



THE MUSLIM WORLD

A JOURNAL DEVOTED TO THE STUDY
OF ISLAM AND CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM
RELATIONSHIP IN PAST AND PRESENT

EDITORS

WILLEM A. BIJEFELD, EMERITUS
WADÍ Z. HADDAD
DAVID A. KERR
IBRAHIM ABU-RABÍ

- THE MOTHERS OF THE BELIEVERS IN THE *HADITH*
PAGE 1 BARBARA STOWASSER
- EGYPTIANS IN JERUSALEM: THEIR ROLE IN THE GENERAL ISLAMIC CONFERENCE OF 1931
PAGE 37 RALPH M. COURY
- YOUNG WOMEN MEMBERS OF THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL MOVEMENT IN EGYPT
PAGE 55 KIMBERLY FAUST, JOHN GULICK, SAAD GADALLA, AND HIND KHATTAB
- "DETribALIZING" AND "REtribALIZING" CHURCHES' DOUBLE ROLES AMONG CHRISTIAN
ARABS IN JORDAN—A STUDY IN ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION
PAGE 67 MOHANNA HADDAD
- SATANIC VERSES AND THE DEATH OF GOD: SALMAN RUSHDIE AND NAJÍE MAHFÚZ
PAGE 91 WILLIAM SHEPARD
- IBN RUSHD VERSUS AL-GHAZÁLÍ: RECONSIDERATION OF A POLEMIC
PAGE 113 JOSEF PUIG MONTADA
- MUHAMMAD, MUSLIMS, AND ISLAMOPHILES IN DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*
PAGE 133 SHAWKAT M. TOORAWA
- ANDALUSIA'S CROWNING GLORY—THE MEZQUITA OF CORDOVA
PAGE 145 HABEEB SALLOUM
- DAMASCUS' CROWNING GLORY—THE UmayyAD MOSQUE
PAGE 149 HABEEB SALLOUM
- BOOK REVIEWS NOTES OF THE QUARTER
- SURVEY OF PERIODICALS

Volume
LXXXII
No. 1-2

Published by
The Duncan Black Macdonald Center
at Hartford Seminary

January-
April
1992

MUHAMMAD, MUSLIMS, AND ISLAMOPHILES IN DANTE'S *COMMEDIA* *

Introduction

The task of singling out a certain type of influence on a literary work, or a particular tendency in rhyme, say, structure, or even lexicon, is a difficult and dangerous one. It is difficult, in the case of the *Commedia*, in particular, because it is a large work that may elude the most thorough of researchers. It is dangerous because it seeks to isolate one aspect of a much larger and comprehensive whole, an aspect usually woven into its very fabric. I have, nevertheless, tried to deal with the matter of Muhammad, Muslims, and Islamophiles in the *Commedia*. A great deal of work has been done on the influence of Islam and things Islamic on Dante but that is not my purpose here.¹ J. S. P. Tatlock's "Mohammed and his Followers in Dante," the only article to treat the status of Muslims in Dante, does not, to my mind, satisfactorily address the issue of these personages' presence in the *Commedia*, and neglects the group I have chosen to call Islamophiles.² I shall try to reach a conclusion about the treatment of these characters in the poem, and, consequently, a conclusion about the implications of their inclusion.

Muhammad and 'Ali

The best place to begin is with Muhammad himself, identified as Maometto in Canto Twenty-Eight of *Inferno*. Here, suffering "underneath the sword edge" of the Devil only to have the wounds heal and "meet his blade once more," Muhammad bemoans his own condition.³

* This is the revised version of a paper delivered at The Sixth Biennial New College Conference on Medieval-Renaissance Studies in Sarasota, Florida on March 10th 1988. I would like to thank Professor Edward Peters for his invaluable comments.

1 See Miguel Asín Palacios, *La escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia* (Madrid, 1919) and Enrico Cerulli, "Dante e Islam," *al-Andalus*, XXI (1956), 229-53. See also Richard Southern, "Dante and Islam," *Relations between East and West in the Middle Ages*, ed., Derek Baker (Edinburgh, 1973), especially Works Cited, 133-145.

2 J. S. P. Tatlock, "Mohammed and his Followers in Dante," *Modern Language Review*, XXVII (1932), 186-195.

3 "al taglio de la spada" and "...ch' altri dinanzi li rivada." *The Divine Comedy*, trans. J. G. P. [?], 1909, 100.

... and said: "See how I split myself! See now how maimed Mohammed is!..."

(*Inferno*, XXVIII: 30-1)

He then describes his companions:

And all the others here whom you can see were, when alive, the sowers of dissension and scandal, and for this they are now split.

(*Inferno*, XXVIII: 34-6)

Dante places Muḥammad in the Ninth Pouch of the Eighth Circle with the Sowers of Scandal and Schism. His punishment is repulsive and the language with which he is described — by Dante, the character — grotesque, one of the most graphic anatomical descriptions in the poem:

...ripped right from his chin to where we fart: his bowels hung between his legs, one saw his vitals and the miserable sack that makes of what we swallow excrement.

(*Inferno*, XXVIII: 24-7)

Dante's obvious disgust and dislike for the man, an apostate Christian perhaps, is undisguised. This view of Muḥammad is not uncharacteristic of Dante's time and was shared by many of his contemporaries. Comparing Muḥammad's abode to the most frightful aftermath of battle, Dante has this to say "...were one to show his limbs pierced through/ and one of his limbs hacked off, that would not match/ the hideousness of the ninth abyss" (*Inferno*, XXVIII: 19-21). This is the fate at the appointed hour and, indeed, in the early part of the fourteenth century, of the spiritual leader of a faith that caused Christianity no end of hardship. In Spain, the *taifa* or petty kingdoms still survived, a thorn in the side of the Christian kings; in the Mediterranean, the Muslims controlled all of the North African littoral; and in the East, the Saracens wrested the Holy Land from the True Believers. Economically and politically, Islam had threatened Christianity, and it continued to do so during Dante's time.⁴

By placing Muḥammad in the Ninth Circle, Dante seems to be implying that Muḥammad had been a Christian and had preached a religion that was a schism from the Church. This is not as far-fetched as it first appears. Preposterous notions concerning Muḥammad included accounts that suggested he had been a cardinal and, unable to become Pope, had sought solace in the

⁴ These events catalyzed one of Dante's contemporaries, the energetic Raymond Lull (ca. 1235-1316), into re-evaluating the position of Christianity vis-à-vis Islam.

preaching of a new religion.⁵ This view is rejected as patently unacceptable by the author of the *Ultimo Comento* in 1334 (cited in Tatlock, 188):

... some say, but it is not true, that he was a cardinal...

Many critics on the Islamic side would probably want to impute to Dante a better acquaintance of the circumstances of Muḥammad's prophethood, pretended or otherwise, than that, citing, perhaps, the nature of 'Ali's disfigurement which coincides precisely with the manner of his death. Dante may simply have been relying on Brunetto Latini.

The average Florentine's perception of Islam was fueled by the popular view, exploited in the romances and other works that ill-represented Islam, either because the writers were misinformed or because of bitter hostility in the wake of the Crusades. The representation, however, was "at times... intelligent and comparatively unprejudiced." There is evidence of a more conciliatory attitude in, for instance, the account of the Dominican friar, William of Tripoli, for the Archdeacon of Liège in which he refers to the abundant mention of Christianity in the Qur'an, asserting that those who believe in that book are surely not in great error:

though their beliefs are wrapped up in many lies and decorated with many fictions, yet it now manifestly appears that they are near to the Christian faith and not far from the path of salvation.⁶

Muḥammad is unfavorably portrayed by Dante: this is a given. The question that goes begging, however, is why he is among those punished for *scandalo* and *scisma*. Both these words are possessed of a theological meaning. The latter is the separation from the Church of a group of Christians which stays Christian; it is derived from the Greek *skisma* meaning cleft or division. The former, from *skandalon*, meaning stumbling block or obstacle, has the special meaning of: a) discredited brought upon religion by unseemly conduct in a religious person, and b) conduct that causes or encourages a lapse of faith or

⁵ This appears in the Italian verse versions of Brunetto Latini's *Tesoro*, cited in A. d'Ancona's "La leggenda di Maometto in Occidente," in *Giornale Storico della letteratura italiana*, 13 (1889), 199. For views of Muḥammad in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, including William Langland's belief that Muḥammad was a "Cristeyne man," see Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Arab in Medieval England* (New Haven and London, 1977), especially 197-210. See also E. Schroder's study, *Glaube und Aberglaube in den altfranzösischen Dichtungen* (Erlangen, 1866), and Maria R. Menocal's recent contribution, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (Philadelphia, 1987).

⁶ *Tractatus de Statu Saracenorum*, cap. xlvii, printed in H. Prutz, *Kulturgeschichte der Kreuzzüge* (Berlin, 1883), 595, cited in R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the World of Islam* (Cambridge, 1955), 107.

of religious obedience in another.⁷ To be truly schismatic one must be Christian which Muhammad is not. Two solutions present themselves. The first is that there was nowhere else to put him: he is put here because no other level suited his sin. One may argue that Dante could justify Muhammad anywhere he wanted but scandal and schism seem to have best suited his purpose. Secondly, and perhaps complementarily, that this was the lowest level in which he could put him. As a heretical Christian, he would have been in the Sixth Circle; as a heathen, yet a respectable Muslim, he would have been with Saladin.

Tatlock points out that the Ninth Pouch is as unusual as the nature of the sins punished: "It is not self-evident why these sins are punished in this part of hell (p. 189). He goes on to make the interesting point that this pouch is not named by Virgil in his enumeration of them in Inferno XI:

hypocrisy and flattery, sorcerers, and falsifiers, simony, and theft, and barrators and panders and like trash.

(*Inferno*, XI: 58-60)

Though these sins do not involve willful deceit, they do cause distrust and disunion: this is why, Tatlock contends, Muhammad is there. This is not an unreasonable suggestion. Muhammad has created a global situation wherein people are misled into believing in and loving one other than Jesus Christ, a situation which has led to disharmony and chaos — the Crusades are ample evidence of this.

The wholly unappealingly described Muhammad then mentions 'Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, for whom Dante has more sympathy in his depiction. 'Ali is not described in gruesome terms (and these are "Muhammad's" words):

...And he who walks and weeps before me is Ali, whose face is opened wide from chin to forehead.

(*Inferno*, XXVIII: 32-3)

Some contend that the gash is like the death blow he received at the hands of the Kharjite assassin though this may be imputing to Dante more knowledge of the circumstances of 'Ali's death than he really had. As for his tears, they seem to be a sign of grief not of weakness. Perhaps he is lamenting his unhappy condition; the reason is unclear and not elaborated upon. 'Ali is in

⁷ 'Scandal' and 'schism,' Webster's New International Dictionary, second edition. Some have adduced the breaking away of the Church's chariot by a dragon in Canto XXXII of *Purgatorio* as evidence for the schismatic aspect of Islam and of Muhammad's mission. See George Holmes, *Dante* (New York, 1980), 76. The second meaning of *skandalos* is developed upon considerably by

the company of Muhammad because he is the spiritual leader of the Shi'a. 'Ali is depicted in the Western medieval belief as the Prophet's uncle or superior in some way. Benvenuto de Rambaldis de Imola writes: that

Aly was Macomeito's (paternal) uncle... who instructed him and led him into such error.⁸

Tatlock makes an interesting linguistic observation. He contends that:

Further, 'ali' was a common Italian noun more usual in Dante than the modem 'ale', and of course was accented on the first syllable. But Dante rhymes *Ali* with *qui* and *cosi*. Now *Ali* shows the strong Arabic accent. Dante, therefore, would seem to have gotten the name through an Arabic speaker (Tatlock, p. 195).

The conclusion is a hasty one. Dante's knowledge of the accent does not preclude the knowledge of someone who knew the correct pronunciation, an acquaintance, a scholar, perhaps even a merchant. There was a great deal of communication between the two sides of the Mediterranean on a military, a commercial and an intellectual level.

Brunetto Latini may have been well versed in Islamic history and knowledgeable of some Arabic works.⁹ Also close to Dante was Fra Remigio de' Girolami, a Dominican lector at S. Maria Novella, "magister in sacred theology, renowned preacher, prolific writer of philosophical treatises, and influential citizen. . . one of the leading figures in the Florence of Dante."¹⁰ Fra Remigio apparently knew Riccaldo da Montecroce who had lived for years in Baghdad and who had consequently written a book about this stay. Presumably, Dante would have known Riccaldo through Fra Remigio. Riccaldo is one of the three early translators of the book on the ascent of Muhammad to heaven, an important purported Islamic source of the *Commedia*, the other two being the Jewish physician Abraham Alfaquin and Bonaventura da Sienna.

⁸ Benvenuto de Rambaldis de Imola *comentum super Dentis Alighierii comoediam nunc primum integre in lucem editum* (Florence, 1887), cited in P. Toynbee, *A Dictionary of Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante*, revised by C. S. Singleton (Oxford, 1968), 29.

⁹ Most recently Joseph Bielawski, who suggests Latini had read Rodrigo Jimenez de Toledo's *Historia Arabum*, in 'Ibn 'Arabi: Islam and the Divine Comedy,' paper presented at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 14 March 1985.

¹⁰ 'An Early Florentine Political Theorist: Fra Remigio de' Girolami,' in Charles T. Davis, *Dante's Italy and Other Essays*, (Philadelphia, 1984), 198-223 (198). On Riccaldo, see Ugo Monneret

Islamophiles

The relations between the Islamic world and Christianity may be epitomized by two rulers and their courts: Alfonso X el Sabio (the Wise), King of León and Castile, and Emperor Frederick II. Of the first Dante says only one thing:

There, the debaucheries and the vain show of the Spaniard and the Bohemian who knew nothing of valor, and chose not to know.¹¹

Although some suggest that the *Spagna* is Alfonso (e.g. Tynbee, 28), not all agree; some argue that it is to Ferdinand IV that Dante is referring. In fact, the Bonaventura translation of the *Kitāb al-Mirāj* (*The Book of the Ascent*) was commissioned by Alfonso X. In an uncanny connection:

Brunetto Latini, Dante's teacher, had resided in Castille as ambassador to this very court.¹²

Frederick II is mentioned several times in the *Commedia* and is placed in Circle VI with the Heretics.

He said: "More than a thousand lie with me: the second Frederick is but one among them. . ."

(*Inferno*, X: 118-119)

...Constance,

who by the second blast of Swabia conceived and bore its third and final puissance.

(*Paradiso*, III: 118-120.)

Frederick, grandson of Frederick I Barbarossa, and son of Henry VI and Constance of Sicily, was known to his contemporaries as *stupor mundi*, wonder of the world. He was born in 1194 and was elected King of the Romans in 1196. Two years later, he succeeded his father as King of Sicily and Naples and was elected Emperor in 1212. This was confirmed with his coronation in Rome on 20 November 1220. The Papacy, however, was to become Frederick's enemy: he was repeatedly excommunicated, captured humorously in J. Bryce's *The Holy Roman Empire*. Frederick was formally deposed in 1245 by Innocent IV but remained Emperor until his death in December 1250.

11. Dante Alighieri, *Il Paradiso*, trans., John Ciardi (New York, 1970), XIX, 124-6. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

12. René Gutmann, *Dante Et Son Temps* (Paris, 1977), 114. On Alfonso, see Muñoz Sandino, *La Escala de Mahoma traducción del árabe al castellano*, *león y burgos*, *edición de 1482*.

Dante's view of this Emperor is two-faceted. On the one hand, Dante greatly admired the 'Sicilian' poets, forefathers of his own school, that flourished at the court of Frederick. He affords him great respect and places in him the hopes of the imperial throne, *l'ultima possanza*, the last great emperor. "His admiration depended not only on linguistic but also on political and historical considerations, and was fed by patriotic and imperialistic sentiments" (Davis, 12). Dante makes it quite clear in the *De vulgari eloquentia* that it was, "Italian political and cultural virtue and not Christian righteousness that [he] praised." Frederick was the prime example of a prince who "demonstrated justice and ability of mind," who "disdained to live like a brute."

And, therefore, all those who were noble of heart and endowed with divine gifts strove to gather round such great princes, so that whatever was attempted by the most excellent talents of Italy came to life in their palaces.

On the other hand, though Frederick enjoys such an exalted reputation, he is thrust among the heretics, punished for his epicureanism, for being "jealous and luxurious in his manner."

No doubt his glamor (and Petrus de Vineia's eloquence) had a considerable impact on Dante's imperial ideal, but it gave him no throne in Dante's empyrean.¹³

The condemnation of Frederick's epicureanism does not find root in simply his hedonistic ethics. In my view, it is not the deeming of intellectual pleasures as superior to any other, nor the deeming of imperturbable calm as the highest good with which Dante takes issue but rather Frederick's Islamophilia. Frederick was highly cultured and his court was a hub of intellectual endeavors, one that did indeed gather the 'most excellent talents', but not necessarily in the pursuit of things Italian or things Christian. Beside being home to Pier della Vigna, to whom some attribute the writing of the first sonnet, Frederick's court was home to Michele Scotto, the famous translator, and Leonard of Pisa, and other scholars, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim alike. Both Michael Scot and Pier della Vigna appear in the *Commedia*. Furthermore, Frederick himself was fluent in several languages and showed interest in various fields of knowledge, among them alchemy, philosophy, mathematics, and medicine, all secular and for which he relied heavily on Arabic materials. A lover of Arabic and Islamic culture, he kept his wives "secluded in an oriental

fashion; a harem was maintained at Lucera." (Toynbee and Singleton, 263). Perhaps Frederick's crowning mistake was to set out for the Holy Land in 1228 where, instead of fighting the heathen *Saracini*, he concluded a treaty with the Muslims, creating a suspicion in Church circles that he was putting, in Gutmann's words, "l'islamisme bien au-dessus de la religion chrétienne" (136). Yet despite this seemingly unfavorable sort of conduct, Frederick, in the view of some scholars, is to be remembered as a lawgiver, and a good one:

The code of laws which he gave Sicily in 1231 bears the impress of his personality and has been described as 'the fullest and most adequate body of legislation promulgated by any Western ruler since Charlemagne' (Toynbee and Singleton, 264).

In this revision of the laws, Frederick was aided by Pier della Vigna. Though he is not specifically named in the *Commedia*, Pier della Vigna is easily identified by the account he gives of himself when addressed by Dante:

I am the one who guarded both the keys of Frederick's heart and turned them, locking and unlocking them with such dexterity that none but I could share his confidence;

(*Inferno*, XIII: 58-61)

Pier was born around 1190 and studied at Bologna. He was recommended by the Archbishop of Palermo to Frederick whose court he entered about the year 1200, where he rose to judge in 1225, and later to Chancellor of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The intimacy of which he speaks in the *Commedia* was destroyed when the tables turned against him and he was thrown into prison by Frederick and blinded. The reason for this turn-around is not known but Dante has Pier citing the envy of the other people in the court:

The whore who never turned her harlot's eyes away from Caesar's dwelling, she who is the death of all and vice of every court, inflamed the minds of everyone against me; and those inflamed, then so inflamed Augustus that my delighted honors turned to sadness.

(*Inferno*, XIII: 64-9)

Pier committed suicide in 1249 rather than suffer disgrace. It is for this sin that he is placed in *Inferno* despite the respect Dante must have had for this man who was instrumental in the rise of Italian letters, the intimate associate of a great emperor, and even, at one stage, an emissary to the Pope. To argue that Dante holds contempt for him because of his association with an Islamicized court is facile and would be, if true, difficult to prove. This is not evident; he is a character with whom Dante

treated, his story is a tragic one and we are made to feel for this character who suffers the indignity of anonymity and of being without a body. Having heard the story of his downfall we are made to understand his plight and to sympathize along with Dante, the character. So, if anything, it is the image of Frederick's court that suffers and not Pier. Pier himself eulogizes Frederick: in his eyes, it was those around him that were to blame. Unlike the other Islamophiles, Pier's punishment is not hideous but pitiful and lamentable. Dante could easily have put him elsewhere had he so wished. Were he to abide by the original accusations he would have put Pier in Pouch Eight of Circle Eight with the Fraudulent Counselors. He does not and spares him the lower depths, the areas populated by the real Islamophiles.

Michele Scotto, court astrologer to Frederick, is punished in Dante's schema for being a magician and soothsayer, "the wondrous Michael Scott; A wizard of such dreaded fame..." says Sir Walter Scott (Toynbee and Singleton, 446). He was apparently very educated having studied at Paris, Oxford and Bologna, was well-versed in several languages, most notably Arabic, and had a passion for judicial astrology, alchemy, physiognomy, and chiromancy. He also seems to have been well-liked by his contemporaries and chroniclers. Boccaccio calls him "un gran maestro in nigromantia" and Villani terms him "il grande filosofo maestro Michele Scotto" (Singleton and Toynbee, p. 465). To Pope Honorius III, he was material for an archbishopric and Pope Gregory IX called him "carus filium nostre" (Singleton and Toynbee, p. 465). Before 1220, he had translated several of Aristotle's works from Arabic into Latin including *De Anima* and *De Caelo*; he began translating Averröes' commentary on Aristotle at Toledo where he also completed his translation of al-Bitruji's (Alpetragius) *Kitāb al-hay'āt*. Genuinely interested in philosophy, he not only introduced a lot of Aristotle to the Latins through his translations but himself wrote a commentary on him.

It comes as a surprise to find a belle-lettrist and philosopher of such caliber in the depths of *Inferno*, especially one whose part in the intellectual history of Italy was so great. Condemned to Pouch Four, Circle Eight for being a magician, Scot is a mere four pouches from Muhammad and a far cry from Averröes and Avicenna. It would seem, as in the case of Muhammad and 'Alī, that Frederick and Michael Scot, two passionately Islamically acculturated individuals, are in the bowels of Hell. And just like Muhammad and 'Alī, I would venture to argue, punished at the lowest (i.e. worst) possible level. With evidence of certain practices—astrology for instance, which involves an element of magic, divining and foretelling—Dante is able to punish Scot at that level. More serious sins would have been hard to substantiate, less serious ones not commensurate to the type of man, an avowed Islamophile, one, perhaps, who

to understand that the virtues exhibited by Saladin are those he wishes in Christian rulers. If Saladin were Christian, and, therefore, blessed in baptism, he would have been saved, Dante seems to be saying. Conflicts with Saladin was a good man with emulable ruler's virtues, the likes of whom: an example for the Christian world's emperors and popes.

Inclusion

Whereas most studies dealing with Islamic culture in Dante's *Commedia* are concerned with influences on the poet's works, my object has been simply to look at the portrayal of Muslims and Islamophiles. The treatment of the prophet and his cousin is negative, but that of Avicenna, Averröes, and Saladin is not. Muḥammad and 'Alī are punished for being the instigators of this anti-Islam, that wrested the Holy Lands from the Christians, that leads others into sin. If Islam is indeed so full of Christianity and yet does not preach salvation through Jesus Christ, then perhaps it is a deflection of sorts from the Church. Perhaps the dragon that breaks away the floor of the chariot in the procession in *Purgatorio* is Muḥammad himself. Muḥammad's followers are not in a bad way—they are saved by their virtue. It is those Christians who choose to associate themselves with Islam and its culture that suffer the real torments of Hell: they should know better, much better. Here perhaps is the crux of the argument. Christians are baptized and blessed with the true faith but are put to shame by the unbaptized Muslims whose only punishable sin is that they have not been baptized.

The set-up is unusual but it is all to a pedagogic end. Dante addresses the Christians enjoining them to be Good, to shun Evil, and to remain on the true path, not that of Muḥammad and 'Alī. Ironically, the other Muslims mentioned are given the relative sanctuary of *Limbo*. Dante is holding these Muslims, unbaptized and un-Christian, engaged in licit pursuits, as the models for his Christian audience, not Scot and Frederick who dabbled in false sciences, and forsook Christianity for things Islamic. Their fate can surely only be eternal damnation.

We shall never be certain of Dante's view of Muslims. Putting Frederick II, Michael Scot and Pier della Vigna deep in Hell while putting Averröes, Avicenna and Saladin in Limbo is puzzling and fascinating. The Muslims are at the highest/mildest level in *Inferno*, the Islamophiles deep within it. If Dante truly means the Muslims to be an example to the innocent Christians, then his case is an eloquent one.

virtuous he would