

# **An Intercultural Crossroad Between Christians and Muslims in Thirteenth Century Italy: Reflections on Dante's Divine Comedy**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate and analyze some exemplary passages in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which suggest the intercultural exchange of ideas and perspectives between the Islamic and Christian world. [Thirteenth-century Italy](#) functioned as an exceptional major "crossroad" between the Islamic world and Western Europe, a place, where the vital exchange of ideas, thoughts and insights provided the stimulus for a flourishing culture.<sup>1</sup> Independent city republics, like Florence, Siena, or Venice were centers of prosperous trade, enormously profiting from a vigorous exchange of goods between the Arabic world and Western Europe. Along with the merchants and their commodities, beliefs, ideas, and philosophical works spread and began to initiate a new era of thinking all over Europe. For the first time, places for intellectual learning, called universities were founded. These institutions, which largely consisted of "foreign" students, served a growing demand for literary training, legal knowledge, and medicine among the municipal entities of Italy, and they provided a favorable environment for intellectual exchange. Via such intercultural cross-roads, scholars should encounter most significant philosophical works. Among these were the long lost *Logic* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle, works that should provide an initial foundation for a new era of philosophical thought. Without this foundation, scholars like Edward Grant point out, the Enlightenment, would most likely have not taken place.<sup>2</sup>

Here, I will provide an example of intellectual crosscurrents between the Islamic and Christian context in the work of one of the famous medieval poets, Dante Alighieri;

crosscurrents that would not have occurred if it were not for the vibrant intercultural exchange between Muslims and Christians in places such as Italy. [Dante's Divine Comedy](#), an imaginary world of visions of hell, purgatory and heaven, is the creation of a highly educated individual, dedicated to lifelong studies, and a person who also was well versed in philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Dante's visionary spaces, populated with famous illustrious people as well as mythical figures, offer most fascinating insights into medieval thirteenth century Italy, while at the same time providing a mirror, which reflects the junction of Judeo-Christian, and Islamic beliefs as well as Greco-Roman philosophical traditions as a most productive path towards new ideas resonating throughout the European continent.

### **Dante's Moral Topography**

As has been argued by numerous scholars, ethics, specifically the question of justice, provides a unifying conceptual frame for the grandiose poetic design throughout the *Divine Comedy*. The visionary design of different spaces of hell, purgatory and heaven functions as a moral topography.<sup>4</sup> This means, moral action is conveyed in the spatial design of the perturbing visions of hell, the purifying experience of purgatory as well as the ultimate reward visualized in the heavenly circles.

The following lines mark the inscription above the gate, which Virgil and the pilgrim pass to enter hell, a space of immeasurable suffering and pain for those whose lives have not been judged worthy.

Through me the way into the doleful city,  
Through me the way into eternal pain,  
Through me the way among a race forsaken.

Divine Omnipotence created me,  
And highest wisdom joined with primal love.

Before me nothing but eternal things  
Were made, and I shall last eternally.  
Abandon all your hope who enter here.  
(*Inferno* III, 1-9)<sup>5</sup>

Canto after canto, new dimensions of agony and torment are vividly evoked before the reader. Whether flies and hornets eternally annoy the cowardly who never settled for choices in life, or the river of boiling blood passes before the eyes of the visitors or the souls are frozen in the lake of ice, named cocytus, the poem colorfully conveys the torments of the race of the forsaken. Justice rules the realm of afterlife. With these visions of hell, Dante has created a remarkable moral landscape; a space that delineates good and evil, worthy and unworthy, mediocre, superb, and abysmal. It is a topography in which historical as well as living figures are judged according to their deeds. A supreme order emerges in the poetic visualizations, an order that reveals not only the afterlife, but also structures the medieval world altogether.

### **Moral Topography as Divine Comedy**

The imagery thus provides an intricate device, not only engaging the readers into marvelous, often unforeseen imagery, but it also allows the poet to freely express his own judgment over the world and its inhabitants. Dante does not hesitate to call divine wrath upon his fiercest enemies. Nor does he shy away from a colorful portrayal of the eternal justice looming over the political landscape of thirteenth century Italy. Just for a very short moment, imagine the freedom that most people possibly might feel writing such a work as the *Divine Comedy*. Not only are they able to inflict horrific torments on their worst lifelong enemies, but they also may nobly reward their friends and those they regard highly with the utmost gift of eternal bliss! Of course, Dante calls his work a

comedy. Nonetheless, the comedy carries serious overtones of the ultimate authority of the Divine Judge who determines the political landscape of thirteenth century Italy.

### **Crosscurrent of Intellectual Thought**

To write a comedy certainly offers a jester's license. It dramatically expands the horizon of what the poet is able to say and communicate, in particular for someone who is living in a medieval world where the rival to banish the all too outspoken from their place of living or the stake to be burnt was never far. Considering his incredibly audacious visions of hell, purgatory and heaven which judges and rewards the living as well as the dead in this world, it seems to me that it is rather surprising that Dante, shortly after his death already is celebrated as the great poet.<sup>6</sup>

Overall, certainly the *Divine Comedy* is a genuine Christian epic, written during the Middle Ages. Therefore, it should not come as a great surprise that the key Islamic leaders Muhammad, the last prophet and founder of Islam and Ali, the first of Muhammad's followers, inhabit hell. As adversaries to the Christian faith, they are considered to be schismatics who bear responsibility for discord and dissension between Jews, Christians, and Muslims and therefore, suffer their just punishment. [Mohammed](#) vividly explains his own punishment to the pilgrim as follows:<sup>7</sup>

“You see how I am split!  
See how Mahomet is deformed and torn!  
In front of me, and weeping, Ali walks,  
his face cleft from his chin up to his crown.

The souls that you see passing in this ditch  
they all were sowers of scandal and of schism,  
and so in death you see them torn asunder.

A devil stand back there who trims us all  
in his cruel way, and each one of this mob

receives anew the sword blade of the devil

each time we make one round of this sad road,  
because the wounds have all healed up again  
by the time each one present himself once more.”  
(*Inferno* XXVIII, 31-42)

Discord between Christians and Muslims was of course central to the medieval mind, especially during a time that had seen the crusades. The medieval miniature highlights the painful state in hell, being torn apart in an endless continuation. This is the punishment for the friction among believers in the monotheistic God thought to be caused by Mohammed and Ali. Powerfully, the blood visualizes the justice for those who stir up schisms that in the end provoke bloody conflict on the battlefields. Their punishment, resulting from their betrayal to the righteous, forces them to take upon themselves the suffering they inflicted upon others. Canto VIII also eloquently evokes the strong condemnation of the non-Christian Islamic environment. Here, the pilgrim and Vergil enter the lower hell and see the City of Dis, with [mosques engulfed in red flames](#).<sup>8</sup> Surely, the visualization of punishment for Islamic leaders and the burning mosques offer a traditional condemnation of Islam, which was especially feared for its military expansion common in medieval Europe.

Considering this historical context, it comes as a surprise that other prominent Muslim figures are not at all given a similarly cruel condemnation. In the first circle of hell, Virgil and the pilgrim enter a place known as Limbo. Here, according to theological interpretation, only children reside who were not baptized, but did not sin. They are spared any pain, however, their desire to come face to face with God will never be fulfilled. Dante, in a very unconventional manner, populates this place with illustrious names from the non-Christian world. Limbo is a place, where pagan philosophers,

warriors and poets are located in a splendid, moat defended, seven-walled castle, surrounded by a lovely stream. It houses Greco-Roman philosophers like Socrates, Aristotle, (Inferno IV, 131), Plato, moralists like Cicero and Seneca, the famous physicians Hippocrates, and Galen. Yet a particular surprise is to find the Islamic philosopher and medical doctor Avicienna (980-1037 C.E.), Saladin, the Sultan of Egypt (1138-1193) who waged war against the Crusaders and the Islamic philosopher Averroës (1126-1198 C.E.), renowned for his commentary on Aristotle. Here, the condemnation against non-Christians and Muslims is surprisingly mute considering their failure to follow the Christian belief. Islamic figures like Avicienna, Saladin, and Averroës are given a very moderate judgment in Limbo a place that is far removed from the great agonies lurking in the deeper realms of hell. No lamentations fill the air; sadness without torments accompanies the shades of those who dwell here (Inferno IV, 29-30). Honored is the knowledge, wisdom and virtue of their lives. Thus, they inhabit the noble castle, a place more closely resembling the “Ellysian Fields” of peace than hell.<sup>9</sup> The reader all too easily forgets that this place is located in the first circle of hell.

The poet, who on first sight delivers a meticulous, carefully designed Christian moral topography, nevertheless obscures dogmatic religious lines in his epic of moral placements in hell, purgatory and heaven.<sup>10</sup> As a matter of fact, Dante explores new horizons of thoughts and ideas in his un-dogmatic judgments, not bound to traditional theological teachings. Limbo, with its famous figures who have never entered Christendom, provides an intricate example of Dante’s freedom to blur the distinct categorizations of his moral Christian worldview, in particular considering the fact that this interpretation of Limbo has no theological precedents.<sup>11</sup> It certainly should come as a surprise to the reader to find the Greco-Roman guild of honor, but even more

importantly Saladin and the Muslim philosophers Avicenna and Averroës spared the brutal torments Muhammed and Ali have to endure. What motivates Dante to evoke tormenting condemnation for the religious leaders Muhammad and Ali while sparing Islamic philosophers utmost misery in the afterlife in a time when Crusader polemic motivated large numbers of Christians? Why are most highly respected and influential individuals, like Saladin, Avicenna and Averroës not reckoned among heretics, although they surely submitted their lives to the Islamic belief? The paradox posed in Dante's moral topography refers to a vexing problem, which I will not solve here in the limited context of this paper. Yet I will outline some crosscurrents of thoughts that Dante was exposed to in Italy, crosscurrents that contributed to the poet's ability to exhibit a visionary comedy of the medieval world and its inhabitants.

### **Aristotelian Virtue Ethic**

We should pause for a moment, reflecting upon the audacity of Dante's poetic vision, the stunning journey that determines the fate of many famous, living or dead, decisively. To see beyond the boundaries of death, to envision the future destiny of not only those who have died, but also some of the living, certainly is, as Giuseppe Mazzotta points out: "nothing less than the divination of man's history and deepest longings."<sup>12</sup> Dante takes on an authoritative interpretation of the world and the moral performance of its inhabitants, of course, according to him in a divine comedy!

The poet's moral topography is by no means accidental. Throughout the whole work, it is purposefully constructed, a dramatic structure which reflects the dynamic cultural interchange between different competing worldviews distinctive of thirteenth century Italy. As a matter of fact, this poetic vision mirrors a cultural exchange

characterized by the acceptance and fascination with new philosophical concepts, which entered the European continent through the work of Islamic philosophers like Averroës and Avicenna.

A striking example, how the cross-cultural dialogue initiates new concepts and ideas clearly resonates in the overall composition of Dante's *Inferno*, which explicitly follows Aristotle's ethics. In Canto XI, the *Nicomachean Ethics* of the philosopher is specifically brought to mind in Vergil's explanation of the moral organization according to which the *Inferno* is structured:

Have you forgotten how your *Ethics* reads,  
those terms it explicates in such detail:  
the three conditions that the heavens hate,  
incontinence, malice, bestiality?

Aristotelian categories organize the different [circles of hell](#), which are represented here in the image by Paganino and Alessandro Paganini.<sup>13</sup> The location and punishment in hell are judged according to the ways human beings performed in life, whether these were virtuous or non-virtuous actions. The path of the poet and pilgrim leads them from Limbo and the outer circles of hell deeper towards the center of the icy lake cocytus. The upper hell houses those who were not able to control their appetites, among these murderers, malicious beings and violent men. Persons who are consciously violating the specific faculty of human reason inhabit the second realm. Here, Muhammad and Ali, the heretics are found among hypocrites, dealers in sorcery, and many more who did not use their reasoning skills to follow righteous actions. Such a distinction closely corresponds with the Aristotelian concept of intellectual and moral virtues. Not only are the circles of the *Inferno* organized according to Aristotelian categories, but the question of what is considered virtuous and the idea that the use of reason allows for knowledge of what is

considered righteous takes on centre stage via the poetic image of the diverse circles of hell.

The bizarre world of afterlife that creates an ordering principle not only for the deceased, but also the living, surely introduces the readers to an enterprise that is as astounding as it is audacious. This is the reason, why moral action is judged in the diverse hell realms, in direct relation to moral action. In other words, the inhabitants of hell inflict their own punishment upon themselves.<sup>14</sup> Following Aristotle, Dante uses the imagery of physical and psychological punishment in the hellish circles to graphically underscore the significance of the human character with regard to morality. Aristotle's ethics of course is a virtue theory argued for as if there were no God, a concept that find's its resonance in Dante's audacious vision of the *Inferno*. In other words, not the disobedience to the God given law, as emphasized in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, but the fact that most of the inhabitants have failed miserably to be virtuous beings, accounts for their places in hell. Therefore, their punishments often are a direct consequence of their deeds. Let us look again at Mohammed's and Ali's penalty. They, who are believed to have caused the rupture between Christians and Muslims, have to physically suffer the pain of being torn apart. Their punishment fits their actions and therefore, is the source for their self inflicted misery in hell.

What we find in the *Divine Comedy* is a change in perspective with regard to the Divine Law, which is no longer the only aspect to determine moral behavior. The poet utilizes Aristotle's autonomous theory of ethics determining the afterlife of the dead and living, creating the perplexing world of the *Inferno*. This, of course does not mean that Dante's moral topography leaves behind the Divine Law, yet the perspective how to evaluate human behavior, has changed dramatically. In the *Inferno*, the catalogue of

Divine order no longer takes center stage alone, but is placed in correlation with the ability to use reason to find out what is the right action.

### **Poetic Freedom**

Dante would not have been able to think in such manner and create his poetic comedy if it were not for the outstanding translations and commentaries on Aristotle by philosophers like Averroës. Dante praises him as the one “who made the Commentary” (*Inferno* IV, 144), a supreme recognition of his reputation as the acclaimed translator and commentator on Aristotle. If it had not been for the laborious translations and commentaries of the Islamic philosophers, the opus of Aristotle, whose works had been largely unknown in Europe before, would not have entered the academic circles. Yet it is the knowledge of Aristotelian logic, science, ethics, and metaphysics that initiates a radically new way of philosophical reasoning and begins to transform European ideas, and society.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of Aristotelian ethic, Limbo, as a place that houses illustrious persons, takes on a most important function and it becomes clear why Dante populates this place with many illustrious figures. Because they are acknowledged for their virtuous character and their ability to use reason, the life of the Islamic philosophers Avicenna and Averroës and Saladin, the famous Islamic leader, is judged as morally worthy. Faith and divine revelation, while most significant, are not the single resolve to determine the afterlife. Instead, as the philosopher claims, human action is guided by the “soul’s faculties in accordance with excellence of virtue.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the virtuous, among them Saladin and the philosophers Avicenna and Averroës, are spared utmost suffering in hell.

The fact that the divine rule is not the only criterion for judgment in the *Inferno* marks a rather significant change in the overall design of the work. Without it, I argue, the *Divine Comedy* could not have taken its form as we find it today because the poet would not have had the freedom to envision the hellish realms as a comedy of the world and in particular the living and dead known to medieval Italy in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Dante in an audacious manner exploits poetic freedom with regard to moral judgment in the *Inferno*. In a medieval world, where criticism was often the first step into condemnation, Dante does not hesitate to picture those he did not consider virtuous in hell, a most meticulous criticism, considering that some were among the living when Dante wrote his work! So, for example, his enemy, [Pope Boniface VIII](#) who appears to the pilgrim, as if suffering, his soles burning, caught in the holes of the third bolgia.<sup>17</sup> Dante trusts reason as guidance for his design of the *Inferno* and it seems, most of his readers readily accepted his vision early on, or else the body of the then famous poet could not have become the center of a struggle between the cities of Florence and Ravenna soon after his death.

Yet Dante would most likely have never become the great Italian poet if he had not lived at a time and place that allowed for the creative exchange of ideas between Christians, Jews and Muslims. Moreover, if there had not existed, at least to a considerable degree, a willingness to listen, to understand and learn from each other, Islamic scholars like Avicenna and Averroës would not have left a lasting mark on Dante's work and the moral topography in the *Inferno* would most likely have taken on a different shape. Thirteenth century Italy served as a crossroad where Islamic and Christian thought met. It became a fertile ground for the application of Aristotelian logic and ethics throughout the disciplines of science, philosophy and theology, not only for

Dante's work, but for centuries to come. Clearly, the struggle between the newly arriving philosophy and traditional theology was not an easy struggle. Yet the poet Dante provides an example of someone who was able to exploit new horizons of thinking gained on the path of intercultural cross-roads.

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Halsall. ORB sources editor. *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*. Fordham University Center for Medieval Studies. 05/22/03 <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/maps/12citaly.jpg> >

<sup>2</sup> Edward Grant. *God and Reason in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001. Grant in particular investigates the domain of university scholasticism with its extraordinary emphasis on reason as an era, which plays a pivotal role for the revolutionary thoughts that are developed during the so-called Age of Reason throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century in Western Society pp. 7-10.

<sup>3</sup> MS. Holkham misc. 48 Dante. *Divine Comedy*. Italy, Genoa(?); 14th cent., third quarter p. 1 (detail, top left) Inferno, Canto I. Initial N[el]. Portrait of Dante. 01/04/03.  
<<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/medieval/jpegs/holkham/misc/48/500/04800374.jpg>>

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Guisepppe Mazzotta. *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. 75.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Dante's *Divine Comedy* are taken from; *Dante Allighieri's Divine Comedy*. Trans. Mark Musa. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Even humans, still living during the thirteenth century, are already placed in hell. Among these is Pope Boniface VIII, who is already visualized by the pilgrim among those being caught in holes of the third *bolgia*, flames relentlessly burning his soles (Inferno, XIX, 46-54). As other churchmen who did not find Dante's approval, Boniface VII is punished for his shameless exploitation of papal powers, privileges and money. Surely only the poet has the power to castigate the pope with an eternal penalty that mirrors the medieval penalty for assassins who were buried alive, upside down.

<sup>7</sup> MS. Holkham misc. 48. Dante. *Divine Comedy*. North Italy, Genoa(?); 14th cent., third quarter p. 42 (detail) Inferno, Canto XXVIII. Dante and Virgil with Mohamed; a devil threatening the sowers of discord. 01/04/03.  
<<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/medieval/jpegs/holkham/misc/48/500/04800419.jpg>>

<sup>8</sup> MS. Holkham misc. 48. Dante. *Divine Comedy*. North Italy, Genoa(?); 14th cent., third quarter p. 11 (detail) Inferno, Canto VIII. The wrathful and the sullen in Styx; Dante and Virgil before the tower with two lights; the tower of Dis with one light. 01/04/03. Oxford: Bodleian Library.  
<<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/medieval/jpegs/holkham/misc/48/500/04800385.jpg>>

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<sup>9</sup> Manolini Psatore Stocchi calls limbo a “melancholy Elysium.” In: *Lectura Dantis: Inferno*. Eds. Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcorn, Charles Ross (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1998. p. 50 et. al.

<sup>10</sup> Teodolina Bartolini points out: Dante “confronts us with absolute truth, while simultaneously rehearsing all the differentiating factors that apparently conflict with those truths.” *The Undivine Comedy*. Princeton: Princeton University, 1992. p.33.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Guiseppe Mazzotta. 14.

<sup>13</sup> [1527/33], [Toscolano]: Paganino and Alessandro Paganini. *Renaissance Dante in Print*. Theodore Cachey and Louis Jordan. Renaissance Dante in Print. University of Notre Dame. 01/17/03  
<[http://www.italnet.nd.edu/Dante/images/tp1527/1527\\_33.wc1.150dpi.jpeg](http://www.italnet.nd.edu/Dante/images/tp1527/1527_33.wc1.150dpi.jpeg)>.

<sup>14</sup> See Mazzotti 76 ff.

<sup>15</sup> In Purg. 25.62-66, Dante rejects the philosophical proposition of the possible separation of the intellect from the soul, which was believed to have originated from Averroës’ works. Yet even in a passage in which Dante vehemently disagrees with this theory, he does not refrain from praising the wisdom of the philosopher, Averroës. In the Islamic world however, Averroës marks the end of a long tradition of innovative philosophical thinking and provocative thought patterns.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, vii.15. Trans. H. Rackham. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> MS. Holkham misc. 48. Dante. North Italy, Genoa(?); 14th cent., third quarter p. 28 (detail). *Inferno*, Canto XIX. Virgil stands beside Dante, who listens to Nicholas III among the simonists. 01/04/03. Oxford: Bodleian Library.  
<<http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/medieval/jpegs/holkham/misc/48/500/04800403.jpg>>

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