AMSS 37th ANNUAL CONFERENCE

"Crossing Boundaries: Mobilizing Faith, Diversity and Dialogue"

Hosted By:
The Harvard Divinity School
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
October 24 – 25. 2008

ABSTRACT

"Francis of Assisi before the Sultan:
Islam in Early Franciscan Writings (1219-1267)"

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September 1219 witnessed an event that had a powerful influence on the medieval imagination of Islam and continues to shape Catholic approaches to Islam (e.g., the late Louis Massignon). Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) journeyed south in order to have a confrontation with the followers of Islam. He first joined the Fifth Crusade at Damietta, Egypt. Then, crossing the border between the two sides, he met with the Sultan, Malik al-Kamil, who returned Francis safely to the Christian camp after a brief visit. Typical modern interpretations of the meeting either envision Francis of Assisi as attempting to broker peace between the two sides, assimilating him to contemporary concerns for non-violence, or portray him attempting to convert the Sultan, transforming him in the process into a proto-humanist who wishes to solve disagreements by reasoning together. This paper will argue that these interpretations are inadequate and fail to grasp why the story of Francis was so important in recreating, specifically, Franciscan and, more broadly, Roman Catholic, attitudes towards Islam. First, the goal of Francis in approaching the Sultan at Damietta was martyrdom. Second, and more importantly, it was the *failure* of Francis to achieve his intention that made this story so intriguing to his earliest biographers. This unexpected event - Francis' non-death - forced them to broaden their portrayal of Islam and find within it a previously unthought wisdom. The argument will trace the portrayal of Islam from Francis' own writings in 1219, to the two early *Vita* by Thomas of Celano (1229 and 1247), concluding with Bonaventure's *Legenda Maior* (1263) and sermons (1255, 1267).