



'The Sultan AND the Saint'

A contemporary film
documentary revisits
the historic encounter.

By Greg Friedman, OFM

On the day after Christmas 2017, a national public television audience had the opportunity to experience the story of Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil and Saint Francis of Assisi. An estimated audience of between three to six million viewers watched *The Sultan and the Saint* on their local PBS stations.

The film, written and directed by Alex Kronemer and narrated by Academy award-winner Jeremy Irons, has gone on to win "best documentary" at some 20 film festivals. It continues to be shown around the world, prompting local dialogue centering on this historic encounter.

Maryland-based Unity Productions produced the film. Founded in 1999 by two American Muslims. *The Holy Land Review* spoke with Unity's Daniel Tutt, who served as associate producer and coordinates Unity's educational outreach for its media. He explained that the founders "began a sort of reach-out campaign to the Muslim community here in the United States." With a background in media, they were "interested in telling the story of this religion, of its history, of its culture, with the focus on broad education."

Rather than focus only on a Muslim audience, Unity "would be reaching out, promoting interfaith engagement, promoting religious literacy and competency in understanding this religion." He added, "You're fighting almost a Sisyphean task [in the face] of the world's political events. But it's also an opportunity...[to look] at this culture and this religion in a different way. Our mission, therefore, is to counter a lot of the Islamophobia and the bigotry that exists in the Western European and American context."

After Unity's first film project, on the life of the



Prophet Muhammad, the group recognized “that there’s more to be done with film than just broadcast, film festivals, awards, and screenings. There’s actually a relational component involved and an educational component...to get it in front of librarians, teachers, interfaith activists, pastors, rabbis and imams, to really drive conversations at a grassroots level around the films.

“We’ve been able to do a high quantity of engagements through support from different foundations, like the United States Institute of Peace, the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and many, many other family foundations, to really drive discussions, to reach wide numbers of people.”

A forgotten history

The Sultan and the Saint was Unity Production’s ninth documentary. Daniel Tutt pointed out that “in some ways, the story is still a forgotten history.” He added that “in interfaith circles, this story is certainly talked about, it’s certainly referenced, but those circles tend to be more academic. They tend to be folks that are in the know. I felt that the narrative was a very rich symbol for interfaith dialogue and encounter.

“On the one hand, you have [what] I would call ‘distorted histories’ on the Catholic side. And then on the Muslim side, you have a complete lack of awareness, mainly of the figure of alKamil, who, as you know, is eclipsed by the figure of Salah ad-Din [ruler of Egypt and Syria who fought and defeated the Crusader armies in the 12th century].

Franciscan author Sister Kathy Warren, who has

Above, the film presents St. Francis in the Crusader camp, with his companion, Br. Illuminato, presenting the request to visit the Muslim camp, to the papal legate, Cardinal Pelagius. At the far right: the filmmakers imagine the meeting of the sultan and Francis. (Images courtesy of Unity Productions)

written about the encounter from a Christian and Franciscan perspective (*Daring to Cross the Threshold: Francis of Assisi Encounters Sultan Malek Al-Kamil*) and appears in the film, resonated with the filmmakers’ approach: “For too many centuries the story was used to promote a message of Christian superiority. Unsubstantiated embellishments were added to the story to give a very different interpretation of Francis’ presence in the Muslim camp as well as his purpose in going there.”

Daniel Tutt said that Unity’s previous work focused on “bringing to life forgotten stories.” He added, “We had the idea of doing this film probably a decade prior. We had always kicked it around, sort of waiting for the right moment to do it. And I really think that what Pope Francis opened up, especially with his engagement with the Muslim world in a very positive way, felt that it was the right time to do this.”

Recreating a medieval story

The film is a “docudrama,” built around historical reenactments, supplemented by interviews with scholars. “We shot everything in Baltimore at a bottling factory that had shut down and had been reconverted into a film studio in the harbor,” Tutt recalled. “All of the interior shots were recreated in that studio, and all the scholarly interviews....All of the exterior shots, the battle scenes, and all of the scenes

of Francis and al-Kāmil in Egypt and Damietta were actually filmed at Assateague Island in Maryland."

While the coast of Maryland substituted for the Mediterranean Ocean and the Nile River, the producers tried to make the other visual elements true to the story's medieval setting. "All of the costuming was as authentic as we could get," Tutt pointed out. "We not only interviewed the leading Franciscan historians and scholars on the encounter, but they also weighed in on costuming, scenes and background settings." The goal? "To preserve as much authentic portrayal as possible."

Research for the project stretched over two years before its November 2016 release. As part of that process, the producers interviewed some 25 experts over hundreds of hours to develop the working script. About a third of those scholars appear on camera. They provide expertise in Islam, Christianity and Judaism—including three Franciscan scholars.

Pulitzer-prize-winning journalist Paul Moses, whose popularly written book, *The Saint and the Sultan*, explored the lives of both al-Kāmil and Francis, appears in the film. "We consulted with Paul a great deal," said Daniel Tutt, to present "a nice background story summary of the encounter. And I felt that his

portraying it in such a way where secular audiences can resonate with it, is very important to keep the story still relevant." Paul Moses agreed. "I was very happy to see the film being made," he told *The Holy Land Review*. It's done a lot to make the story better known. He added, "That's what I was hoping for, to get the word out in a way a TV show could do."

Violence and the human brain

One perspective unique to *The Sultan and the Saint* came from neuroscience. The producers wanted to explore how the religious and political conflict depicted in the film involved both the demonization of the other and its accompanying violence. The question, according to Tutt, was "What's actually going on at this subjective level when people are thrown into violent situations?"

Dr. Emile Bruneau, a neuroscientist at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication, narrates how the human brain functions in violent conflict situations. His remarks are complemented by a mix of reenacted battle scenes with animation suggesting the working of the brain and nervous system. Bruneau has himself worked in conflict regions around the world and specializes in applying neuroscience to the study of hostility between political or religious groups.

The Crusades are the historical backdrop for the encounter in the film, which depicts the political and religious issues involved, as well as the reality that

Below, a Crusader on the shore at Damietta, Egypt, stands over the dead body of one of his victims. As part of its presentation, the film examined the effect of violence on the human brain. (Image courtesy of Unity Productions)



the Church's efforts to re-claim the Holy Land for Christianity became sidetracked into violence against Jews and even Christians in the East, in addition to the de-humanization and bloody wars against the Muslims who were the declared enemies.

Daniel Tutt pointed out that the producers' hope was to explore what took place. "Of course, it's an incredibly complex phenomenon, like all social phenomenon are, but I think this [film] gives people a sort of framework to understand it."

In doing so, the film does not shy away from a graphic depiction of the brutality of war. "If the film were rated it would be PG with violence," Daniel Tutt observed. Franciscan historian Father Michael Cusato, who appears in the film, noted that "One of the most original—though not uncontroversial—aspects of the *The Sultan and the Saint* is its visual emphasis on the violence of the Fifth Crusade and of warfare in general."

Other treatments of the Crusades have, Fr. Michael observed, "more often than not, soft-pedaled [it] in favor of putting the emphasis upon the religious fervor supposedly underpinning—and therefore, justifying—the extreme violence of the western Christian campaign to crush Muslim strongholds in the Holy Land. But the fact of the matter is that these were bloody, face-to-face, hand-to-hand clashes resulting in the deaths and injuries of thousands of men and women."

Commenting on the film's "exploration of the neurological processes which occur in human beings during moments of violent urges and actions," he added, "by contrast the film asserts how those same processes can be reversed or abated when they are redirected towards more positive human relations and actions. This is really what the director of the film was trying to get at; and the pacific relationship struck up between Francis and al-Malik al-Kāmil is the prime example of how violent, ingrained urges can be transformed into something more positive and constructive."

Zack Beyer portrayed Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil in the film. (Image courtesy of Unity Productions)



Who was the sultan?

Daniel Tutt pointed out that "St. Francis has thousands of pages written about him. al-Kāmil on the other hand, is a fascinating figure but in many ways unknown in [our] contemporary period both to Muslims and to the West.

"But this was not the case during his own time. Here's a man who was a fond admirer of scholars. He was an incredible diplomat. He was an incredible military tactician and strategist, and what we discovered through research was [that he was] very much a catalyst to rerouting the Crusades from having to do with the attainment of Jerusalem.

"When he created the peace after the Fifth Crusade over Jerusalem, this was a significant event in the history of the Crusades. Of course, it did not end the Crusades, but it was a moment that shaped the future direction and de-intensified the conflict towards a more peaceful resolution."

As in every docudrama, Tutt noted, artistic and scholarly choices had to be made, especially about figures like Francis and al-Kāmil, whose stories have been embellished and even distorted over time. "We would always choose to emphasize a fact or a story line that had general scholarly consensus. We didn't adopt any of the outlandish ideas, like al-Kāmil was a secret Christian. We tried to stick very much to the main stream of the scholarship."



Who was the saint?

"We did not decide to paint St. Francis as a kind of new ager, as a kind of figure who was above religion," Tutt explained. "Rather, we tried to show that, in fact, he was a medieval Christian who most likely went to the Sultan with the interest in converting him. And that is a beautiful thing from a storytelling standpoint, because here you see a wonderful transformation, and we tried to show



that transformation in the film." The filmmakers highlighted "the modification that Francis made to the rules of his order on how to deal with religious 'others,' particularly Muslims. [This] is sort of the proof that his encounter with the Sultan was not only something that was subjectively transformative but actually was institutionally transformative for the Franciscan Order."

Sr. Kathy Warren underscored the deeper lessons of the film. "I agree with the film's perspective that Francis was not a supporter of the crusades, especially to settle such major conflicts. I believe the portrayal of the dialogue and the respect shown between Francis and al-Kamil offers a powerful method for dealing with conflict today."

Sr. Kathy explained that "Francis was a master at understanding and embracing the human condition—the whole of it—the joys and the struggles. I believe this is one of the traits that makes Francis one of the most well-known persons in history. Francis' approach to Islam was simply a stretching of the understanding he had come to about the human condition. Francis, through his encounter with a leper, came to understand that every human being, without exception, is brother and sister. This insight is rooted in the belief that each of us have the same Creator, the One God, from whom we come and to whom we are all returning."

She noted that "this key insight meant that all those who were 'officially' excluded from the society in which Francis lived prior to his 'conversion'—lepers, heretics, Jews, Muslims, etc.—were not 'others.' Francis

Photo at top: Alexander McPherson portrayed Francis of Assisi in the film.

Photo at bottom: Francis in the court of Sultan al-Malik al-Kāmil.

Photo opposite: the Muslim camp at Damietta, Egypt. (Images courtesy of Unity Productions)

came to realize the universal kinship of all of humanity, no exceptions. Thus, he approached the Muslims in the Sultan's camp not as 'the hated enemy' or 'the beast,' but as his own brothers and sisters." The story, she said, "helps us to realize how very radical Francis' approach to living in the world and in the Church was and continues to be.

A continuing impact

Daniel Tutt and the team at Unity Productions are pleased with the film's impact, particularly in its educational outreach. "I think the impact, in addition to the broadcast, the film festivals, and the international distribution of the film, has been most felt at the educational grassroots engagement level," he said. "To date, we've had 5,000 requests from institutions for the film. So this means they're either receiving it, in most cases, on DVD and will be hopefully screening it multiple times either in the classroom, at the library, at the congregation, etc. That reaches deep."

Unity has a campaign in the United States to foster dialogue between Christian evangelicals and Pentecostals, with Muslim communities. To date, Tutt says, "We've had 50 encounter events with the film.... where evangelicals use the film as an invitation to bring Muslims into their sacred space and have a dialogue. It's very exciting."

For this anniversary year, Daniel Tutt said he hopes "this docudrama, addressing such an important event in history, when you do it in such a way that resonates for the long duration,...becomes evergreen and can be utilized as a tool for many years. It doesn't go out of fashion."

Sr. Kathy Warren, from a Franciscan perspective, has found a positive reaction: "I have shown the film to several audiences and found that it shocks, offends, stretches, enlightens and even angers." She recalled the reaction of one viewer, who observed during a discussion following a viewing of *The Sultan and the Saint*, "I think this film and this discussion is turning me into a 'recovering Islamophobe.' I am so grateful that I came tonight, and I have much to think about. I know I will attend the follow up session at the mosque to continue hearing about the parts of this reality that I've never had the opportunity to encounter." ✝

For more information on *The Sultan and the Saint*:
www.sultanandthesaintfilm.com

