

Notes

1. I have tried to address the pros and cons of a full EU membership of Turkey in somewhat more detail in my “The Islamic World and Europe at the Crossroads”, in: Christoph Marcinkowski (ed.), *The Islamic World and Europe: Managing Religious and Cultural Identities in the Age of Globalisation* (Freiburg Studies in Social Anthropology 24; Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2009), 17–37.
2. Christoph Marcinkowski, “Leaving the Gazi’s Path: Turkey’s Evaporating Eastern Dreams”, review of Idris Bal, *Turkey’s Relations with the West and the Turkic Republics: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Model* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2000), in: *Journal of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations* [Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia] 3, no. 1 (2001), 104–7.

Paul Moses – *The Saint and the Sultan: The Crusades, Islam, and Francis of Assisi’s Mission of Peace*

(New York: Doubleday, 2009). xii+302 pp. ISBN: 978-0-385-52370-7. US\$26.00

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This book by Pulitzer Prize-winning New York journalist Paul Moses retells the story of a meeting that took place in the summer of 1219 during the Fifth Crusade (1213–21) between Saint Francis of Assisi – one of the best-loved saints of Catholic Christianity – and the Ayyubid Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil (r. 1218–38) in the Egyptian city of Damietta at the mouth of the Nile. In a dangerous and daring move by crossing enemy lines to advocate peace, St Francis and Malik al-Kāmil shared a brief dialogue about war, peace and faith in the One God. The conversation inspired St Francis to return home with a bold challenge to his fellow Christians: to live peacefully with the Muslims despite the war between their religious leaders and to stop warfare of any kind.

The Fifth Crusade was another attempt on the part of Christianity to retake Jerusalem and the rest of the Holy Land from the Muslims by first conquering the powerful Ayyubid state in Egypt. Due to famine and disease after the Nile failed to flood, al-Kāmil could not defend Damietta. This led to the fall of the city to the Christians in November 1219. The sultan withdrew to al-Manṣūrah, a fortress further up the river. After this there was little action until 1221, when al-Kāmil offered peace again, but was again refused. After their initial success at Damietta, the Crusaders for their part marched south towards Cairo in July of 1221. An attack by al-Kāmil during the night, however, resulted in a great number of crusader losses – and eventually in the surrender of the Christian army. The sultan agreed to an eight-year peace agreement with the Christians. He was able to retake Damietta in September 1221. In the following years, al-Kāmil was locked in a power struggle with his brother and was therefore willing to accept a peace agreement with the Holy Roman Emperor (and King of Jerusalem) Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (r. 1220–50), who was scheduled to arrive in the region for what became known as the Sixth Crusade (1228–29).

In February 1229, al-Kāmil negotiated a ten-year peace treaty with Frederick II and returned Jerusalem and other holy sites to the Crusader kingdom. The treaty of 1229 is unique in the history of the Crusades. By diplomacy alone and without major military confrontation, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and a corridor running to the sea were ceded to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Exception was made for Jerusalem's Temple area, the Dome of the Rock, and the al-Aqṣā Mosque, which the Muslims retained. Moreover, all current Muslim residents of the city would retain their homes and property. They would also have their own city officials to administer a separate justice system and safeguard their religious interests. The walls of Jerusalem, which had already been destroyed, were not rebuilt, and the peace was to last for ten years. Nevertheless many Muslims were still opposed to this treaty, as were many Christians. In 1239, the treaty with Frederick expired and Jerusalem came again under Ayyubid control.

In 2009, the Catholic Church celebrated the 800th anniversary of the Franciscan Order. Although St Francis of Assisi came from a wealthy family, he is best known for his embrace of poverty, which led to his founding of the Franciscan Order. St Francis – or *il poverello*, the ‘little poor one’, as he is known among his admirers – is probably the Catholic Church's most popular saint – in part because he appeals to so many non-Christians. That he could communicate with animals and live harmoniously with nature might have something to do with it, as well. Less well-known is his role in the establishment of the historic peace talks during the violent Crusades. Christopher Tyerman's massive history of the crusades, *God's War*, for instance – reviewed by the writer of these lines in the previous issue of this journal¹ – devotes less than two pages to the encounter between St Francis of Assisi and the sultan of Egypt.

By contrast, that historic encounter between the two forms the centrepiece of Moses' book. Moses believes that the meeting of Francis with the sultan – a nephew of the legendary warrior Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī (known to the West as ‘Saladin’) – is crucial for understanding how Francis understood his strategy of dialogue with ‘the Other’. Moses centres on Francis' dedication to peace, highlighting the saint's 1219 meeting with al-Malik al-Kāmil. Embracing a life of poverty, Francis was joined by other young men fleeing the violent culture around them, whom he exhorted to preach peace and repentance. The saint's long-standing desire to preach to the Muslim world led to his famous encounter with al-Malik al-Kāmil in 1219. Francis came across the lines unarmed, merely chanting the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd...”. Apparently, al-Kāmil – already a serious Muslim who respected Christian monks and Muslim Sufis – was impressed with Francis.

Moses' book, which aims at a wider audience² – also traces the origins of Francis' thinking about peace back to his early years when he himself was an aristocratic warrior for his Central Italian home town of Assisi as it waged war

against neighbouring Perugia. It was to advance his vision of peace that Francis travelled to the Middle East to seek out the sultan and engage him in a dialogue, much to the chagrin of the institutional Church, which was supporting the Crusades as an attempt to win back the Holy Land. Through logic and reason, he also hoped that the sultan would be won over to the merits of Christianity. While the meeting between the two did not produce an immediate peace or a conversion, Moses asserts that it blazed the path to what still can be a similar conversation between Christians and Muslims in our own day. Moses' realistic and powerful book gives readers an informed idea of how difficult it was to follow Francis in an age of broad acceptance of violence. The saint comes through as both lovable and naïve, never able to win sufficient acceptance for his approach, even among his own followers.

The encounter between the Christian saint and the Muslim sultan has been famously depicted in biographies and art throughout the centuries, and in 2008 IAIS Malaysia published a monograph³ which featured a modern depiction of St Francis' meeting with the sultan. In the pertinent historical literature, Sultan al-Kāmil is variously presented as an enlightened pagan monarch hungry for evangelical teaching, a cruel oriental despot, or a worldly libertine. However, Moses argues that the facts were misconstrued or simply fabricated – mainly for political ends. Although to the mind of this writer, this is a rather controversial claim, Moses makes a strong case for the significance of Francis' (and al-Kāmil's) approach toward inter-religious dialogue for our own troubled times.

To sum up, *The Saint and the Sultan* is above all a story about peace (and the art of peace-making) – a story that is nearly 800 years old but still resonates in an era where Christians and Muslims look at each other with suspicion. Moses' account of St Francis' meeting with the sultan in the midst of the Fifth Crusade not only details the historical record, puts it into context, and tries to strip it – in Moses' view – of centuries of distortions. It also documents how its *true* significance has recently come to blossom and bear fruit in Christian–Muslim relations and is therefore highly relevant to those involved in the dialogue industry.⁴

Notes

1. Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), reviewed in *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1, no. 1 (October 2009), 198–201.
2. More scholarly is John V. Tolan's *Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian–Muslim Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
3. Syed Farid Alatas, *An Islamic Perspective on the Commitment to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Kuala Lumpur: IAIS Malaysia, 2008).
4. For some positive developments in this regard see Christoph Marcinkowski, "Religion, Reason, Regensburg: Perspectives for Catholic–Muslim Dialogue", *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1, no. 1 (October 2009), 159–67.