

Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian–Muslim Encounter

John Tolan

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In August or September 1219 at the height of the Fifth Crusade, Francis of Assisi audaciously set out to meet Sultan Malik al-Kâmil of Egypt. In *Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian–Muslim Encounter*, historian John Tolan has produced a fascinating volume on this rather strange episode, an encounter that has captivated writers and painters for centuries. In an age when religion has lost much of its traditional power, however, the author wonders how much we can really know about the experience of Francis and al-Kâmil meeting each other “in a tent in an armed camp on the banks of the Nile, during a truce in the midst of a bloody war” (p. 4). Instead of trying to locate the real Francis and al-Kâmil in the fragments of history, Tolan asks why this particular has fascinated so many different artists. He answers, quite simply, that “for them, it was not merely a curiosity, or a footnote to the history of a crusade which failed on the banks of the Nile. It was much more: an emblematic encounter or confrontation between East and West” (p. 326). Whether it was seen as an encounter or a confrontation, in turn, depended

in part on the historical, religious, and political context within which the given artist was working. In this sense, the book reads more like a metahistory of how, why, and to what effect a particular historical episode has been depicted over the years.

Given the focus on such a momentous encounter between East and West, Islam and Christianity, Muslim and Christian, as well as how it has been portrayed and understood, this book should be of particular interest to students of Christian–Muslim relations and dialogue. It should also be of interest to people interested in the construction of East/West and Muslim/Christian identity.

The first part is dedicated to a thoughtful, thorough study of this encounter’s various representations, mostly in early Franciscan hagiography. This dovetails nicely with the second part, which focuses on its representations since the fourteenth century. Tolan’s goal is to show the extent to which this encounter has inspired writers and artists, mostly in Europe (given the relative dearth of descriptions in Muslim texts) over the centuries, and how the descriptions and portrayals of it changed with Europe’s and the Church’s political fortunes relative, especially, to those of the Ottoman Empire.

The first chapter provides a detailed study of the portrait painted by Jacques de Vitry, bishop of Acre, in his *Historia occidentalis* (1223-5?). This sets the tone for the entire book, which is methodical and well structured. The opening pages quote extensively from the bishop’s account and then move on to discuss the text. Here, Tolan focuses on how de Vitry’s text, which depicts Francis in glowing terms, shows “how Francis’s sanctification has already begun several years before the saint’s death” (p. 39). The author highlights how narratives of this encounter vary wildly in historical and political detail and accuracy, which makes for some interesting comparisons. For example, he points out that while de Vitry’s account clearly notes the political context in which the encounter occurred, Thomas of Celano, Francis’ thirteenth-century biographer, places Francis in Syria (not Egypt) and writes more with a view to sanctification than to historical accuracy.

In his presentation of how Henry of Avranches, one of Pope Gregory IX’s court poets, portrays Francis, Tolan says that the future saint comes across as an epic “hero of a sacred adventure” (p. 75), a theme that recurs in the work of many of the other authors discussed in this book. According to Tolan, Henry is the first one to imagine what Francis actually said to the sultan. In recounting his version, he depicts Francis as a great philosopher and orator preaching Christianity to the barbarians. This, as Tolan discusses in later chapters, is a common theme in many of the narratives. The author notes that the majority of European depictions paint a common picture of European superiority, with

Francis seen alternately as a saintly figure with the spiritual power to subdue the dangerous Muslim sultan or as a martyr risking life and limb among the Muslims and Arabs for the sake of God. In any event, Tolan remarks that many such depictions reflect Europe's fear of the Muslim "other" at that time and may have served to justify its colonialism and imperialism. The twentieth century saw a shift in perspective, however, according to the author, for European authors began to cast both Francis and al-Kâmil in a positive light. Louis Masignon (d. 1962), for example, expressed great reverence for Islam even while preaching Christianity and, as Tolan notes, "places Francis's mission in the context of the philosophical and cultural rapprochement between Islam and Christianity" (p. 296).

Although much of the earlier hagiographical literature presents Francis as a fearless supporter of the Crusades, Tolan mentions various nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors, including a handful of Franciscans and many non-Franciscans, that depict him as precisely the opposite: the apostle of peace who was absolutely opposed to the Crusades. For them, Tolan writes, "Francis practiced peace, the Church preached war" (p. 303). The inimitable Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis, for instance, comes to a powerful conclusion in a hagiographical novel about Francis, translated in 1962 as *God's Pauper: St. Francis of Assisi*. In this novel, Tolan tells us, Kazantzakis initially presents Francis as an ardent supporter of the Crusades. When he meets the sultan, however, Kazantzakis paints the sultan as a megalomaniac, which leads Francis to conclude that what must be liberated is not the Holy Land but one's heart (p. 303). Although it likely was not Kazantzakis' intention, this suggests a great affinity between Christian and Muslim piety, namely, the struggle to purify one's heart. In that sense, perhaps Kazantzakis' negative portrayal of the sultan need not necessarily be read as an outright criticism of Islam, but rather as a commentary on the trappings of power and the need for Christians and Muslims alike to look deeper within themselves.

John Tolan has produced a richly detailed metahistory of an intriguing encounter between East and West, Islam and Christianity. The modest lesson we can draw from it, it seems, is that every encounter is pregnant with multiple meanings and interpretations. This, in turn, should move us to consider the best possible meaning and interpretation so as to better allow for mutual learning and understanding.

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