

Those Going Among the Saracens

by

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This paper will examine the views of St. Francis of Assisi on how to deal with Muslims. It is based both on his recorded words and his personal experience as well as the strong teaching that he passed on to his followers.

The Novice who Wanted to have a Psalter.

A brother novice said to Saint Francis: “Father, it would be a great consolation to me to have a psalter. But, although the general minister has given me permission to have it, I still want to have it with your knowledge”. Brother Francis gave him this sort of response. “The Emperor Charles, Roland and Oliver, and all the paladins and knights that were valiant in battle, pursuing unbelievers with great toil and fatigue even unto death, had a glorious and memorable victory for themselves, and, finally died in battle fighting as holy martyrs for the faith of Christ. And there are many who want to receive honour and praise by only relating what they did.”

This story is particularly well attested, appearing first in a collection of anecdotes that could only have come from day-to-day association with Francis, now known as the *Assisi Compilation* (1244-1260).¹ It reappears, verbatim, in the Sabatier edition of *A Mirror of Perfection* (1318),² and in *The Kinship of Saint Francis* (1365) by Arnald of Sarrant.³

The Song of Roland

At first sight Francis’s reply is extraordinary, seeming to have little to do with the possession of a psalter and commending to his novices the behaviour of Charlemagne and his warriors in the slaughter of ‘unbelievers’ – for which read Saracens, (i.e. Muslims.) The story of Roland and Oliver is told in the ‘Song of Roland’, the first and most famous of the French epic poems known as *Chansons de Geste*.⁴ It gives a highly romanticised account of a battle that took place on 15th August 778. The Emperor Charlemagne, after an abortive expedition in Spain, was returning from Saragossa to Aachen via the Pyrenees when his rearguard was set upon and destroyed by Basques in the valley of Roncesvaux. Many popular songs recounted this disaster, the hero being one Hrodland, Count of the Marches of Brittany. In the ‘Song of Roland’ as we have it, written some 300 years later,⁵ the historical germ of the story has almost disappeared under a mass of legend. Charlemagne, a man of thirty-six when the battle took place, has become an old man with a flowing white beard. The expedition of 777/8 has become a campaign of seven years. Hrodland has become Roland, a nephew of Charlemagne, equipped with a brave steed *Veillantif*, a mighty sword *Durandal* and a magic horn of ivory *Olifant*. He is the chief of twelve Paladins, peers of Charlemagne’s court, knights renowned for their heroism and chivalry. Roland has a faithful friend (and rival) Oliver and a fiancée ‘la belle Aude’. The Basques have been replaced by Saracens under a King Marsile. The twelve Paladins make up the rearguard of Charlemagne’s

¹ *Francis of Assisi*. Vol II. pp. 113, 209. All references to the writings of St. Francis and other thirteenth and fourteenth century authors are taken from Regis J. Armstrong, J.A. Wayne Hellman, William J. Short (Eds.) *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*. Published by New City Press, New York and London in three volumes. Volume I (1999), Volume II (2000), Volume III (2001). In the footnotes they are referred to simply as *Francis of Assisi*.

² *Francis of Assisi*. Vol III. p. 257

³ *Francis of Assisi*. Vol. III. p. 707.

⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers (trans.) *The Song of Roland*, Penguin 1957.

⁵ Supposedly by one Tuold. Whether he was the author, reciter or copyist is not clear.

army and are taken by surprise through the treachery of an anti-hero called Ganelon. They fight off two Saracen armies but are overcome by the third, after displaying prodigies of valour. Roland refuses until almost the last moment to sound his Olifant, and so recall Charlemagne to rescue him. The other Paladins are all killed and Roland, left alone, hides Durandal and dies, holding up his glove to God. Charlemagne, hearing the horn from 30 leagues away, turns back to avenge his nephew. Marsile is killed, the Saracens decimated and Ganelon put to death. When La belle Aude hears of Roland's end she dies, past all consolation. But Roland, with the help of the Archangels Gabriel and Michael, is carried up to heaven.

It need cause us no surprise that Francis had a great affection for the 'Song of Roland'. Whether or not his mother Pica was French, we know that from an early age she taught him poems in the Provençal language along with the ideals of romantic love and chivalry as extolled by the troubadours. He was naturally musical and learned to play the viol. Pica taught him to sing in Latin, Umbrian and French and we are told that 'with his strong, sweet, clear voice Francis sang enchantingly.'⁶ Chief among the romantic poems was the 'Song of Roland' which had taken final form about a hundred years before Francis was born. Although written in Anglo-Norman French he would have understood it easily and clearly enjoyed it as much as his contemporaries did. But it remains extraordinary that he commended the 'Song of Roland' to a novice, for there can be few more explicit and bloodthirsty accounts of the Christian duty to slaughter Muslims.

The Saracen menace to Christendom had become formidable about the end of the tenth century and led to a number of expeditions against the Moors in Spain with a clearly religious motive. The pilgrim road to the shrine of St. James of Compostela (the 'Moor slayer') led through the very pass in which Charlemagne's rearguard had made its last stand. The 'Song of Roland' took final form around the time of the First Crusade (1096-9). The theological underpinning of the story is quite plain. Islam is 'that false faith that God has disallowed'⁷. Charlemagne himself says 'Never to Paynims may I show love or peace'.⁸ Archbishop Turpin, one of the Paladins in Roland's rearguard, absolves his fellow warriors from any wrongdoing in the battle to come and adds 'If you should die, blest martyrdom's your guerdon; You'll sit on high in Paradise eternal'.⁹ (A chilling mirror-image of what Muslim suicide bombers are supposedly taught today). And Turpin matches deeds to words. Having driven his lance deep into his enemy's breast 'He spits him through, on high his body heaves,/ And hurls him dead a spear's length o'er the lea./ But yet to chide him none the less proceeds:/ "Vile infidel, you lied between your teeth!"¹⁰ Later he makes an apparently slighting reference to the religious life. Speaking of the 'knight of breed' he says 'Forward and fierce in battle should he be,/ Else he's not worth a single penny-piece,/ Best he turn monk in monastery meek/ And for our sins pray daily on his knees'.¹¹

But whatever else Francis may have intended when commending the story of Roland and Oliver to his novice, it cannot have been that he was urging the man to sign up for a crusade. There are two other features of the 'Song of Roland' that he may have had in mind. Dorothy L. Sayers, in her commentary on the poem, highlights the attractiveness of the hero. Roland, she says, has a character that is simplicity itself. 'Rash, arrogant, generous, outspoken to a fault, loyal, affectionate and single-minded, he has all the qualities that endear a captain to his men and a romantic hero to his audience. ... He never sulks or bears a grudge. Beneath all his overweening

⁶ Adrian House, *Francis of Assisi*, Pimlico, 2000. pp. 12, 16, 25.

⁷ Dorothy L. Sayers. (trans.) *The Song of Roland*. Penguin. 1957. Line 3638

⁸ *Ibid.* Line 3596. ('Paynims' = pagans, i.e. another name for Saracens)

⁹ *Ibid.* Lines 1134,5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Lines 1249-53.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Lines 1879-82

there is a real modesty of heart and a child-like simplicity of love and loyalty - to God, to the Emperor, to his friend, to his men, his horse, his horn, his good sword Durendal. But the picture that remains most vividly with us is that of a gay and unconquerable youth. No other epic hero strikes this note so ringingly'. And she also emphasises the essential Christianity of the poem. "It is not merely Christian in subject; it is Christian to its very bones.... And it is a Christianity as naïve and uncomplicated as might be found at any time in the simplest village church".¹² Perhaps one can see here some inkling of why all this appealed to Francis.¹³

A second explanation for this appeal can be found in the book by Professor B.Z. Kedar of the Hebrew University at Jerusalem called *Crusade and mission: European approaches toward the Muslims*.¹⁴ He points to a strong tradition, especially among the crusaders themselves, in which the motive of mission and conversion came clearly to the fore, despite the fact that this is nowhere mentioned in the writings of Pope Innocent III when launching the fifth crusade. In Kedar's view this development was probably strongly influenced by the 'Song of Roland'. His point is that just before the final battle Charlemagne offers to convert the Emir: 'Do thou confess the Faith by God revealed,/ take Christendom, and thy fast friend I'll be.'¹⁵ After the battle Charlemagne drives the Saracens to the baptismal font on pain of death. 'An hundred thousand or more are thus baptised and christened'.¹⁶ And he takes the Queen of Spain, Bramimond, a captive back to France. 'Her would the King convert by love to Christ.'¹⁷ She is duly baptised in the Baths at Aix 'And Juliana they've chosen for her name;/ Christian is she, informed in the True Way.'¹⁸ Kedar believes that the 'Song of Roland', dating from just before the First Crusade, 'has probably shaped the ethic of the crusading stratum *par excellence* - the knighthood - more decisively than many an encyclical or learned treatise'.¹⁹ In support he says that Albert of Aachen, in his chronicle of the First Crusade written in about 1130, mentioned many attempts by the crusaders to convert the Saracens, even though in the Papal call to the crusade the motive of conversion was completely absent.²⁰ This may seem far-fetched, and certainly in what he said to the novice Francis makes no mention of converting the Saracens, only of a valiant fight, a glorious victory and a martyr's death.

But this may be to miss the main point of the story, which lies not so much in the virtue of what Roland and Oliver did, as in the wrong attitude of those who 'want to receive honour and praise by *only relating* what they did' (my emphasis). In the *Assisi Compilation* these words are immediately glossed as follows: 'And because of this he wrote the meaning of these words in his *Admonitions*, saying "The saints have done these deeds, and we want to receive honour and glory by recounting and preaching about them", as if to say: "Knowledge puffs up, but charity builds."' ²¹ And the next section of the *Assisi Compilation* recounts that 'Whenever brothers came to ask advice about such things he would give them the same answer. For this reason he used to say: "A

¹² *Op. cit.* pp. 16,19.

¹³ It would be mischievous, and probably unfair to both sides, to suggest an affinity between the prompt and unquestioning obedience required of soldiers on the parade ground and Francis's almost paranoid insistence on a similar response to anything he said, however unreasonable - like planting cabbages upside down!

¹⁴ Princeton, 1984. Quoted in J. Hoerberichts *Francis and Islam*, Franciscan Press, Quincy University, Illinois, 1997. pp. 26, 27.

¹⁵ *The song of Roland*, Lines 3597, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Lines 3671, 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Line 3674.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Line, 3986, 7.

¹⁹ *As in Note 14*

²⁰ *As in note 14*

²¹ *Francis of Assisi*. Vol II. p. 209. From *Admonitions* VI 3. In *Francis of Assisi* Vol I. p. 131.

person is only as learned as his actions show; and a religious is only as good a preacher as his actions show;” as if to say, “A good tree is known only by its fruit”²². On this reading Francis is objecting to the novice owning a psalter not because there is anything wrong in reading the psalms or learning them by heart but because this can easily become a substitute for living the life. In the *Mirror of Perfection* this point is made explicitly. It is as if Francis were saying ‘We must not care about books and learning, but about virtuous deeds’.²³ In the words of a contemporary Franciscan prophet ‘Our knowledge of God is participatory. God refuses to be intellectually “thought”, and is only known in the passion and pain of it all, when the issues become soul-sized and worthy of us’.²⁴

Both accounts then tell the following story. ‘Another time when blessed Francis was sitting near a fire warming himself the same novice spoke to him again about a psalter. And blessed Francis told him: “After you have a psalter you will want a breviary; and after you have a breviary you will sit in a fancy chair, like a great prelate telling your brother: ‘bring me the breviary.’” And saying this upset Francis so that he rubbed ashes on his head repeatedly saying ‘I, a breviary, I a breviary!’²⁵ Here Francis’s objection seems to be the corrupting effect of any possession, well known to be one of his main preoccupations. As the *Mirror of Perfection* explains, he wanted the brothers to have few books kept in common, beds of straw, huts of wood and no ‘fine furnishings.’²⁶ But if this was the point, why drag Roland and Oliver into the conversation anyway. Clearly the *Chanson* itself held a fascination for Francis, and we next examine the part played by crusading in the story of his life.

St. Francis and the Crusades.

It is hard at this distance of time to understand what was really going on. It is quite clear that, despite all setbacks, the crusading movement was more vigorous than ever during the early 1200s. As a devotional activity and as an expression of raw religious aggression it had kept its momentum and there was no lack of enthusiasts. The individual crusader was a man undergoing penance, a pilgrim for the good of his own soul. The spiritual benefits did not depend on success or failure of the campaign; that was in God's hands anyway. A disastrous crusade could still afford plenary indulgence of all sins. In 1235 the papal letter *Quantum Nos Urgeat* addressed to the Franciscans, allowed them to grant between ten and thirty days indulgence to anyone who attended their crusade sermons twice a week, and to absolve from excommunication people guilty of arson or violence against clerics if they took the Cross. Nor need we suppose that the friars took up this task unwillingly or were repelled by its unspiritual nature. In the previous century Bernard of Clairvaux, great spiritual revivalist and founder of the Cistercians, had written an open letter to the English people in support of the Second Crusade. "Your land is well known to be rich in young and vigorous men. . . . Gird yourselves therefore like men and take up arms with joy and with zeal for your Christian name, in order to 'take vengeance on the heathen and curb the nations'. . . . Now, O mighty soldiers, O men of war, you have a cause for which you can fight without danger to your souls; a cause in which to conquer is glorious and for which to die is gain".²⁷ The message is quite clear. In the view of no less a spiritual giant than S. Bernard, to take up the sword, under the sign of the Cross, for the slaughter of the Infidel, was a Christian

²² *Francis of Assisi*. Vol II. p. 210.

²³ *Francis of Assisi*. Vol. III, p. 257, 8.

²⁴ Richard Rohr, *Hope against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of St. Francis in an Age of Anxiety*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2001. p. 81.

²⁵ *Francis of Assisi*. Vol II, p. 209 and Vol III. p 258.

²⁶ *Francis of Assisi*. Vol III. p259.

²⁷ B.S. James (trans. and ed.) *The Letters of St. Bernard of Clairvaux*. 1953. Letter 391.

activity of the highest spiritual merit. In our eyes the whole concept of indulgences seems unbearably superstitious. To the medieval Christian it was a royal road to heaven.

Francis was a man of his time. With this as background we can now examine in more detail his interest in crusading. He set out on Crusade five times, four of them ending in humiliating failure. The first had nothing to do with Islam but throws light on Francis's character. In 1204, after two years recovering from his time as prisoner-of-war in Perugia, he was keen to get back to into action. Count Walter of Brienne, a famous warrior from Troyes in Champagne, had involved himself in a dynastic struggle with German imperial forces in the south of Italy. His followers had been allowed by Pope Innocent III to regard themselves as crusaders and embroider the cross on their surcoats. So it was as a would-be crusader that Francis set out, magnificently fitted out with new arms and armour at his father's expense, in the company of a young nobleman of Assisi. They were aiming for Apulia, far away to the south, but the upshot was farcical. Having got no further than Spoleto (about 20 miles down the road) Francis gave up and came home. Exactly what caused to change his mind has never been explained. There is the story of a mysterious voice telling him to return.²⁸ Sabatier suggests that the young nobleman with whom he was traveling had become fed up with his ostentatious finery and boastfulness and took some form of revenge.²⁹ Perhaps he pointed out that Francis was only the son of a merchant and had no chance whatever of being knighted. It is equally possible that Francis simply lost his taste for this adventure. Why ride on quite unnecessarily towards a pointless and probably trivial death, for the sake of a dynastic struggle in a far off land?

The second excursion, in 1206, came after the final disastrous show-down with his father. Francis traced a cross in chalk on the farmhand's tunic that the bishop had given him to hide his nakedness. Perhaps this was simply bravado. Perhaps he had some vague idea of getting to Venice and on by ship. Anyway he went off on foot, into the winter woods, singing gaily in French. And there a band of robbers found him, to whom he introduced himself as a 'Herald of the Great King'. They beat him up and left him in a ditch. He sought shelter in a nearby monastery, probably the priory of Valfabbrica. He got some bread and a blanket to sleep in, stayed a few days till the weather improved, and then made his way to Gubbio - once a great crusading town that had sent a thousand crossbowmen to join Peter the Hermit. There, about 20 miles north of Assisi, he stopped again. A friend, Count Spadalunga gave him some rather better clothes. And after a while he drifted home.³⁰

His third excursion was to the East. The year was 1212. The great growth of the friars Minor had begun. Francis set off intending to join John of Brienne (brother of the defunct Walter) recently crowned king of Jerusalem at Tyre. Francis 'burning with the desire for holy martyrdom, wished to take a ship to the region of Syria to preach the Christian faith to the Saracens and other unbelievers'.³¹ According to the account, he found a ship and set off alone. Giles, on a similar mission at the same time, seems to have got through. Not so Francis. His ship was blown off course and forced to winter off Slavonia (now the Dalmatian coast). He could find no ship going on to Cyprus or Acre that year and, having no money either, stowed away on a boat returning to Ancona. With a companion whom he had apparently enrolled in Dalmatia, he moved off slowly westwards through the region of Le Marche. When he got to Urbino he found a banquet in

²⁸ *The Legend of the Three Companions* (1241-1247). Chapter II. *Francis of Assisi*. Vol. II. P. 71

²⁹ Paul Sabatier *Vie de S. François d' Assise*, 1894. Reprinted as Jon M. Sweeney *The Road to Assisi*. Paraclete Press. 2003. p. 11.

³⁰ Thomas of Celano *The Life of Saint Francis*. (1228, 1229) Chapter VII. *St Francis of Assisi*. Vol I. pp.194,5.

³¹ *Ibid*. Chapter XX. *St Francis of Assisi*. Vol I, p. 229

progress celebrating the marriage of one of the Count of Montefeltro's sons. Climbing a little wall he preached - of the sufferings of Holy martyrs - so beautifully that it was 'as if it were the angel of God who spoke'. A great noble of Tuscany, Messer Orlando of Chuisi in Casentino, was so impressed that after some soul searching, he offered to give Francis a mountain. Although Francis never allowed his brothers to own property, he accepted for himself. La Verna was duly conveyed to him on 8 May 1213.³² So the expedition ended well, if not in the crusading sense Francis had intended, and certainly not with martyrdom.

His fourth crusading expedition was to the west. The Moorish overlord in Spain (Mohammed ibn Yakub al Mansur, known as the 'Miramolín') had gone on the offensive and brought over an enormous army from Morocco. Three Christian kings, Pedro of Aragon, Sancho of Navarre and Alfonso of Castile appealed to the Pope for help and Innocent on 23 May 1212 duly declared a new crusade in Spain. On 16th July, at Las Navas de Tolosa near Jaen, the three kings, against all odds, won a terrific victory. Francis was thrilled, comparing this success with the legendary deeds in the Chanson de Roland. It is clear enough where his sympathies lay. In the words of Thomas of Celano, 'not too long after this he started on a journey toward Morocco to preach the gospel of Christ to the Miramolín and his people'.³³ He was to walk through Languedoc and Provence and then across the north of Spain from Navarre into Leon, Castile and Galicia, making for Santiago de Compostela. This was probably in 1214 because in the previous year he could have become entangled in the massacre of Albigensians in Languedoc. If he started after the Pentecost Chapter of that year, the 'crusade' in Toulouse being over, he could just have made it to Santiago in time for the feast of the apostle. That was as close to the action as Francis got.

This time he was not alone. Bernard of Quintavalle went with him but was left behind en route to look after a sick beggar. Masseo was with him, and possibly also Elias who was very close to Francis by now, devoted to him personally and equally passionate about Crusading. He was also exceptionally energetic and able; from now on Francis came to rely on him more and more. Perhaps it was Elias who persuaded Francis to call off the Moorish part of the expedition. Thomas of Celano says God 'withstood him to his face, striking him with illness and called him back from the journey he had begun'.³⁴ Whatever the cause he did turn back. The trip to Spain had become another abortive sortie and the when the little party got back to the valley of Spoleto they went into a hermitage and spent much time in prayer.

Allowing for a slow journey back after the illness, we have now arrived at 1215. On 15th July the young Emperor Frederick II, now 20, having defeated all rivals in a whirlwind campaign, was crowned on Charlemagne's throne at Aix-la-Chapelle and solemnly took the Cross. On 1st November the Lateran Council opened and the fifth crusade was under way. By now Francis was on his most successful preaching tour ever – to Narni and Rieti in the South, to Arezzo and 'his' mountain to the north and to Ancona in the east. He was met with huge enthusiasm. No one can have been more excited about the new crusade than Francis. But things got off to a shaky start. In the spring of 1216 Innocent came to Perugia and there, quite unexpectedly, died. The cardinals elected an otherworldly and pious old man, Cencio Savelli of Rome. He took the name Honorius III and was quick to proclaim that the crusade would go ahead just the same, though in fact much of the enthusiasm for it had died. The crusaders duly assembled and set sail for the Holy Land on 1st June 1217. At the Pentecost Chapter that year it was decided to send groups of friars to four Christian countries: France, Germany, Hungary and the Holy Land (Outremer.) Elias was chosen

³² 'The Donation of La Verna' (1274). *St Francis of Assisi*. Vol. III. p. 801-3.

³³ Thomas of Celano *The Life of Saint Francis*. (1228,1229) Chapter VII. *St Francis of Assisi*. Vol I. p. 230.

³⁴ *Ibid.* Vol I p. 230.

to lead the party to Outremer. Francis chose France, but got nowhere near it. Having reached Florence he had an inconclusive argument with Cardinal Ugolino and turned back³⁵, leaving Pacificus to lead the party. (Pacificus had been a jongleur, noted for bawdy songs, and was probably French - maybe the first non-Italian to join the order). The expeditions to Germany and Hungary also came to a pitiful end. Some of the friars had been stripped naked, some had been imprisoned, some were set upon with dogs and staves. One lost his breeches 15 times. Both missions were complete fiascos.

Nor had things gone much better in the Holy Land, with an advance up the Golan Heights towards Damascus, a siege of the Saracen fortress on Mount Tabor and a raid up the Bekaa valley all proving fruitless. But by the summer of 1218, under the leadership of John of Brienne, the crusaders had established themselves in Egypt where the Sultan had not expected them. Rather than going for Alexandria they besieged Damietta, a heavily fortified city on the eastern limb of the Nile delta, and by August they had taken the port area. At this point another leader arrived, appointed directly by the pope, a Spanish cardinal, overbearing and tactless, Pelagius of Santa Lucia. There was continual squabbling with John of Brienne. But by the spring of 1219 reinforcements had arrived from France and England. The Sultan of Egypt, Melek-al-Kamil, had been forced to leave the city and camp at Fariskur, six miles further up the Nile. He was by then making overtures of peace, offering to surrender Jerusalem and pay the crusaders tribute.

At the Pentecost chapter of 1219 it was agreed to send groups of friars to Provence and Aquitaine, to Tunis, and to the Moors. Another group was to be sent to the Holy Land, this time led by Francis himself. A month later he was at Ancona, ready to embark. He had with him some of the most gifted friars, Peter of Catania, and two noblemen well versed in war - Leonardo, late lord of Sassorosso and Illuminatio of Rieti. They disembarked in mid-July at Acre and there on the quay to meet and brief them was Elias.

We do not know how Elias had spent the intervening two years. Certainly he had studied crusader architecture, to judge by the great Basilica at Assisi that he built immediately after Francis' death. He will also have studied the Saracens closely, to judge from his later correspondence with the Caliph of Baghdad. Obviously he briefed Francis on the situation at Damietta. Acre was a highly successful settlement but Francis did not linger. In late July or early August he sailed on to Damietta. Illuminato went with him, probably Leonardo and Peter, possibly Elias. There had already been two failed assaults on Damietta - on 20th July and 6th August - and many had been killed including some important commanders. Soon after that, in mid August, Francis arrived. It was the long awaited climax of his many crusading enterprises. He was now nearly forty.

High drama was to follow. On 29th August, with Pelagius and John of Brienne still at odds over strategy, the common soldiers, sick of waiting, made a more or less spontaneous attack. According to Thomas of Celano, Francis had a presentiment that this assault would also fail (as well he might) and tried to warn the soldiers off.³⁶ But their own commanders could not restrain them and nor did Francis. The result was near disaster. The Italians fled. Only a rally led by the English earls (Chester, Derby, Winchester and Arundel) prevented complete collapse. Over 3,400 crusaders were killed. Francis could not bear to watch and sent a companion to observe and report.

The Sultan was equally off-balance. There was famine in Egypt, quarrelling in Syria and above all the threat that Frederick II would finally arrive. At the end of September the Sultan offered

³⁵ *The Mirror of Perfection*, (1318). Chapter 65. *Francis of Assisi*. Vol III. pp. 309,310.

³⁶ Thomas of Celano *The Second Life of St. Francis*. (1245-1247) The Second Book. Chapter IV. *St. Francis of Assisi*. Vol II. pp. 265,266.

generous terms of settlement. Jerusalem, central Palestine and Galilee would be restored. The Sultan would pay for the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt, a portion of the True Cross would be handed over, and twenty noble Saracens surrendered as hostages. In return the Sultan asked for a thirty-year truce. Of course this offer ought to have been accepted. But Pelagius, backed by the Pope, the Emperor, the Patriarch of Jerusalem and the Italians, refused. Less than a week later, on 5th November, he was proved right in the short term when Damietta fell. It had been under siege for eighteen months. Of its 80,000 inhabitants less than 3000 survived the siege and only 100 were healthy. There was a winter truce. Frederick never came. Next summer Pelagius marched his army towards Cairo and camped in the flood plain of the Nile. Kamil breached the flood barriers and the crusader army was engulfed. Pelagius found a boat and escaped taking most of the food and medical supplies. The Sultan was generous. He told the wreck of the Crusade that they could have a five-year truce, their prisoners back and the True Cross if they would only go away. So the crusaders lost Damietta after all. And when Kamil sent for the True Cross to hand it over no one could find it!

We come now to the question of Francis's motive in going to the Holy Land. From what has been said so far this could have been simply to provide a chaplaincy to the Crusade. According to the *Estoire d'Eracles* he 'came to the army at Damietta and there did much good, and remained there until the city was taken. He saw the sin and evil that began to increase among the soldiers and was displeased by it. For this reason he left there, stayed for a while in Syria, and then returned to his own land'.³⁷

Saint Francis and the Sultan

But a rather different slant emerges in the stories of his visit with Kamil. We do not know whether this took place before or after the fall of Damietta. It might have been during the winter truce that followed, even early in 1220. We know that Pelagius only reluctantly agreed to his going. We know that Francis, accompanied only by Illuminato, set out for the Sultan's camp at Fariskur. After some rough handling by the sentries they were finally brought into Kamil's presence. The Sultan thought at first that they were would-be deserters from the Christian army. There was a steady flow of such renegade Christians who were always well treated by the Sultan. But Francis announced bluntly that neither he nor Illuminato would ever become Muslims. They were messengers sent from God to save the Sultan's soul.³⁸

What was Francis really up to? Can he have taken seriously the thought that he would convert the Sultan? There is a familiar story line which crops up again and again during the Middle Ages, beginning with the 'Song of Roland' itself. A Christian envoy to a Muslim court tries to forge an alliance on the basis that the Muslim ruler converts with his whole people. The envoy, in turn, is tempted by rich gifts to betray his fellow Christians which he sometimes agrees to, sometimes refuses.³⁹ Thomas of Celano, Julian of Speyer and Henry of Avranches all chose variants of this framework.⁴⁰ There is the story of Kamil testing Francis by inviting him to walk over a carpet

³⁷ *The History of the Emperor Eracles* (1229-31). *St. Francis of Assisi* Vol I. p. 609.

³⁸ Saint Bonaventure *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*. (1260-1263). Chapter 9. *St Francis of Assisi*. Vol. II. p. 602.

³⁹ Dorothy L. Sayers. (trans.) *The Song of Roland*. Penguin. 1957. The Christian knight Ganelon, envoy to the Muslim ruler Marsile, tells the latter 'King Charlemayne, the Great, thus sends you word:/You must receive the faith of Christ our Lord,/ And as your fief half Spain he will award.' (Lines 430-32). Marsile, having in a fury threatened to kill Ganelon, thinks better of it and replies: 'But by these pelts of sable fur I vow,/ Which of good gold are worth five hundred pounds,/ Richly I'll quite you ere the next day be out.' (Lines 515-17). Ganelon accepts, and in exchange undertakes to deliver Roland and the rearguard into Marsile's hands.

⁴⁰ Thomas of Celano *The Life of Saint Francis*. (1228, 1229). Chapter XX. *Francis of Assisi*. Vol I. p. 231.

decorated with crosses - which Francis agreed to on the grounds that thieves were also crucified and it was only the True Cross that counted. He did not mind treading on the symbol of brigands.⁴¹ His sense of humour was plainly intact. There is the story of his temptation by a beautiful houri - only to have him ask her to join him in bed on the fire!⁴² There is the story that Francis proposed to the Sultan a trial by fire. The *Qadi* and the *Ulema* refused - not we may suppose through cowardice but simply because it was against Islamic Law.⁴³ Then Francis is said to have proposed undergoing trial by fire by himself alone.⁴⁴ This was extremely rash. One Peter Bartholomew, discoverer of the Holy Lance during the first crusade, having tried exactly that, came out horribly burned and died twelve days later. If Francis had done the same, not only would he have incurred a hideous death but there was the awful possibility that, to the Muslims at least, the truth of Islam would have been confirmed. Kamil did not want to be responsible, even indirectly, for Francis' immolation and tactfully refused, saying he feared a revolt among his own people.

Kamil was a notably civilised person. Nephew of Saladin and almost exactly the same age as Francis, he had been knighted as a boy by King Richard the Lion Heart. He was on excellent terms with the Venetians and allowed some thousands of Europeans to trade in Egypt. He loved the poetry of the great Sufi mystic Omar-ibn-al- Farid. It seems that he welcomed Francis to his camp, enjoyed a series of amiable discussions and sent him back not only un-martyred but virtually unmarked. Francis, an honoured guest at the Sultan's court, charismatic exponent of the Christian faith, had been allowed to talk but was totally unable to convince. So there was really nothing for Francis and Illuminato to do but return to the crusaders' camp. Kamil may well have offered gold, silver and silken garments but Francis refused, accepting only a security guard.⁴⁵

To go seeking martyrdom would have been regarded in those days as quite correct and indeed highly meritorious. But one cannot believe that Francis would have been so discourteous as to seek audience of the Sultan only to have the man commit deadly sin by killing him. The group of Friars Minor who had been sent to Morocco did in the end achieve martyrdom but only by shouting in public that Mohammed was an impostor and telling the Miramolin that the Koran was a pack of lies.⁴⁶ There is no indication whatever that Francis ever did or would behave like that.⁴⁷

Is it tempting to see Francis' programme in our own terms as an attempted 'Peace Process'. But, anachronism apart, Kamil had already offered peace. It does not seem that Francis was at this stage opposed to the crusade as such. He was the Pope's man and crusades were a papal enterprise *par excellence*. In one account, derived apparently by Bonaventure from Illuminato, Francis tells

Julian of Speyer. *The Life of Saint Francis*. (1232-1235). Chapter VII. *Francis of Assisi*. Vol I. p. 395.
Henry of Avranches. *The Versified Life of Saint Francis*. (1232-1239) The Eighth Book. Lines 135-182.
Francis of Assisi. Vol I. p. 487, 8.

⁴¹ Anthony Mockler. *Francis of Assisi: the Wandering Years*. Phaidon press. 1976. pp.211,12

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ St. Bonaventure. *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*. (1260-1263).Chapter Nine. *Saint Francis of Assisi*, Vol II. p. 603

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Julian of Speyer. *The Life of Saint Francis*. (1232-1235). Chapter VII. *Francis of Assisi*. Vol I. p. 395.

⁴⁶ Anthony Mockler. *Francis of Assisi: the Wandering Years*. Phaidon press. 1976. p.237

⁴⁷ According to one account, when St. Francis was informed of this he exclaimed "Now I can say that I have five true brothers". However the *Chronicle of Jordan* seems to be more authentic where it says "When the life and legend of the above mentioned brothers was brought to St. Francis ... he rejected the legend and forbade it to be read". J. Hoeberichts, *Francis and Islam*. 1997 p. 74. Franciscan Press, Quincy Illinois.

the Sultan: “‘If your eye causes you scandal tear it out and throw it away’. Through this God wanted to teach us that no fellow human being ...could ever be so dear to us that we would not have to eradicate him if he tried to keep us away from the faith.... And because of this it is just that that the Christians invade you and the land you occupy because you blaspheme the name of Christ and you try to alienate people from worshipping Christ.”⁴⁸ This was quite an orthodox position. If Muslims hindered the practice and progress of the Christian faith in their own lands this constituted an insult to the Christian people and, according to canon law, allowed Christians to wage just war in order to punish the offence. I doubt that Francis was a pacifist, even at this stage of his life, or opposed to the use of military force in a good cause. Augustine of Hippo had allowed it as had the Decretals of Gratian. If the Pope decreed that the slaughter of Saracens was a good cause then be it so. I am not suggesting that in the latter half of his life Francis seriously contemplated taking up the sword himself again. Like the early Christians he saw himself as having a higher calling: to pray for his enemies and the conversion of the Sultan. But like most Christians in all ages, when something he held dear was threatened, then he would countenance force if necessary to preserve it.

It seems likely that he sailed from Egypt to Acre by the spring crossing of 1220 and on from Acre to Venice in the Autumn. What he did in the meantime no one knows. Visiting Jerusalem would have been pointless – the place was virtually a ghost town, while sporadic fighting was going on all over Galilee. Perhaps in the summer of 1220 Francis lived quietly in Acre. He was summoned back from Syria in the late summer of 1220 by Stephen, a lay friar, who came to report the outcome of that year’s Pentecost Chapter. The news was bad. A new constitution had been introduced. It forbade the eating of meat on any occasion and of milk products at most. Trivial as this seems to us, it was anathema to Francis; a direct and unmistakable step towards Catharisation of the Order. A brother called Filippo had obtained from Cardinal Ugolino and the Curia privileges for the Poor Clares that Francis had explicitly opposed. Brother Giovanni of Campello had set up a splinter group. Someone had spread the rumour that Francis was dead. There had been a virtual coup d’état. He set off instantly for home only to resign the leadership as soon as he had been welcomed back. ‘From today’ he told the next chapter ‘I am dead for you. But here is Peter of Catania whom you and I will obey’.⁴⁹ He was disillusioned with crusading; with the hierarchy in the person of Pelagius; with the Emperor who promised to lead the Crusade and never came. Now his Order had moved away from him. He spent the next year, with Caesar of Speyer, working on a Rule for the Order.

The Regula non Bullata.

The rule in question is often referred to as *The Earlier Rule*,⁵⁰ but this is confusing. We know that Francis brought a simple rule of life to Pope Innocent III for his approval in 1209 or 1210, but no copies have survived. During the following years this rule developed in light of the experiences of the brothers, the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council and the thinking of Francis himself. It was given final form at the Pentecost Chapter of 1221, the last at which all the brothers gathered together. This was *The Earlier Rule*, also known as the *Regula non Bullata* (The Rule without a Papal Seal), because it was never formally approved, indeed Cardinal Ugolino virtually rejected it. It was only after substantial re-working that it was endorsed by Pope Honorius II (by his Bull of 29 November 1223) in the form known as *The Later Rule* – less inspirational and more

⁴⁸ Ms. Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, *Ottob. Lat. 522, f.243r (92r)*. Quoted in Christopher T. Maier, *Preaching the Crusaders: Mendicant Friars and the Cross in the Thirteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press. 1994. p.15.

⁴⁹ *The Mirror of Perfection* (1318). Chapter 39. *Francis of Assisi*. Vol III. p. 287

⁵⁰ *The Earlier Rule. Francis of Assisi*. Vol I. p. 63.

succinct.⁵¹ It is the Earlier Rule which is of importance to us here because it contains, in Chapter 16, the fruits of Francis's mature reflection on his experiences in the Holy Land. This chapter reads as follows:⁵² (Quotations from scripture, italicized in the text, were apparently provided by Caesar of Speyer.)

“Chapter XVI: Those going among the Saracens and Other Nonbelievers

The Lord says: *Behold I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be prudent as serpents and simple as doves.* Let any brother, then, who desires by divine inspiration to go among the Saracens and other nonbelievers, go with the permission of his minister and servant. If he sees they are fit to be sent, the minister may give them permission and not oppose them, for he will be bound to render an accounting to the Lord if he has proceeded without discernment in this and other matters.

As for the brothers who go, they can live spiritually among the Saracens and nonbelievers in two ways. One is not to engage in arguments or disputes but to be subject to *every human creature for God's sake* and to acknowledge that they are Christians. The other way is to announce the Word of God, when they see it pleases the Lord, in order that [unbelievers] may believe in almighty God, the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, the Creator of all, the Son, the Redeemer and Saviour, and be baptized and become Christians because *no one can enter into the kingdom of God without being reborn of water and the Holy Spirit.*

They can say to them and the others these and other things which please God because the Lord says in the Gospel: *Whoever acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father.*

Wherever they may be, let all my brothers remember that they have given themselves and abandoned their bodies to the Lord Jesus Christ. For love of Him they must make themselves vulnerable to their enemies, both visible and invisible, because the Lord says: *Whoever loses his life because of me will save it in eternal life. Blessed are they who suffer persecution for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. If they have persecuted me they will also persecute you. If they persecute you in one town flee to another. Blessed are you when people hate you, speak evil of you, persecute, expel, and abuse you, denounce your name as evil and utter every kind of slander against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad on that day because your reward is great in heaven. I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of them and do not fear those who kill the body and after that have nothing more to do. See that you are not alarmed. For by your patience you will possess your souls; whoever perseveres to the end will be saved.”*

This Chapter throws a revealing light on the views of Francis himself; the more so that in the later officially endorsed rule it is almost completely gutted.⁵³ Two conditions are quite clear. The brother must be inspired by God to go, and the ministers must think him a fit person to do so. The element of sacrificial risk is foremost in Francis's mind, backed up by the raft of gospel texts. But

⁵¹ *The Later Rule. Francis of Assisi.* Vol I. p. 99.

⁵² *Francis of Assisi.* Vol I. pp. 74, 5.

⁵³ *The Later Rule, Chapter XII* vests the authority to decide whether or not a brother is fit to go on such expeditions in the hands of ministers provincial. On all the remaining aspects of the earlier Chapter XVI it is completely silent. *Francis of Assisi.* Vol I. p. 106.

the heart of the chapter lies in the two ways of 'living spiritually' among the Saracens. The second way is familiar enough, consisting of a mission to preach, convert and baptize. This is explicitly allowed, if the brothers see that it will 'please the Lord' to do so, and a short creed is provided for their guidance in preaching. But the first way is far more interesting. It consists of subjecting themselves to the Islamic authorities, not concealing the fact that they are Christians, but not engaging in arguments and disputes, which is to say not attempting to proselytize in any way other than by example.

It is important to recognize that Islamic law explicitly recognizes the right of people to live in this way. Non-Muslims are protected if they submit to Islamic domination by a Pact - or *Dhimma* - which imposes discriminatory regulations. This applies only to Christians and Jews, because they share the same Islamic theological and legal category, referred to in the Koran as 'People of the Book'. If they agree to submit to a Muslim ruler, they then become 'protected *dhimmi* peoples' - tributaries, since their protection is linked to an obligatory payment of a koranic poll-tax (the *jizya*) to the Islamic community.

This protection is forfeited if the *dhimmis* should rebel against Islamic law, give allegiance to non-Muslim power, refuse to pay the koranic *jizya*, entice a Muslim from his faith, harm a Muslim or his property or commit blasphemy. Blasphemy includes denigration of the Prophet Muhammad, the Koran, the Muslim faith, the shari'a by suggesting that it has a defect, and by refusing a decision which is the consensus of the Islamic community. The moment the 'pact of protection' is abolished then the lives of the *dhimmis* and their property are forfeit. This protector-protected relationship is typical of a war-treaty between the conqueror and the vanquished, and it remains valid for Islamists because it is fixed in the theological texts. The protection system presents both positive and negative aspects: it provide security and a measure of religious autonomy. On the other hand, *dhimmis* suffer many legal disabilities intended to reduce them to a condition of humiliation and segregation. These rules were established as early as the 8th and 9th centuries by the founders of the schools of Islamic law. Other texts in the Koran stress religious tolerance and peaceful relations, which frequently existed, but the official position is still based on the strict reading given above.⁵⁴

Plainly Francis's 'second way' of living among the Saracens, in order to preach, convert and baptize them, would mean forfeiting *dhimmi* status because it would involve 'enticing a Muslim from his faith'. As such it could be extremely dangerous, running the risk of martyrdom, and Francis clearly recognizes this where he quotes the text concerning 'those who kill the body'. But the 'first way' would mean accepting the conditions of *dhimmi* status, thus claiming the protection that these provide.

There is good reason to suppose that, by this stage in his life, the 'first way' had great appeal for Francis. He had seen the humiliating failure of his first four 'crusading' expeditions. His experiences in Egypt had been compelling. He had seen his bid to convert the Sultan, and still more his offers of ordeal by fire (if they were made) courteously and considerately declined. He had plainly conceived an admiration for the Sultan, a man who, according to one account, had offered him gifts to give to the 'Christian poor or to churches for his salvation'.⁵⁵ Here was a degree of urbanity and good sense all too lacking in the Christian world. Thomas of Celano recounts a strange habit that Francis had of collecting any pieces of writing, 'even writings of pagans', wherever he found them and putting them in a decent place. When a brother asked him

⁵⁴ Bat Ye'or. *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide*. Gazelle Book Services Limited, London. 2002.

⁵⁵ *The Major Legend of Saint Francis*. (1260-63). Chapter Nine. *Francis of Assisi*. Vol II, p. 603.

about this He said it was because they have the letters which make the glorious name of the Lord God. 'And the good that is found there does not belong to the pagans or to any human being, but to God alone to whom belongs every good thing'.⁵⁶

Franciscans in the Holy Land

So the case was strong for a type of Franciscan life lived among the Saracens and subject to them, but making no secret of its total loyalty to Christ. And there is no better example of such a life than that of the Franciscans in the Holy Land. After the death of St. Francis the Franciscan authorities continued to treat the Holy Land with respect. In 1265, at the General Chapter of Pisa presided over by St. Bonaventure, a Province of the Holy Land was established, consisting of Cyprus, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, all the territories conquered by the Crusades. But on 18 May 1291 Acre fell to the Muslim army. With Muslims now controlling all the Holy Land, the Franciscans left and took refuge in Cyprus. Here, they began planning a direct and gradually increasing return to Jerusalem and the area of Palestine.

There is evidence that Franciscans were back in the Holy Sepulchre during the period 1322 to 1327. A bull from Pope John XXII (9 August 1328) granted permission to the Provincial Minister, resident in Cyprus, to send two of his friars to the holy places every year. Soon afterwards the Muslim authorities officially recognized the Franciscans as regular officiants in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. In 1347, the Franciscans settled on a permanent basis in Bethlehem near the Basilica of the Nativity. The first statutes for the Holy Land, dating from 1377, provided that a maximum of twenty friars should serve the Holy Places - Cenacle, Holy Sepulchre and Bethlehem. Their main activity was to keep Christian worship going in these sanctuaries and to give spiritual assistance to pilgrims. At this time the Custody of the Holy Land suffered the martyrdom of many friars. For example Nicolo Tavelich (Slav), Stefano da Cuneo (Italian), Deodato da Rodez and Pietro da Narbona (French), who all belonged to the friary of Mount Sion in Jerusalem, were killed on 14 November 1391. In the life they lived and in the risks they ran these brothers were true mirrors of the first model given by Francis in Chapter XVI of The Earlier Rule.

Another less well known activity of the Franciscans was giving spiritual aid to European merchants resident or passing through the main cities of Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. Originally this was offered only during Lent and Advent but gradually grew and became more stable. With the passing of time, the Custody acquired more sites through perseverance and sacrifice, while along with the increase in its possessions the Custody suffered many painful losses and humiliating restrictions at the hands of the Turkish governors. After a number of troublesome centuries, from 1500 to 1800, the Franciscans had established many religious, cultural and social activities. Some of these initiatives, given the place and circumstance, were the work of true pioneers.

The Custody of the Holy Land still remains an important institution, continuing its mission in the Holy Places and, through many other activities, bearing witness to the Faith in the countries in which it operates. These activities have been increased or reduced, changed and varied, in accordance with the needs of recent times in the tormented Middle East. The Custody conspicuously increased its social assistance activities during the last hundred years, whilst still maintaining its traditional character. It has also brought about the growth of activities in the archaeological field, particularly in research and excavation connected with the Holy Scriptures. For these we are all indebted.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ *The life of Saint Francis*. (128-29). Chapter XXIX. *Francis of Assisi*. Vol. I. p. 252.

⁵⁷ *Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land*. <http://198.62.75.5/www1/ofm/cust/TShistry.html>

Conclusion

This essay has tried to show how through faith, perseverance and bitter experience Francis and his brothers came in the end to reject the Church's strategy of power projection that showed itself in crusades against the Muslims. Instead, as God inspired them, they went among the Saracens without arms and violence to live among them in peace and be subject unto them. In so doing they began a learning process through which prejudices could be broken down and a new mutual faith and understanding be built up. They learned and have shown that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of justice and peace, is not the monopoly of Christians. It is also manifest in the wonderful variety of good and beautiful things which the people of other faiths realize in their daily lives. Christians can hear the voice of the Spirit all around them, calling them to work together with people of other faiths in building the kingdom of God.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ J. Hoeberichts. *Francis and Islam*. Franciscan Press, Quincy, Illinois. 1997. pp. 188,9.