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

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Introduction

Francis of Assisi was born in 1181 to a moderately affluent merchant family. He is described as a frivolous youth who was not particularly diligent in his pursuit of the family business (i.e., the cloth trade). He briefly tried his hand at life as knight but backed out of the campaign before it began. But the next year, in 1206, took on a radically new life with great seriousness, giving away all he had, renouncing his family and pursuing the life of poverty. With this he became the founder of the Franciscan Order and within his own lifetime the way of life established by Francis would help revolutionize the fabric medieval Christianity at every level. Starting off alone, subsequently joined by handful of men, at the time of his death the Order encompassed thousands of persons across Europe.

Our principal interest is in an incident from the life of Francis that took place in 1219: his journey to see the Sultan, Malik al-Kamil, at Damietta during the Fifth Crusade. We will examine this story primarily as it is portrayed in three of the earliest Franciscan sources: Francis’ own description of Muslims and how Christians should interact with them, written on the eve of this encounter; the description of the event provided by Thomas of Celano in the *Vita Prima*, the first official life of Francis written for his canonization a few years after his death in 1229; and the redescription of the same encounter given in the next official life written by Bonaventure in 1263.

The Pursuit of Martyrdom: Francis's *Regula Non Bullata* and Celano's *Vita Prima*

Allow me to take the texts slightly out of sequence since Francis does not describe the encounter himself. Celano relates the story in a very concise way. Having travelled by boat to Damietta in 1219, Francis, fervent in spirit, confronts the “Sultan of the Saracens”. We are told that at his capture he was “insulted and beaten” by those who took him, but he was nonetheless received “graciously” by the Sultan who allowed him to speak, was impressed by his demeanor and by Francis’ disdain for wealth. Having listened to Francis patiently, he returned him to the Christian camp.

Francis and Celano speak with one voice concerning Francis’s motivation, and the rather limited place that Islam held in their thought. Islam was a means to pursue martyrdom. Sometime in 1219, just before he left for Damietta, Francis revised the provisional rules governing the life of his Order, providing a rather lengthy reflection on how to interact with Muslims. First of all Francis identifies the “Saracens” as “*infideles*”: this serves to contrast them with Judaism and its betrayal of God (*perfideles*) and with groups like the Albigensians who were Christian heretics. The Muslims were an separate group, independent of the Christian faith, who worshipped God in a damnable and inappropriate way.

Next, Francis tells his Order that the Muslims are wolves amongst whom the Franciscan will travel like a sheep. This passage quotes the Gospel of Matthew, 10:16ff, where Jesus is encouraging his disciples even as he tells them that they will be tested and often put to death. The whole passage from Matthew, various parts of which are cited by Francis throughout this section, is crucial to Francis’s understanding of the role of Islam. Islam offers the Franciscan a chance to test whether or not they can “endure to the end” (Mt 10:22, RnB XVI.21).

This idea drives the remainder of Francis’s reflection. With the exception of a single sentence, where Francis allows that it is permissible for the Franciscan to live among the Muslims with out conflict, “subject to every human creature for God’s sake” (RnB XVI.6), Francis encourages his followers to do as he is about to do. Go to the Muslims, preach God and embrace death. “Let all my brothers remember that they have given themselves and abandoned their bodies to the Lord Jesus Christ...I tell you my friends, do not be afraid of them and do not fear those who kill the body and afterwards

have nothing more to do. See that you are not alarmed, for by your patience [suffering], you will possess your souls” (RnB XVI.10, 17-20).

Celano, in his biography of Francis, is loyal to Francis’ self-interpretation. Islam enters the story at the point when he discusses Francis’ urgent desire for martyrdom in imitation of the death of Christ. We are told, at this point, of two prior attempts to reach Muslim lands that failed, before Celano relates the pericope at Damietta.

Beyond what we have said about Celano already, I wish only to note two points. First, Thomas primarily follows the language of the RnB when referring to the Muslims as “Saracens” and “infidels”, but in one passage concerning the arrival of Francis at Damietta, Thomas uses a new term. “Now in the thirteenth year of his conversion [1219], he journeyed to the region of Syria, while bitter and long battles were being waged daily between Christians and pagans. Taking a companion with him, he was not afraid to present himself to the sight of the Sultan of the Saracens” (1Cel, 57). The use of the term “paganos” is an oddity in Thomas’ lexicon and is not found in Francis’ writings. Nonetheless it fits well with Thomas’ theme of martyrdom. The term recalls the golden age of the Christian martyrs, a millennia ago, and their deaths at the hands of the pagan Roman Empire. This emphasizes what a unique opportunity Islam offered in the eyes of many Franciscans: a new chance to follow the way of the Cross and die for their faith.

Second, I think it is important to note, that even in Celano’s short account of the story, he feels it necessary to speculate concerning why Francis survived. While the speculations are brief, he notes two factors. First is a specifically Franciscan ideal: poverty. The Sultan is said to have been impressed with Francis’ principled distaste for wealth. The second reason provided has, if possible, even less to do with Islam: God did not wish Francis to be a martyr because Francis had been chosen for a unique honor, *i.e.*, the stigmata.

Bonaventure: Expanding the Tale

The story of Francis at Damietta is only rarely repeated, shows even less development and is often entirely absent from the additions to the Francis legend that appear after 1229. Thomas of Celano develops a portion of the Damietta story in the *Vita Secunda* (1247), but without discussing Islam at all and without repeating the story of

Francis before the Sultan that he had already told in 1Cel. In general one can say that, following 1Cel, there is more of an fascination with the stigmata and that the fascination with this hitherto unknown phenomena completely displaced and overwhelmed any interest in Francis's failed attempts at martyrdom and thus with Islam. Nonetheless the story reappears repeatedly in several texts by the man who became the head of the order in 1257, the great medieval theologian, Bonaventure (1221-1274).

Bonaventure's telling of the story of Damietta is heavily dependent on Celano, often to the point of quoting him verbatim. Thematically speaking, the most important way in which Bonaventure follows 1Cel is the way in which Bonaventure still situates the discussion of Islam within Francis' pursuit of martyrdom. Also like Celano, Bonaventure concludes the story by noting that Francis was preserved from that martyrdom because he was destined for the stigmata.

Nonetheless there are noticeable differences, and Bonaventure substantially expands on the meager details offered by 1Cel, speculating on the details of the meeting between Francis and the Sultan in a way that is not foreshadowed in the earlier textual sources. These speculations serve to address the question of why Francis was not killed and to do so in a manner that reestablished this moment as an important story in the life of Francis and not the trivial event that it seemed to have become in the 35 years since 1Cel.

Let us simply begin by noting the expanded story. Drawing from the RnB, Bonaventure incorporates the image of sheep among wolves directly and literally into the story by having Francis see two sheep and then quote Matthew 10 to his companion. The capture and brutal treatment of Francis and his companion is then given in a little more detail in to make clear the brutal nature of the enemy. The real developments take place in the confrontation between Francis and Malik al-Kamil. Here Francis is described as challenging the Muslim religious leaders first to a trial by ordeal, in which both sides would throw themselves into a fire, and then, when the Muslim leaders back out (with a clear implication that they are afraid and do not have faith in God to protect them), Francis offers to undergo the ordeal alone, if the Sultan promises to convert, with all his people, to Christianity if Francis should survive. The Sultan tells Francis that his people would never agree to this. The clear implication of the story as it is told in the LMa and

LMi is that Francis has faith and confidence in the Truth while the Muslims do not. Furthermore, It is also made clear, on the basis of these stories, why the Sultan is so clearly moved by Francis. Francis essentially wins the contest between Christianity and Islam by default. The followers of Islam are afraid to trust themselves to God. (The way in which Francis despises wealth does, of course, reappear here as well). Bonaventure even goes so far as to say, in one of the 1267 sermons, that the Sultan told Francis, in the end, that Christianity was the truth: The Sultan says, “I believe your faith is good and true” after which Bonaventure comments, “From that moment, the Christian faith was imprinted on his heart”. Francis was spared, in other words, because Francis actually succeeded in converting the Sultan.

That said, there is a different strand of thought at work in Bonaventure’s *Legenda*. If such a distinction may be permitted, the idea that Francis converted the Sultan provides a personal, limited and somewhat private explanation of why Francis was not killed. Bonaventure is also interested to deal with Islam as a historical and providential force in a manner that transcends impact that one person might have upon another mere individual. And, in significant ways these two strands are blatantly in tension with one another in Bonaventure’s account.

This new and original theme can be seen as an extension of the earlier ideal of Islam as an opportunity for martyrdom. But again, in that original context, martyrdom was an event of personal and private, even if salvific significance. Bonaventure now wishes to suggest that Islam of eschatological significance for the unfolding of history.

Here it is the title by which Bonaventure consistently identifies the Sultan that is important. Where Celano had called him Sultan and identifies his land as Syria, Bonaventure consistently refers to Malik al-Kamil as the “King of Babylon”. It is worth noting, before we look at this specific title, that Babylon itself has apocalyptic overtones already in Christian literature, especially linked to its use in the Apocalypse of John. This apocalyptic imagery was wildly popular within the Franciscan Order in the 13th century.

But, the image of the “King of Babylon” is not found within the Apocalypse. Instead it is another book of the Bible to which we must turn: the writings of the prophet Ezekiel. Here the King of Babylon is someone who takes the Jews into captivity in order

to test and purify them because of their sins. This is the role in which now casts Islam. While the pursuit of personal martyrdom is not ruled out, Bonaventure lets Islam hang like the left hand of God over Christendom, threatening to purify a corrupt and decadent Christianity so that it might regain the faith of the martyrs.

Francis points the way. Francis is, for Bonaventure, an apocalyptic figure who tells of the dawn of a new day in the history of the Church. As the pure soul, Francis himself is the image of Christ who shows what the Church ought to be and while he bears Christ within his body (the stigmata), he is not and cannot be swallowed up by the forces of apocalyptic darkness, but leads the way into the future of what the purified Church will be [Here the relevant text is Bonaventure's *Collationes* (1274)]. In this Bonaventure foreshadows what will become an explicit theme in 14th century Franciscan writers: the connection of Islam and Anti-Christ.

In attempting to explain the significance of the encounter between Francis and Islam at Damietta Bonaventure must explain why it is that Francis is not martyred and what significance Islam itself has. On the personal level, Bonaventure argues that Francis is not killed because he converted the Sultan. But on a salvation-historical level, Francis is not killed because he is the future of the Church as it passes through the apocalyptic purgation that is political giant, Islam. Franciscanism is what Christianity must become in order to humble themselves before God and be spared the judgment that Islam is capable of raining down on Europe.

Conclusion

Typical modern interpretations of Francis before the Sultan either envision Francis as attempting to broker peace between Christians and Muslims, 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 wished to solve disagreements by reasoning together. It seems clear to me that these are well-intentioned misrepresentations of the story. Francis went to Damietta to die, as the earliest accounts unanimously testify.

What is most intriguing to me is not why Francis went, but that he failed, and the way in which it causes Franciscans over the next 50 years to first ignore the story, not

sure what to do with it, and then, beginning with Bonaventure, to rethink the story and broaden it – to rethink Islam and broaden their account of its role. They may not have done this in ways that we would like, but it is nonetheless precisely the failure of expectations with regards to Islam that leads the Franciscans to explore Islam in greater detail. They do it, necessarily, within the confines of their tradition, but, still, they do it.