Francis’s encounter with Islam (meeting Sultan Malik Al-Kamil سلطان الملك الكامل)

(notes based on books by J. Hoeberichts and K.A. Warren, see bibliography)

The Crusades and attitudes to Muslims in Western Europe

Planning for the fifth crusade (1217-1221), pope Innocent III laid out his justification and policies for the crusade in his papal encyclical *Quia maior* (1213).

*Practical measures to attract crusaders:*

Innocent III issued indulgences to those who would participate in the crusade; properties and persons of the crusaders are placed under the protection of the church; fundraising efforts for the crusade.

*Theological justification:*

Christ’s call “to deny himself and take up the cross and follow me” is interpreted in terms of following Christ into battle, i.e., as a kind of jihad (جهاد).

The command “to love one’s neighbor” is interpreted in terms of liberating the Christians who were under the Islamic rule in the Holy Land.

St. Bernard preaching the crusades in the 12th century, justified killing in the name of Christ: “to inflict death or to die for Christ is no sin, but rather an abundant claim to glory.... The Lord accepts with pleasure the death of the enemy as revenge....” The church presented killing pagans for the sake of Christ as something to be admired because it offered the Christians an opportunity for salvation.

*Attitudes towards Mohammed and Islam:*

Innocent III uses very negative language with regard to Mohammed and the Saracens. He describes the Saracens as cruel, bloodthirsty barbarians. He did not think treaties made with the Saracens were worthy of being honored, so he prepared for the new crusade at the same time as he was proposing a peace plan to the current Sultan. Innocent III indentified Mohammed with the beast of the Apocalypse who seduces many by worldly enticements.

*Similarities between Islam and Franciscans*

The Quran 5:82 speaks positively about Christians:

“You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity toward the believers [to be] the Jews and those who associate others with Allah; and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers among those who say, “We are Christians.” That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant.”
The “Ninety Nine Most Beautiful Names of God,” a popular Islamic prayer that lists epithets of Allah from the Quran, emphasizes mercy (the epithet al-Rahim الرحم) and compassion. Al Ghazali, an 11-12th-century Islamic mystic, comments that the best way to anticipate the mercy of God is by showing mercy and generosity to those in need and by gentleness rather than violence; in particular, one must help the poor and rid them of their poverty.

Social responsibility, including almsgiving, is a very serious obligation in Islam. Those who hoard their wealth are condemned by the Quran as are “those who do not treat the orphan with dignity nor encourage each other to feed the poor... [and who] greedily devour their inheritances” (Quran 89:17-19).

One needs social action in order to attain a right relationship with God: “And give the kinsman his right, and the needy, and the traveller; that is better for those who desire God’s face; those—they are the prosperers. And what you give in usury, that it may increase upon the people’s wealth, increases not with God; but what you give in alms, desiring God’s face, those—they receive recompense manifold” (Quran 30:38-39)

The closest one gets to something like Franciscans in Islam is in the form of sufism, a spiritual ascetic movement. The name ‘sufi’ means a person wearing ‘suf’ (wool), just like Franciscan friars whose habits were made of wool. Sufism arose out the popular feeling that the acquisition of wealth and worldly gain had destroyed the possibility to live according to the Quran. So sufis are not supposed to have private property or refer to anything as “mine.” The goal of the sufi is to become at one with God, which means to extinguish one’s own sense of self. Many of the sufis lived by begging, believing that a true sufi possessed nothing and was possessed by nothing (i.e., not having possessions brought true freedom). Thus Sultan Malik Al-Kamil, who was close to the sufis and whose close adviser was a sufi, could have identified Francis and his friars as sufis.

**Potential Islamic influences on Francis**

After his return from Egypt Francis added Chapter 16 to the Early Rule (see text of the chapter).

Francis expresses the following sentiment in Testament 12: “Wherever I find our Lord’s most holy names and written words in unbecoming places, I want to gather them up and I beg that they be gathered up and placed in a becoming place.”

The same sentiment is expressed in his letters to the clergy and custodians. This can be seen as similar to the muslim belief that the Quran is the actual word of God and the physical words and books themselves must be protected.

Francis frequently used the expression “if God wills it” (إ燃气 الله إشاء الله) which is reminiscent of the Islamic submission to the absolute will of God that drives everything that happens in this world.

In his letter to the custodians Francis expresses his enthusiasm for public prayer or prayer “at every hour.” In his letter to the rulers (v. 7) he asks that “every evening an announcement be made by a messenger or some other sign” to pray. Such sentiments are reminiscent of the salat (صلاة) (Islamic daily prayers) and the public call to prayer by the muezzin.
Francis composed *The Praises of God* on Mount La Verna in September 1224, when a new crusade was in the making, against his own wishes. The prayer is reminiscent of the Islamic prayer “Ninety Nine Most Beautiful Names of God.”

St. Francis, *The Praises of God*

You are holy Lord God Who does wonderful things.
You are strong. You are great. You are the most high.
You are the almighty king. You holy Father,
King of heaven and earth.
You are three and one, the Lord God of gods;
You are the good, all good, the highest good,
Lord God living and true.
You are love, charity; You are wisdom, You are humility,
You are patience, You are beauty, You are meekness,
You are security, You are rest,
You are gladness and joy, You are our hope, You are justice,
You are moderation, You are all our riches to sufficiency.
You are beauty, You are meekness,
You are the protector, You are our custodian and defender,
You are strength, You are refreshment. You are our hope,
You are our faith, You are our charity,
You are all our sweetness, You are our eternal life:
Great and wonderful Lord, Almighty God, Merciful Savior.