Beginning in 1219 and continuing into the early modern era, bands of Franciscans periodically left the cities and convents of Europe to cross over seas and mountains to Islamic lands. There they preached the salvific gospel of Jesus Christ in front of kings and qāḍīs, and more significantly, condemned the Prophet Muhammad as a demoniac and liar, who led his followers to eternal suffering in hell. The narrators of such stories imagined that the result was as the friars had truly desired—not the conversion of their audience, but their own execution in accordance with Islamic law, which forbids insulting the Prophet or the faith. For a century, friars declaimed and died, and while their stories circulated in some form among Franciscans, nobody honored them with formal passiones. In the early fourteenth century, however, Franciscans suddenly found stories of martyrdom by Muslims compelling, and worthy of commemoration.

Why? There is of course not just one answer, but the accounts were a response to at least two crises of the early fourteenth century, one inside the Order, and the other outside. Most immediately, the passiones must be read in the context of the controversy over poverty among Conventual Franciscans, rigorist Spirituals, and a heavy-handed pope (John XXII), which led to Spirituals being burned at the stake for heresy, and the Conventual leadership of the Order fleeing Avignon in fear of meeting the same fate. For many friars, the stories were a demonstration of Franciscan spirituality that replaced poverty with martyrdom as the highest expression of imitatio Christi (et Francisci), and provided the Order with a common set of heroes that both Spirituals and Conventuals could admire. Islam, in this context, became a synecdoche for the world itself and its temptations. But the passiones were also understood in the context of

1 For Francis as a model of sanctity, in this case for Louis IX of France, see M. Cecilia Gaposchkin, The Making of St. Louis: Kingship, Sanctity, and Crusade in Late Medieval France (Ithaca, 2008), p. 159.
another crisis, this one ongoing and slow-burning: the failure of western Christendom in its struggle to overcome Islam militarily and spiritually. The Franciscan accounts gave western Christians a new set of stories in which conflict between Christians and Muslims could be played out, perhaps to a more satisfactory conclusion than contemporary efforts through crusade or mission.

The accounts were distinctive in two ways. They represent the first martyrrological corpus written in the Latin West that prominently features Muslims as persecutors, and they put aside some of the distinctive characteristics that had marked Latin martyr narratives since the third century. Martyr narratives have embraced many different ideologies, but one of the most important was the conviction that at the same time as the martyrs transcend the world through death, they (with God’s help) transform it through miracle and conversion. The martyrs participated in some way in the same victory over the devil and his earthly power as Jesus’s death had. In contrast, the Franciscan martyrologies rejected the hope for earthly transformation, and rendered Muslim participants as unworthy to view the glories of the martyrs or receive the benefit of their sacrifice.

Crusade and Mission ... and Martyrdom

Christians had evoked martyrdom in conflict with Islam since the seventh century (as had Muslims in their conflicts with Christians). Eastern Christian stories of martyrdom helped to distinguish Christian from Muslim and discourage conversion to Islam; the example of the martyrs of Cordoba in the mid-ninth century is perhaps the best-known example.

2 There are of course a large number of such martyrdoms from other Christian communities, preserved in Greek, Arabic, Syriac, Coptic, and other languages. The passiones of the Cordoba martyrs, while in Latin, were written within Islamic Spain. See note 5 for further bibliography. Others do exist, such as the “Martyrdom of Pelagius,” but as isolated examples, not as a defined group of accounts. See Celso Rodríguez Fernández, ed., La Pasión de S. Pelayo: Edición crítica, con traducción y comentarios (Santiago de Compostela, 1991); translated as Raguel, “The Martyrdom of St. Pelagius,” trans. Jeffrey A. Bowman, in Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology, ed. Thomas Head (London, 2001), pp. 227–35.

5 Kenneth Baxter Wolf, Christian Martyrs in Muslim Spain (Cambridge, 1988); Jessica A. Coope, The Martyrs of Córdoba: Community and Family Conflict in an Age of Mass Conversion