Jacques de Vitry, he went unarmed, carrying nothing but the "buckler of faith"³⁷- and he had experienced that the "wolves" were not cruel beasts. He went on to decree 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

³⁴ Francis of Assisi "The Earlier Rule" Chapter XXII 1-4 *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, p. 127

³⁵ Hoerberichts, 4

³⁶ Francis of Assisi "The Earlier Rule" Chapter XVI, 1 *Francis and Clare: the Complete Works*, p. 121

³⁷ De Beer, 132

Monti points out, this means to live out the qualities expressed in the life of Jesus.³⁸ For Francis, a presence ‘in the spirit of the Lord’ was a presence which expresses the qualities of the life lived by Jesus Christ, the qualities of humility and peace. Consequently, as he urged 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 marked 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.³⁹

To live as ‘subject to’ is a way of relating to others that is not based on violence and power, but is expressed in a spirit of love and humility.⁴⁰

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 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 were greatly

³⁸ Dominic Monti, “The Experience of the Spirit in our Franciscan Tradition”, *The Cord* 49,3 (1999): 114-129

³⁹ Warren, 74

⁴⁰ Antoz Rozetter, “The Missionary Dimension of the Franciscan Charism” in *Mission in the Franciscan Tradition* ed. Anselm Moons and Flavian Walsh (St Bonaventure, New York: Franciscan Institute, 1993) pp.51,52

exasperated against each other, and whose irritation caused the shedding of no small quantity of blood.⁴¹

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.

I wish to return to the question raised earlier, namely, what was 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 can be argued 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.

Bonaventure places the ordeal by fire at the centre of his account of the meeting between Francis and al-Kamil. It is important to remember that

⁴¹ Candide Chalippe *The Life and Legends of Saint Francis of Assisi*, ed. and trans. Hilarion Duerk (London: Echo Library, 2007), p.137

Bonaventure is not so much writing a literal history of Francis as presenting a theological vision. It is significant that Bonaventure sticks closely to Celano when he speaks of Francis preaching to the Crusaders, but differs significantly from Celano in his description of the meeting with the Sultan, particularly in reference to the story of the fire. In other of his writings, Bonaventure frequently uses the image of fire to speak of the purifying presence of God: "This fire is God".⁴² Bonaventure's literary style abounds in imagery and metaphor. By placing 'fire' at the heart of this encounter, Bonaventure may have wished to symbolize the challenge to all parties to be willing to enter into and experience the fire that is God – the theological experience of conversion.

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.⁴³ 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 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."⁴⁴

⁴² Bonaventure, "The Soul's Journey Into God" in *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey Into God-The Tree of Life-The Life of St Francis*, intro. and trans. Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p.115

⁴³ 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 Bonaventura, New York: Franciscan Institute, 2006), pp.29-74

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p.61

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.”⁴⁵

Theologically, then, we might say that the experience of religious conversion 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 why both Celano and Bonaventure included in their *Legenda* 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.

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⁴⁵ *Ephesians* 2:14-17