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

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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.  

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.  

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 *Interno*. 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:

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3 "al taglio de la spada" and "...altri d'innanz' il ricordo..." *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*.
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... and said: "See how I split myself! See now how maligned Mohammed is!..."

(Inf. 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.

(Inf. XXVIII: 34-6)

Dante places Muhammad in the Ninth Pouch of the Eighth Circle with the Sowers of Scandal and Schism. His punishment is repulsive and the language 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.

(Inf. XXVIII: 24-7)

Dante's obvious disgust and dislike for the man, an apostate Christian perhaps, is undisguised. This view of Muhammad is not uncharacteristic of Dante's time and was shared by many of his contemporaries. Comparing Muhammad'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" (Inf. 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 *jawāfī* 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. 6

By placing Muhammad in the Ninth Circle, Dante seems to be implying that Muhammad 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 Muhammad included accounts that suggested he had been a cardinal and, unable to become Pope, had sought solace in the preaching of a new religion. 5 This view is rejected as patently unacceptable by the author of the *Ottimo Cimento* 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 Muhammad's prophethood, pretended or otherwise, than that, citing, perhaps, the nature of 'All'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

Muhammad 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 *scisione*. 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) discrediting brought upon religion by unseemly conduct in a religious person, and b) conduct that causes or encourages a lapse of faith or

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of religious obedience in another. To be truly schismatic one must be Christian which Muḥammad 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 Muḥammad 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.

(Inf. XI: 58-60)

Though these sins do not involve willful deceit, they do cause distrust and disunion: this is why, Tatlock contends, Muḥammad is there. This is not an unreasonable suggestion. Muḥammad 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 Muḥammad 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 'Muḥammad's' words):

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

(Inf. XXVIII: 32-3)

Some contend that the gash is like the death blow he received at the hands of the Kharijite 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 the company of Muḥammad because he is the spiritual leader of the Shī'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:

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

Tatlock makes an interesting linguistic observation. He contends that:

Further, 'oli' was a common Italian noun more usual in Dante than the modern 'ale', and of course was accentuated on the first syllable. But Dante rhymes Ali with quil and così Now Ali's 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 Ghilomari, a Dominican lecturer at S. Maria Novella, "magister in sacred theology, renowned preacher, prolific writer of philosophical treatises, and influential citizen... of the leading figures in the Florence of Dante."10 Fra Remigio apparently knew Riccaldo da Montecorso 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 asent of Muḥammad to heaven, an important purported Islamic source of the Commedia, the other two being the Jewish physician Abraham Alfaquin and Bonaventura da Siena.

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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 Léon 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 Spaniard is Alfonso (e.g. Toynbee, 28), not all agree; some argue that it is to Ferdinand IV that Dante is referring. In fact, the Bonaventura translation of the Kitáb al-Miráj (The Book of the Ascent) was commissioned by Alfonso X. In an uncanny connection:

Brunetto Latini, Dante’s teacher, had resided in Castile 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.

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 Saraceni, 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;

(Inferso, 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.

(Inferso, 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 sympathizes. Pier 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 Animae and De Coelo; he began translating Averroës' commentary on Aristotle at Toledo where he also completed his translation of al-Bitruji's (Alpetragius) Kitab al-hay'at. 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 belletrist 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 Averroës 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 places Islam above Christianity.
to understand that the virtues exhibited by Saladin are those he wishes a Christian rulers. If Saladin were Christian, and, therefore, blessed baptism, he would have been saved. Dante seems to be saying. Conflicts Saladin was a good man with emuleable ruler’s virtues, the likes of on: an example for the Christian world’s emperors and popes.

Conclusion

Whereas most studies dealing with Islamic culture in Dante’s Commedia concerned with influences on the poet’s works, my object has been simply look at the portrayal of Muslims and Islamophiles. The treatment of the prophet and his cousin is negative, but that of Avicenna, Averroes, and Saladin is not. Muhammad and ‘Ali are punished for being the instigators of this anti-faith, 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 defection of sorts from the Church. Perhaps the dragon that breaks away the floor of the chariot in the procession in Purgatorio is Muhammad himself. Muhammad’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 Muhammad and ‘Ali. 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 Averroes, 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 incontinent Christians, then his case is an eloquent one.