

Christians & Muslims: A Gallery of Spiritual Warriors

As their brethren attacked Muslim fortresses, these evangelistic crusaders fought for Muslim souls.

Steven Gertz

Trailblazing preacher

Francis of Assisi

1181-1226

Writing his first Rule in 1209, 27-year-old Francis called on his followers to preach to and convert Muslims: "Let any brother who desires by divine inspiration to go among the Saracens and other nonbelievers, go with the permission of his minister and servant."

Francis, a radical who had renounced his father's wealth to embrace a lifestyle of poverty and relentless preaching, sent his first missionary to one of the crusader states in Syria in 1217. Two years later, he commissioned six more men to go to Morocco. News eventually filtered back that five of the friars reached Morocco and began preaching in the streets, but they were decapitated by angry Muslims.

As the father of a growing order, the Friars Minor, Francis debated whether he should visit the war zone himself. Eventually he responded to a call from Pope Honorius III, who sought preachers to invigorate the soldiers of the Fifth Crusade.

In 1219 Francis set sail for Damietta, Egypt, where crusaders were besieging a Muslim fortress. While the battle raged, Francis hatched a plan to cross over the lines to try to convert Saladin's nephew, Sultan Malik al-Kamil.

The sultan's sentinels, thinking Francis and his companion Illuminato came with a message from the crusaders, ushered them directly into al-Kamil's presence.

When the sultan questioned them about their business, Francis answered, "We are telling you in all truth that if you die in the law which you now profess, you will be lost and God will not possess your soul. It is for this reason we have come."

The sultan's counselors called for the friars' execution. They told al-Kamil, "Lord, you are the sword of the law: you have the duty to maintain and defend it. We command you, in the name of Allah and of Muhammad, who has given us the law, to cut off their heads here and now, for we do not want to listen to anything they have to say."

At this, the sultan refused to listen to Francis, but neither would he kill him. "I am going to act against the law," he said, "because I am never going to condemn you to death. For that would be an evil reward for me to bestow on you, who conscientiously risked death in order to save my soul for God."

The sultan then offered them gifts and land, but Francis refused, and the sultan escorted them safely back across Christian lines.

The friar didn't stay long in Egypt, and after visiting the crusader city of Acre, he sailed for Italy, never to return. But his followers and indeed the whole of medieval Christianity treasured this tale of courage.

He inspired his order to send more missionaries.

Jacques de Vitry later wrote of the Franciscans, "Not only Christ's faithful but even the Saracens ... admire their humility and virtue, and when the brothers fearlessly approach them to preach, they willingly receive them and, with a grateful spirit, provide them with what they need."

Inquisitor and educator

Ramon de Penyaforte

ca. 1175-1275

Ramon de Penyaforte was a well bred and well known teacher of canon law at the University of Bologna when the "kidnapper of souls," Dominic de Guzman, came to town with a call to poverty. Ramon shocked his students and colleagues by leaving his position to return to Barcelona and join the Dominican order.

Ramon's arrival in Barcelona came at a strategic time. Across Spain, as Christian rulers took the offensive against Muslim forces, Dominicans followed them to convert both apostate Christians and devout Muslims. Pope Gregory IX asked Ramon to travel the country preaching the crusade against the Moors. Ramon was so effective that the pope called him back to Rome to serve as his confessor and, later, as inquisitor of heretics.

The new inquisitor keenly understood the need for a coherent response to Islam. When his colleagues appointed him to lead the Dominican order in May 1238, he encouraged fellow Dominican Thomas Aquinas to write an apology against the heretics' errors. The result was the formative ***Summa Contra Gentiles***. In it Aquinas used reason to convince Muslims of the truth of Christianity, since they refused Scripture's authority.

Ramon lost little time in training his order in Aquinas's apologetic. He secretly set up schools for missionaries in Tunis and Barcelona. His schools soon attracted interest. Friar Humbert de Romans wrote of them with glowing praise: "From Spain we learn that the Brethren, who for some years have given themselves up to the study of Arabic language, have made great progress, and what is still more praiseworthy is that they have converted Saracens, many of whom have already received Baptism."

For all his efforts, though, Ramon never accomplished what he set out to do. Some 30 years after Pope Honorius III authorized both Franciscans and Dominicans to evangelize the Moors of Spain and North Africa, Ramon could point to few Muslim leaders even leaning toward Christianity.

Crusader bishop

Jacques de Vitry

1160-1240

Jacques traveled a long road to the East. Born in France, he studied at the University of Paris, then sought out the mystic Marie d'Oignies, who encouraged him to preach. He soon won renown across Europe for his attacks on the heretical Albigenses. His reputation earned him an appointment, in 1216, as bishop of the crusader city of Acre.

As bishop, Jacques turned his attention to the conversion of another band of "heretics"—Muslims. In the spring of 1217, he undertook a preaching tour of the coastal region of Syria, which was then under crusader rule. To his delight, two Muslims converted and were baptized in the church of Tortosa.

Encouraged by this early success, Jacques traveled to the Christian-Muslim borderland to preach. But he soon found that most Muslims hesitated to embrace Christianity, for fear of retribution from other Muslims. So he aligned himself with the crusaders, reasoning that Muslims would dare to convert if

soldiers could protect them.

The plan failed. Sometimes the crusaders themselves obstructed his work. Soldiers commonly took Muslim captives, many of them children, as slaves. Jacques wanted to convert and baptize them, but under the laws of the crusader kingdoms, any Muslim who converted gained his or her freedom. Therefore, some crusaders refused to allow Jacques to come near their slaves, "although these [Muslims] earnestly and tearfully requested it."

By 1227, Jacques had given up and gone home. Crusader fortunes had reversed, and neither the conversion nor the defeat of the Muslims seemed likely.

Martyred mystic

Ramon Llull

(Raymond Lull)

1235-1315

Ramon Llull was born on the island of Majorca, off the coast of Spain. Decades before, King James II of Aragon had captured Majorca from the Moors. The king awarded land to his captains, including Llull's father. So Llull lived a privileged life, eventually rising to a position of overseeing the king's feasts. He also gained fame as one of the kingdom's finest poets.

But in July 1266, Llull saw a vision of Jesus on the cross, and his life changed dramatically. He quit writing amorous poetry and retired to a cell, where he spent the next nine years learning Arabic with his Muslim slave. A tragic fight that led to his slave's death strengthened his resolve to serve God and inspired his motto, "He who loves not lives not."

Around this time, Llull learned of Francis's visit to the sultan and discerned God's call on his life as a missionary to Muslims. As his father had wielded the sword as a soldier, he would wield the sword of the Spirit as a missionary.

A prolific writer, Llull wrote an astonishing 321 books in Latin, Catalan, and Arabic, many of which responded to Islamic challenges to Christianity. His ***Ars Major sive Generalis*** (1275) locked horns with Muslim philosophers Avicenna and Averroes on the grounds that Christianity was rational, an innovation in Muslim-Christian dialogue.

In his novel ***Blanquerna*** (1287), he outlined two methods of converting Muslims, one peaceful (preaching) and one violent (crusade). Llull appeared to have vacillated between them, though in his ***Llibre de Contemplacio en Deu*** (1273), he stated clearly that the Holy Land should be conquered not by force of arms, but "by love, prayers, and the shedding of tears and blood."

Llull did more than write—he labored to build schools that would train missionaries for service in Muslim lands. In 1276, he established his first school in Majorca, which taught not only theology and philosophy, but also Arabic and the geography of Islamic lands.

"The man unacquainted with geography," he wrote, "is not only ignorant where he walks but whither he leads. Whether he attempts the conversion of infidels or works for other interests of the Church, it is indispensable that he know the religions and environments of all nations."

His next step was to convince the papacy of his vision. But corrupt Nicholas IV and Boniface VIII took more interest in lining their pockets. Discouraged, the missionary decided to go to North Africa himself.

In 1291, 1307, and again in 1314, he talked with and preached to the ***ulema***, or Muslim literati.

Threatened, imprisoned, and banished twice, Lull would not be silenced. "Death has no terrors for a sincere servant of Christ who is laboring to bring souls to a knowledge of the truth," he told his captors.

Years before, he wrote in his ***Llibre de Contemplacio en Deu***, "Men are wont to die, O Lord, from old age ... but thus, if it be your will, your servant would prefer to die in the glow of love." On June 30, 1315, a Muslim mob granted his desire by stoning him to death in Bugia, Algeria.

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