Aspects of Orientalism in Dante

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2015

Abstract

Dante Alighieri’s references to the Islamic world are analyzed in order to determine how he perceived the Muslim Other through his medieval Christian lens, and how this shaped both his religious conception of salvation, as well as his political dream for a universal monarchy. Edward Said’s Orientalism acts as a foundational theory guiding this study, in conjunction with Hans-Robert Jauss’ Reception Theory, serving to determine how Dante’s perception of the Islamic world was shaped through the subjective study of the Orient which preceded him, as well as his own politically and religiously divided milieu. While Dante’s depictions of the Islamic prophets, Mohammad and Ali, give the initial impression that the poet was vehemently anti-Islam, the analysis of his other references to the Muslims and later, to other non-Christians, reveal that his views on the Other are far more complex and not necessarily negative. Although Dante does denigrate those individuals whose actions initiated schism, the poet’s condemnation is not limited by religious or political ascriptions, nor does he condemn those who followed the teachings of schismatic leaders, marking him as a unique figure amongst many of his contemporaries. Dante’s views on the Crusades and the conflict between Church and State are also highlighted for the significant impact that these aspects had on Dante’s desire for a universal monarchy. Through his inclusion of many references – both subtle and overt – primarily to the Islamic world, while also to the Jews and other non-Christians, Dante raises complex questions
about the possibility of salvation beyond Christianity and religious supersessionism, applying these questions to his political vision of a stable and united universal monarchy and the threat that otherness poses to this ideal.
Acknowledgments

The research and writing of this thesis was a long and, at times, arduous process which would not have been possible without the endless support and encouragement from those who propelled me forward.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my doctoral supervisor, Domenico Pietropaolo, for his receptiveness to my ideas, his thought-provoking input, and his overall guidance throughout the years.

I may have given up long ago without the steadfast support of my five dearest friends. I thank them for believing that I could make it out of the selva oscura successfully.

To my husband, Nickolaos, whose willingness to listen, supportive gestures and words, and overall love were what brought me to the finish line. Thank you for cheering me on.

And finally, to my parents, Karim and Giuseppina, who introduced me to the concept of religious pluralism and to the interconnectedness between Christianity and Islam through their own union, I thank them for always answering my questions and encouraging my curiosity about faith, justice, and morality.
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Preface

The concept of the Other, especially in religious terms, is an inevitable part of our modern discourse as the inherent human need for self-definition through contrast continues to shape our perception of those we deem different from ourselves. As a centuries-old preoccupation, this inherited notion of otherness reached particular prominence during the Middle Ages, as Christendom attempted to reaffirm its supremacy over the overwhelming threat of Islam. Amidst the general casting of the Orient as a place steeped in sin, Dante Alighieri’s references to the Muslims and other non-Christians highlight him as a unique figure amongst his contemporaries, willing to raise questions on religious supremacy and the possibility of salvation beyond Christian confines.

The original interest in and study of aspects of Islam in Dante’s *Commedia* was largely generated through the work of Miguel Asin Palacios in his controversial book *La Escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia* published in 1919,¹ wherein he sought to prove that Dante drew from Islamic sources in his design of the cosmology of the *Commedia*. While the focus of my thesis does not directly coincide with that of Asin Palacios, the propelling force of it does, in that my aim is to shed light on how what Dante knew about Islam formed his perception of the Islamic Other, and how these perceptions distinguish Dante as a unique figure of his time. Moreover, Palacios’ theory that Dante significantly drew from and was inspired by Islamic sources led him to consider the probability that Dante was not a rejector of Muslim culture – a consideration from which I launch my analysis of Dante and his perception of Islam.

¹ Asin Palacios’ book was translated into English by Harold Sutherland with the title *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, published in 1926, and republished in 2008.
In the few years both before and after the second publication of Asin Palacios’ text, significant interest in Dante and Islam began to reemerge amongst scholars, including Gregory B. Stone, Brenda Deen Schildgen, Suzanne Conklin Akbari, and Heather Coffey amongst others;² this renewed interest demonstrates that this is not an exotic or remote subject, but rather a very current and relevant one. The recent republication of the English translation of Asin Palacios’ book is representative of the current intellectual climate acknowledging Islamic influences on Dante, and on a broader level, the debate over what these aspects of Orientalism in Dante reveal about the poet’s sentiments towards the non-Christian Other. The rerelease of Asin Palacios’ work is more that just a cause, but rather an indication that the subject of Dante and Islam needs to be revisited.

The first chapter, “Medieval Orientalism: Theory and Method”, introduces the theoretical framework of this thesis. Edward Said’s Orientalism, a term which he redefined as a subjective study of the Orient, acts as the primary theory guiding the research, serving to shed light on how Christian perceptions of Islam fluctuated throughout the Middle Ages. Although it is indisputable that the Orientalist discourse which preceded Dante shaped his perception of Islam, Dante’s references to the Muslims and other non-Christians indicates that his perceptions of the religious Other are not simply negative. Hans Robert Jauss’ Reception Theory acts as a secondary theory in this thesis, serving to guide the analysis of how the anti-Islamic literature

² Heather Coffey points to several other sources as evidence of the renewed interest in the influence of Islam on Dante over the past decade. In addition to several of the recent sources that I cite throughout this thesis, Coffey also includes Jan M. Ziolkowski’s 2007 article, “Dante and Islam” and Giovanni Curatola 2010 book, Dante e l’Islam: Incontri di civilità, the latter of which is the catalog of an exhibition held at the Biblioteca di via Senato in Milan from November 4 to March 27, 2011 (Coffey 37). I should also note that one month before completing this thesis, Ziolkowski edited a book of the same name, Dante and Islam (2014), featuring a collection of articles on the subject, by scholars whose work I had already included in my research, such as Maria Corti, José Martínez Gásquez, Brenda Deen Schildgen, Gregory B. Stone, Daniela Boccasini, Maria Esposito Frank, Karla Mallette, Giorgio Battistoni and David Abulafia.
which preceded Dante, paired with the historical context of political and religious division of which he was a product, contributed to his horizon of expectations.

Chapter two, “Dante’s Perception of Islam”, begins by establishing what Dante knew about the Islamic world through a consideration of those texts – either of Arabic origin or by Christian writers of anti-Islamic polemics – that the poet may have had direct or indirect access to. Dante’s inability to read Arabic led him to seek knowledge of the Islamic world through translations of primary texts, such as the Qur’an and portions of the Hadith, often littered with inaccuracies or anti-Islamic attacks inserted by the translators. The main portion of this chapter continues with an analysis of each of Dante’s references to Islam in order to determine how the information that he had access to shaped his perception of the Muslim world. Dante’s gruesome depictions of the Prophet Mohammad and Ali seem to initially indicate Dante’s disdain for the followers of these men. However, as the other less analyzed yet just as significant references to Islam are scrutinized more closely, the poet’s views on religious otherness do not fall in line with those of his contemporaries.

The third chapter, “Florence, the Crusades and Salvation Through the Eyes of Dante”, discusses the poet’s view on the political state of thirteenth-century Florence, along with the impact of the Crusades on Western Europe. The division which plagued Dante’s time – and which impacted him directly through his exile from Florence – serves to explain his concerns regarding schism in both religious and political terms. Through an analysis on Dante’s references to the political fragmentation of his time, I aim to highlight how his milieu significantly contributed to his views on salvation beyond Christian confines. His desire for the eventual establishment of a universal monarchy led Dante to consider how Muslims and other non-Christians fit into the fixed concept of salvation embraced by Christendom, and it is through
his willingness to consider the possibility of salvation beyond Christianity that the poet marks himself as a unique thinker among his contemporaries.

Chapter four, “The Jews as Precursors to Concepts of Islamic Otherness”, aims to demonstrate how the otherness that Christians originally assigned to the Jews was later similarly applied to the Muslims, creating a link between these two religions in the medieval Christian imagination that formed Dante’s reality. The chapter begins with a historical background of how Christians approached the Jews. As a people who had provided Christians with the foundation of their faith through the teachings of the Old Testament, the Jews could not be entirely rejected, yet at the same time, in their unwillingness to accept Christ as the Son of God, the Jews became a source of anxiety for Christians, binarily viewed as both outsiders and insiders within Christendom. The second half of the chapter offers a close analysis of Dante’s references to the Judaic Other in the *Commedia*. Although the references to Judaism are few and subtle in comparison to those made to Islam, they carry significant importance in the understanding of how they contribute to Dante’s political vision for a united universal monarchy. In his goal to promote his ideal monarchy through his writings, Dante considers how the Jews, along with the Muslims and other non-Christians, fit into the concepts of Christian salvation, social egalitarianism and political unity, once again taking a unique stance within his medieval Christian reality.
Dante’s perception of Islam cannot be summarized as being an overall polemical one. Although a product of a Christian society, Dante must not simply be approached as an ultimate supporter of Christianity and ipso facto as an advocate against Islam. Instead, Dante uses the presence of Muslims, as well as other non-Christians, in the *Divina Commedia* in order to raise complex theological and ideological questions. While many of Dante’s contemporaries adhered to the notion that Islam was a religion to be disdained, Dante stands apart from the medieval theologians and poets of his time, in his willingness to look beneath the rigid conceptions of the Other. Yet, the general casting of the Middle East as a place steeped in sin and completely different from the Christian world ultimately influenced even the most open of minds, including Dante’s. The poet’s avid interest in the history, literature and philosophy which preceded him, allowed him to acquire a wide range of knowledge. However, particularly when it came to the study of the Orient, historical accounts were often skewed by the ideological biases of the individuals who compiled them, leaving fact mixed with fiction. As an inheritor of these accounts and the perceptions attached to them, Dante is automatically limited in his understanding of the Orient, yet at the same time, he does not adhere to the common negative Orientalist stereotypes of his time.

Throughout the analysis of Dante’s perception of the Orient, we must acknowledge that his time was lain with deeply rooted Orientalism. Orientalism, a theory revolutionized by Edward Said, provides the theoretical foundation for this thesis in its ability to trace the sentiments of curiosity, fear and paranoia that the West developed in its studies of and
interactions with the Orient. Dante’s direct statements and allusions to the Orient are difficult to analyze because of the poet’s often ambiguous language and references. Through the application of Said’s Orientalism to Dante, I intend to show that what the poet thought he knew about the Orient often did not correspond with reality. Dante’s understanding of the Orient was not only limited by what he read, but also by his very identity as a Florentine Christian. Hans Robert Jauss’ Reception Theory provides me with the tools necessary to highlight how Dante’s perceptions of the Orient were not autonomously developed, but were instead formed by the literary and historical tradition which preceded him.

Immediately after Dante’s death, many intellectuals devoted themselves to closely reading the *Commedia*, offering their own explanations of the poem. In Dante’s age, commentators were generally drawn towards certain monumental works; amongst these, the Bible, a work holding the Word of God, called for much analysis, while the study of classical works such as Virgil’s *Aeneid* allowed a means of accessing the mysteries of antiquity.\(^3\) Hence, the fact that Dante’s *Commedia* garnered so much attention during the author’s life and shortly afterwards, elevated the work to one carrying considerable authority, revealing the degree of impact that the work had on the ideologies of Dante’s near contemporaries. However, just as Dante was shaped by the literary and ideological tradition which preceded him as well as by his current socio-cultural milieu, so too did his work shape future Orientalist discourse.

Edward Said’s analysis of Orientalism and Hans Robert Jauss’ Reception Theory provide the theoretical framework allowing for the examination of Dante’s perception of Islam, as well

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\(^3\) There are, of course, many other works that generated commentary. For example, the important tradition of commentaries on Lombard’s *Sententiae*, on the *Corpus Iuris*, on Aristotle’s *Corpus*, on Ovid, on Boethius, on Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* (of which there were eight commentaries in the first half of the fourteenth century alone), on the *Liber causis*, etc. What marks Dante as an extraordinary case for his time is not the rarity of commentaries in general, but the rarity of commentaries on contemporary poems in the vernacular.
as how he developed his own perception through the reading of the literature which preceded him. Orientalism offers the theoretical tools required to work towards an understanding of the historical evolution of perceptions of the East, and more specifically, to piece together the puzzle of medieval Orientalism, exposing its many shades and layers. Jauss’ Reception Theory provides this thesis with a comprehensive approach to Orientalism. Jauss’ theory highlights how a reader in any point in history and in any place in the world reads a text through his own individual filter and consequently produces a distinct interpretation of that text, inimitable by any other reader. Yet, specifically targeted towards Dante, Reception Theory allows us to understand how Dante read works on the Orient and how, in turn, they would shape his treatment of the Islamic world. The application of these two theories to Dante allows the possibility to trace the fluctuation in the perception of the Islamic Other from the early days of Christian-Islamic interaction, through to the centuries leading up to Dante’s Florence. Through this understanding of the historical evolution of Orientalism may Dante’s treatment of the Muslims be most affectively analyzed in the second chapter.

Edward Said revolutionized the study of Orientalism in 1978, redefining the term as a subjective study of the Islamic East as perceived through Western eyes. Although Said focuses his study on the Orientalism of eighteenth and nineteenth-century British and French colonialism, the polemical depictions and misperceptions of the Orient began centuries earlier. Following the death of the Prophet Mohammad in 632, Islam emerged as a force that could not be ignored, rapidly expanding its hegemony far beyond its modest beginnings at Mecca. By the eighth century, as this new religion advanced toward European soil, the Christian West felt its once solid position threatened, consequently creating the need to make sense of the new Islamic Other by defining it in terms that they could accept: Islam was deemed inferior, idolatrous and an impostor of a religion. “Psychologically, Orientalism is a form of paranoia” (Said 72), which,
through fear, produces a need to differentiate oneself from the Other. By underscoring the many differences between themselves and the Other, Western Christians were ultimately attempting to define themselves as a means of re-establishing their now weakened identity as members of a superior faith.

Hans Robert Jauss’ Reception Theory serves as an invaluable tool to understand what shaped Dante’s perception of non-Christians. Jauss’ theory was revolutionary in igniting the realization that a text can only exist through its readers as they sift through what they read using individual filters determined by their own personal experiences, combined with the overall historical context which engulfs them. Only through a consideration of Dante’s socio-cultural milieu, his political position and his areas of intellectual interest – amongst other factors – may one begin to develop a comprehensive understanding of how Dante perceived non-Christians, as well as how his interpretive paradigm was formed. Although both Said’s concept of Orientalism and Jauss’ Reception Theory were conceived in the twentieth century, they prove applicable and relevant to medieval texts such as Dante’s *Commedia* because they enable the modern reader to read these texts through the filters which governed the thoughts of medieval men. Orientalism and Reception Theory form the theoretical foundation for this thesis, providing the mechanisms necessary to shed light on Dante’s multifaceted perception of the non-Christian Other, with a focus on perceptions of Islam; and later in this thesis, how Christian perceptions of Judaism contributed to the horizon of expectations that medieval Christians drew from in order to define the new and threatening presence of Islam.

In this chapter I will provide an introduction to Said’s Orientalism in order to establish the theoretical vocabulary that will guide this thesis. I will then apply Said’s theory to the Middle Ages, outlining the ways in which Orientalism took shape during Dante’s time, while
also tracing the roots of medieval Orientalism to the Biblical age. I will then discuss Jauss’ Reception Theory and its relevance to the analysis of Orientalism in Dante. With this first chapter, I intend to establish the theoretical reference points that will prove pivotal for my thesis, while contextualizing the Orientalism of Dante’s age. In this way, I hope to build on the work of scholars such as Brenda Deen Schildgen and Suzanne Conklin Akbari, amongst others, by considering how Dante’s perception of Islam was shaped by the Orientalism which preceded him, while eventually demonstrating that the poet was a unique figure for his time, seldom adhering to the negative conceptions of the Islamic Other that were common in medieval Christendom.

1 Introduction to Said’s Orientalism

In order to uncover aspects of Orientalism in Dante, it is first pertinent to understand Orientalism through Edward Said, for it is his use of the term that will be referred to throughout this thesis. As a Palestinian-American scholar, Said was bestowed with a unique East-West perspective that allowed him to analyze how the Occident depicted the Orient through a much more critical lens. Prior to 1978, Orientalism was a term used to describe what was regarded as an accurate and factual study of the Orient, as western scholars and historians travelled to exotic lands of the East and returned home with detailed accounts of its alien peoples, customs and religion. Yet upon the publication of Orientalism that year, Said completely redefined the term as “the seductive degradation of knowledge” (328), composed of a compilation of subjective depictions of the Orient, tainted by deeply-rooted western prejudices against Islam which prevent scholars from recognizing and recording factual information about the East. Thus, Said’s work transformed
Orientalism into a pejorative word, no longer representative of the pursuit of fact but of the creation of distorted and biased narratives about the East as western men attempted to establish themselves as the norm and the Oriental Others as inferior, corrupt and alien abnormalities. The language of Orientalism is therefore one which attempts “to characterize the Orient as alien and to incorporate it schematically on a theatrical stage whose audience, manager, and actors are for Europe, and only for Europe” (Said 71-72). In Said’s theory, the “Orient” cannot be interpreted as an all-encompassing label for the Eastern world. Said makes a distinction between the Far East, including India and China, as places of exotic wonders and distant mysteries, and the Eastern Mediterranean, the area invaded by the Muslims, as a territory feared by the West. The “honoured horizon” of the Far East versus the “scorned Orient”, as described by Brenda Deen Schildgen (2002, 6), were two completely separate ideas for the West. Distance was a significant factor in this separation, as the closer of the two “easts” posed the more immediate threat and contributed to the hatred which developed towards its people.

In his study of Orientalism, Said traces its evolution from its early beginnings in antiquity to its steady rise in the Middle Ages, to its peak during eighteenth and nineteenth-century European colonialism, while also considering the West’s relationship with the Orient in the twentieth century. Historical accounts and literary works written well before Said were already marred by Orientalism, yet it was Said that defined the parameters of the subjective study of the Orient and identified its effects on the relations between East and West over the centuries. However, since Said places considerable emphasis on the age of colonialism, before studying its beginnings it is first necessary to outline what the height of Orientalism entailed. In the early 1800s France and Britain made it their mission to expand their territories, and chose to target the Orient – a land which they regarded as weak and with its inhabitants belonging to “a subject
race” which the European powerhouses believed needed to be “dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves” (Said 35).

Said determined that there are certain qualifications that allowed the idea of the Orient to become such a powerful force of self-definition for the West, especially during these centuries of European imperialism. First, Said stresses that the Orient and the Occident are not simply territories that exist in both a geographical and ideological sense. Although these terms do correspond to specific geographical areas, the physical divide between them as well as the ideas of what each space stands for are constructs of man (Said 5). One cannot exist without the other, for it is their converse relationship to one another that assigns each with its own identity. Said clarifies his idea by aptly applying Giambattista Vico’s theory of history as a man-made phenomenon to geography, in that while both constructs must have aspects of reality to which each corresponds, history, like geography, only takes form in the minds of men (24-25). Said discusses Orientalism as a critical and historiographic category; although the perceptions of the East are not static over time, these documented perceptions – expressed by literary figures, travellers, historians and the like – although subjective, become accepted as truths by the general public. This process of assigning defining qualities to the Orient, and consequently to the West, stems from establishing a territorial divide between the Orient and the West. From this first step of conceptual geographical separation, Orientalism was born.

The second qualification is that the Orient was “Orientalized”, or formed in the minds of westerners because it was regarded as inferior and thus in need of an identity to be imposed upon it by an external force. Said paints a picture of an unbalanced relationship between two worlds, with the West as higher on the scale and thus claiming both the ability and the right to mould the East into an idea that would serve to raise itself even higher: “The relationship between Occident
and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony

[...] The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be “Oriental” in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be — that is, submitted to being — made Oriental” (5-6). Said uses nineteenth-century French author Gustave Flaubert’s account of his acquaintance with an Egyptian courtesan during the time he spent in North Africa as an illustration of this process of Orientalization. Instead of documenting what the woman expressed about herself or her homeland, Flaubert speaks on her behalf, robbing her of her own narrative. Said stresses that the Oriental “is given as fixed, stable, in need of knowledge about himself”, unable to engage in a dialogue with the Orientalist. Instead, the Oriental becomes the source of information, while the Orientalist assumes the role of the provider of knowledge (308). As an Oriental female of low social status, every element of her being placed at an inferior level in respect to her Western wealthy male counterpart. Flaubert was thus easily able to create an image of her which highlighted her “typically Oriental” qualities (Said 6), without considering her as an individual separate from any fixed stereotypes. Said identifies Flaubert as just one example of the countless Orientalists who ignore the individual and instead adhere to an inflexible image of the Oriental that they have developed in their own minds.

The final qualification is that the many misconceptions, falsifications of fact and almost legend-like perceptions of the East during the Middle Ages were not new notions, but rather were parts of a paradigm that had deeply permeated the western literary, historical and ideological traditions. The differences that the West saw in their Eastern counterparts were ones that had been identified centuries ago and had been generally accepted as truth, allowing them to become engrained in western consciousness. As Said explains, “Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for
many generations, there has been a considerable material investment” (6). The perception of the Orient as the epitome of otherness in respect to the Occident has existed for so long and with such an immense presence, that rather than be easily discarded, Said demonstrates that it reached its peak during European colonialism, and has endured to this day. The Orient has been a European construct, built between a series of walls determined by a paradigmatic model that Europe has determined embody what it means to be Oriental. As highlighted by Said, “It is Europe that articulates the Orient; this articulation is the prerogative, not of a puppet master, but of a genuine creator, whose life-giving power represents, animates, constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous space beyond familiar boundaries” (57). Before Islam penetrated Europe, European Christians had already begun to paint a picture of its otherness, one which was used as a constant point of reference that would be added to as Europe’s exposure to Islam increased over the centuries.

The climax of Orientalism achieved during the age of colonialism was made possible by the qualifications discussed above. In order to trace the origins of these qualifications, the first seeds of Orientalism sowed during antiquity, and eventually flourishing during the early centuries following the birth of Islam, must be considered. Some of the earliest accounts of the East through Western narratives are those of the second century BC, by chroniclers who had heard of the travels of Herodotus and Alexander the Great to the Orient. Such accounts offered the West a glimpse of a far off land which would have been otherwise inaccessible to them, marking the start of when the West began to create its own picture of the unknowable East. Yet, at this early stage, the Orient was seen more as a place of fascination, containing awe-inducing people, technology, clothing and spices. However, upon the death of the Prophet in 632, the West’s relationship with and view of the Orient began to take a much more dramatic and negative turn.
2 Medieval Orientalism

Although the concept of the Other\textsuperscript{4} became a formal area of study in the twentieth century, the basic desire to define those we deem different from ourselves as the premise of self-definition through contrast is inherent to human nature. Beneath the all-encompassing umbrella of the Other, the perception of the non-Christian Other has proven to be a consistent source of self-definition for the Christian West since the age of Constantine I. With the foundation of Christianity, the new monotheistic religion had to establish its position as the true faith by discrediting the divisive and idolatrous nature of paganism, while identifying Judaism as an old and now superseded religion.

With the appearance of Islam on the world scene, Christendom’s need to define itself through contrast reached new heights. The meaning of the Arabic word \textit{Islam}, “submission to God’s will”, is the simple message at the core of the religion. It is this very simplicity that significantly provoked panic throughout Christendom. The Christian West was now faced with a new threat greater than they had ever encountered: a monotheistic religion without the

\textsuperscript{4} The concept of the Other denotes a sense of separation between oneself and another, indicating the individual’s awareness that he is different from those around him. One of the most prominent philosophers to deal with the Other was Jean-Paul Sartre. He identified the Other as a product of human’s consciousness, constructed in the attempt to carve out one’s own identity. His famous words “Hell— is other people” (\textit{No Exit} 45) best encapsulate Sartre’s concept of the Other: the impossibility of ever knowing the Self is painful for the individual. Hence, he must search for some relief by looking towards the Other as his source for self-definition through contrast. For further information on the twentieth-century concept of the Other, see Schroeder’s \textit{Sartre and His Predecessors: The Self and the Other}. 

ambiguities of such Christian concepts as the Holy Trinity or the Resurrection, a religion that did not require a hierarchy of clergymen or sacraments for its existence and, finally, a religion that had managed to attract a remarkable amount of followers in a relatively short period of time. During Mohammad’s life (ca. 570-632), he garnered thousands of faithful followers who, immediately following his death, made it their mission to diffuse Islam as far as possible. The religion soon established its dominance in Persia, Egypt, Syria and Turkey and by the eighth and ninth centuries Islam had firmly implanted itself in North Africa, Spain, Sicily and areas of southern France. Beyond its military and religious successes, the scientific advances by the Islamic world between the ninth and eleventh centuries were far beyond those that the Christian world accomplished from its conception until the fourteenth century (Southern 1962, 8). Hence, from its beginnings Islam instilled both fear and awe in the hearts of Christian men who could not deny its strength of influence – sentiments which, although fluctuated at varying degrees, would continue to persist for centuries and still resonate with the modern Western world. Said’s words best encapsulate the impact that this new religion had on European identity: “For Europe, Islam was a lasting trauma” (59).

It is important to note that prior to the sixteenth century, other than a few exceptions, the word “Muslim” or “Islam” did not exist in medieval Christian consciousness (Tolan xv).

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5 Islamic doctrine indicates that Jesus was a notable prophet of pure ambitions, and recognizes His miraculous birth unto the Virgin Mary – who they too venerate: “Behold! The angels said: ‘O Mary! Allah gives you Glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honor in this world and the Hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to Allah; He shall speak to the people in childhood and in maturity. And he shall be (of the company) of the righteous.’ She said: ‘O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man hath touched me?’ He said: ‘Even so; Allah creates what He wills: when He has decreed a matter, He but says to it, ‘Be,’ and it is!’” (Sura 3:12-47). However, it is the Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God, who although human, must be worshipped as God, that is most rejected. For an extensive analysis of the Islamic conception of Christ see Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb’s *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross*.

6 As noted by Tolan, there are two exceptions where these terms were used in Western languages prior to the 1500s. In 1273 while still on mission in Palestine, Dominican friar, William of Tripoli composed *Notitia de Machometo*, in
Instead, the term “Saracen” was used to describe the followers of this new religion. It was a term which was all-encompassing, making no distinction between ethnicity and religion, and one which carried the stigma of idolatry, lasciviousness and overall otherness in respect to European Christians. The word “Saracen” derives from “Sahra” or “Sahara”, a term meaning “desert” which the Romans used to refer to the nomadic people of the desert (Reynolds 100), and later began to be used as a common term of alterity during the Biblical age. The Bible was the first source many early medieval scholars turned to in order to understand the role of Islam. In the case of the Muslims, the classical works of antiquity could offer no assistance in comprehending this new Other. Moreover, as an age with high levels of illiteracy, the oral transmission of the Bible was the only source of information that the lower class had exposure to and considered to hold the perpetual Word of God.  

During the seventh century in the Byzantine Empire, Muslim invasions were at first interpreted as stemming from an apocalyptic force from God in response to the sins of his people (Tolan 42), with Mohammad as the anti-Christ. The idea of Islamic success as the manifestation which he accounted what he had learned about the life of the Prophet and the Islamic religion. The other exception is found in Spanish scholar Petrus Alfonsi’s 1110 work, Dialogi contra Iudaeis. Tolan turns to the Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971 and 1985) for the first English attestation of the word “Moslim”, which occurred in 1615, and the word “Islam” in 1613 (Tolan 284). In Europe, the Arabic word “Mussulman” began to circulate in Spain with a variety of pronunciations. It spread throughout Europe, with the first written attestation appearing in French in the sixteenth century, and the word “Islam” in 1697. For this information, Tolan consults Alain Rey’s Le Robert: Dictionnaire historique de la langue française.

It is imperative to note that most illiterate commoners were familiar only with parts of the Bible. Priests and friars selected passages that they determined to be most pertinent, and rather than simply deliver them to the people, they would often supplement these passages with their own summaries, exempla and extensive moralization. A prime example of what medieval priests presented to their audiences is found in the Fasciculus morum. The original form of this preacher’s guide, written soon after 1300, is of Franciscan authorship (Wenzel 22), and provides a dissection of the seven deadly sins in a simplistic manner, targeted towards the common layman. Its direct biblical quotes are rather short, accompanied by entire retellings of the passages in question. Wenzel provides an analysis of the twenty-eight surviving manuscripts, ranging from c1412 to the late fifteenth century, demonstrating the variations that appear throughout. Each scribe introduced his own unique emendations and supplementary explanations noted in the margins or between the lines of the work (Wenzel 23).
of the apocalypse was one which medieval theologians attributed to the Bible. In Revelations 9:3-4, the image of a swarm of locusts was interpreted as the apocalyptic force made real by the Muslim armies. From the Byzantine Empire, the apocalyptic interpretation of Islam moved westwards, generating particular interest in Spain, for as Southern once again stresses, “Spain was the country which suffered most from, and therefore thought most about Islam” (1962, 19). The apocalyptic association with Islam further emphasizes the importance of the Orient as the most eastern place on the medieval map. Not only was this mysterious place associated with the genesis of humanity, having provided the birthplace for Adam and Eve, but it was also representative of the end of humankind for the threatening mob of sinners that it had unleashed upon the western world (Akbari 3).

The Biblical references to the Ishmaelites were also tied to the Saracens. The Ishmaelites were the descendants of Ishmael, a man excluded from the promise that God made with Abraham. In Judges 8:24, the Ishmaelites are described as wearing gold earrings, a custom deemed foreign, while Christian theologian Hippolytus depicts the Saracens as barbaric enemies of the Roman Empire. It is hence easy to understand why the term Saracen – associated with barbarians, opponents of the Roman Empire and plagued by otherness through their foreign customs – became linked to the followers of Islam. In addition, the biblical commentator and contemporary of Mohammad, Isidore of Seville, looked to Ishmael in order to define the role of the Saracens before the Islamic religion had entered Europe. Tolan notes that Isidore, in his

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8 “et de fumo exierunt lucustae in terram et data est illis potestas sicut habent potestatem scorpiones terrae et praeceptum est illis ne laederent faenum terrae neque omne viride neque omnem arborem nisi tantum homines qui non habent signum Dei in frontibus.”

9 The Egyptian servant, Hagar, also became associated with Islamic alterity (Genesis 16). When Abraham’s wife, Sarah, offered the servant girl to Abraham in order for them to bear a child, the union did lead to the birth of Ishmael. The term “Agareni” was thus also used referred to the descendants of Hagar, just as the term “Ishmaelites” was used to refer to the descendants of this same union (Möhring 186).
discussion of Genesis 16:12, depicts Ishmael quite negatively “as bastard son of Abraham, the first idolater, a magician, and especially ‘a wild man’ whose ‘hand will be against every man, and every man’s against his’” (20). These last words from Genesis, as quoted by Tolan, again paint the image of Ishmael as an ultimate outsider. The Ishmaelites consequently inherited this role which was eventually transferred onto the new religious outcasts, the Muslims. The Saracens, perceived by Christians as being led by an idolatrous, trickster of a prophet who faced much opposition during his time, were naturally tied to Ishmael. Isidore’s identification of the connection between Ishmael and the Saracens was one adopted and developed further by eighth-century biblical commentator Bede, and others after him, allowing the perception to persist for several centuries.

With the significant rise of Islam, the term Saracen became associated with maximized levels of alterity. The word “Saracen” was applied to the Arabs, Turks, Persians and any other ethnic group perceived to be associated with both the exoticism and heretical nature of the new Islamic presence. The Crusades rapidly diffused the term from the Byzantine Empire to Western Europe by the late eleventh to early twelfth century. The term comprised all the “savage” Oriental tribes that the West had ever been threatened by. The word “Saracen” was henceforth assimilated into medieval vocabulary to encompass the ultimate enemy of Christendom (Falk 68). Also by the twelfth century, word reached the West that Islam was a monotheistic religion; nonetheless, the image of the idolatrous and even pagan Saracen had persisted, for to recognize Islam as monotheistic would lessen its otherness and hinder the formation of the Christian identity.

The twelfth-century epic poem Chanson de Roland provides a prime example of the typical Saracen as perceived by Europeans. In it, the Saracens appear as pagan worshippers,
praying to multiple idols such as Apollo and Mahumet. The inclusion of Apollo identifies the Saracens as followers of an antiquated, pagan way of worship, while their worship of Mahumet is an example of the many distortions of the Prophet’s name (Tolan 105). By portraying the Saracens praying before Mahumet, the author of the *Chanson* attempts to strip him of his prophet-status, and instead define him as a sheer idol. The biblical conception of God, which was embedded in the medieval Christian man, was that He is outside of time and space, and thus the epitome of spirituality.\(^{10}\) Hence, since the Prophet was perceived as being void of spirituality, for the medieval Christian, Mohammad was much more closely linked to Satan than to anything divine. Consequently, by association, those who worshipped the Prophet were perceived as superficial beings themselves, concerned only with the material. The focus on the materialism of the Saracens was a result of the sensuality and lustful nature that Christians associated with the Prophet, a man they considered to be driven purely by the senses. Moreover, such descriptions of the Saracens locked them into an immutable identity, crafted by their Christian counterparts. Southern elaborates: “Like well-loved characters of fiction, they were expected to display certain characteristics, and authors faithfully reproduced them for hundreds of years” (1962, 29).

It was only beginning in the 1400s that terms encompassing both ethnic and religious alterity such as “Saracen” and “Mohammedanism” began to be supplemented and eventually replaced by terms such as “Turk” or “Moor. This marks the start of an important shift in the evolution of Orientalism. No longer was the Saracen, and accordingly Islam, perceived as a monolithic entity, but rather as being composed of a multitude of layers. Furthermore, religion,

\(^{10}\) “ego Alpha et Omega primus et novissimus principium et finis” (Revelation 22:13); “spiritus est Deus et eos qui adorant eum in spiritu et veritate oportet adorare” (John 4:24); “quia caro et sanguis non revelavit tibi sed Pater meus qui in caelis est” (Matthew 16:17).
which had once been the focal point of Islam’s otherness, became a secondary issue as ethnic and cultural dissemblance became part of a more secular equation. As elaborated by Akbari,

This change in terminology signals a paradigm shift in the discourse of Orientalism, where the distinct social character and political role of Ottoman Turkey, on the one hand, and North Africa, on the other, were directly relevant to European national networks of alliance and rivalries. As separate players in European and Mediterranean politics, they could no longer be conflated into a single ‘Saracen’ Other [...] Religion ceases to be the primary factor in Orientalist discourse and becomes a secondary quality [...] Religion is replaced in Orientalist discourse by a more complex and sophisticated set of categories of nation, ethnicity, and race (285).

The move towards a more secular Orientalism progressively developed over the centuries, for when the Orientalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries began, Europe was completely disinterested in the religious conversion of the East, and was instead motivated by political and imperial ambitions. Many of the Orientalist accounts composed during this time tend to ignore issue of religious differences, and instead focus on the characteristics of the Eastern people, highlighting their overall cultural weaknesses, and thus encouraging the West to impose dominance over them.

During Dante’s age, Islam was also commonly referred to as Mohammedanism, indicating that although medieval Europe had knowledge of the Prophet’s central role in Islam, they mistakenly assumed that Mohammad is to Islam as Christ is to Christianity. Hence, there was the perception of Islam as a false, heretical faith, with a pseudo-prophet attempting to supersede Christ as a divine leader. This could not have been further from the truth, for Mohammad’s humanity is stressed throughout the Qur’an, wherein his role is not that of a divine being who is one with God, but rather as a prophet appointed by God to spread His truth. The medieval man envisioned God as “the supreme feudal lord” (Auerbach 20) and the highest point
in the hierarchy of the spiritual realm. Thus, Mohammad and the religion he stood for were seen as attempting to challenge the firm foundation that the “true” Christian God commanded.

Beyond its idolatrousness, Islam was also identified as a schismatic faith. Islam has the Old Testament as its basis, while it also incorporates aspects of the New Testament. However, by recognizing Jesus as an important messenger but refuting Him as God’s son, the Muslims were perceived as being blind to the core message of the New Testament. Thus, Islam was seen as having borrowed elements from the Old and New Testaments, and from these Holy Scriptures creating something profane. As will be elaborated upon in the following chapter, although Dante rejected the notion of Islam as an idolatrous faith, he seemed to adhere to perception that it was a schism of Christianity. This belief was largely due to four main legends about Mohammad that began spreading throughout Europe, with probable origins in Spain, in the late 1200s. The tales were an attempt to determine some biographical information about the Prophet, in which he was depicted as various types of clergymen, sometimes even as a cardinal, who after having failed to achieve the papacy, turned away from Christianity and established his own fraudulent religion (Tatlock 188). While there were certain details of these and other Western accounts that were based on fact, they were contorted in a way that would further highlight the falsity of the Prophet. For instance, Mohammad’s humanity is presented as an automatic lack of spirituality, as the son of a merchant he is associated with worldly possessions, his use of arms to defend himself and his followers is interpreted as a thirst for glory, and finally, his need for multiple wives is perceived as a clear sign of his licentious nature.

As the myth-like accounts spread further away from those areas already under Muslim rule, the inaccuracies increased and became far more hostile. Some variations incorporated overly offensive details, such as Mohammad’s body being devoured by pigs or dogs upon his
death, or his tomb being suspended by magnets.\textsuperscript{11} As elucidated by Tolan, this was a deliberate action by the clerical authors of the biographies to distort whatever aspects they could in order to emphasize the complete corruption and falsity of this heretical religion: “these are texts meant to denigrate Islam to readers that were unlikely ever to meet a Muslim, not to \textit{dhimmis}\textsuperscript{12} who had daily contact with Muslims. The authors are thus freer both to make Muhammad conform to the typological image of a heresiarch and to paint him in vivid colors as a scoundrel” (139).

The fabricated biographies of the Prophet experienced such staying-power in Europe that the information they presented was generally accepted as truth. The stories are prime examples of Orientalism; their Western production allowed the various authors to insert and adjust details, without the possibility of facing objection from the East. Said observes that “Orientalists are neither interested in nor capable of discussing individuals; instead artificial entities […] predominate” (154-155). Therefore, through these biographical accounts, Christendom once again seized the opportunity to construct narratives for their Muslim counterparts and present them as truth. These varying accounts had such a persistent presence in Christian Europe, that they were adopted and referred to by several of Dante’s early commentators, including Iacopo Alighieri, the Ottimo Commento (Andrea Lancia) and Benvenuto da Imola, in their discussions of Dante’s portrayal of Mohammad.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} This image of Mohammad’s tomb suspended in the air by magnets was an attempt to identify him as a false prophet, unable to perform divine miracles like those of Christ, and instead resorting to mere theatrical props and acts of trickery. Akbari indicates that western biographies of the Prophet often interpret the suspended tomb more specifically as a mockery of Christ’s ascension (231-232).

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Dhimmitis} were protected non-Muslim minorities, usually “People of the Book”, that Muslims did not force conversion upon.

\textsuperscript{13} For more on the legend of Mohammad as an impostor pope, and in particular, how this legend was adopted by the early commentators, see Norman Daniel’s \textit{Islam and the West}, especially p. 83-86, as well as Valerio Cappozzo’s article “Libri dei sogni e geomanzia”, p. 207-226.
As previously mentioned, Islamic rule managed to reach Europe when Muslim armies invaded Spain in 711 and most of the nation’s people submitted to Islamic conversion. As the first European territory to have been struck by the force of Islam, Spain became the birthplace of most of the polemical depictions of the Muslims. Much of the literary works and historical accounts that emerged from Spain and dealt with Islam introduced the sense of aggression towards the Muslims and the dire need to define them into a fixed set of ideas; ideas which would begin to trickle out of Spain, until they developed so rapidly that they became an integral part of how Christian Europe viewed the Orient. Eventually, other areas of Europe which once lay under the familiar blanket of Christianity adopted negative views of Islam as the Oriental religion wreaked havoc throughout Europe and beyond.

Although the perception of Islam in the Middle Ages was mostly negative, there were periods of tolerance and individuals open to Islamic learning. As noted by Kathleen Biddick, prior to the 1100s, there seemed to be much more tolerance among the “People of the Book” (i.e. Jews, Christians and Muslims), at least from an economic perspective, as Mediterranean trade flourished following the Diaspora of the Jews (1235). One of the most impressive examples of tolerance towards Islam existed in Lucera in the early thirteenth century. Emperor Frederick II – whose significance in the Commedia will be discussed in later chapters – had endured years of conflict in Sicily between its Muslim and Christian inhabitants and had finally developed a solution. Between 1224 and 1244, Frederick transferred thousands of Muslims from Sicily to Lucera, a city in southern Italy (modern-day Foggia), in order to maintain peace under his dominion. However, what marks Frederick as a remarkable ruler is that he allowed the Muslims of Lucera to preserve their Arabic tongue and to continue practicing their religion and maintain their cultural traditions (Taylor 203). Under Frederick’s rule, Lucera was not the only place to be treated with tolerance. Sicily became “a center for cross-cultural scholarship in Arabic, Greek
“and Latin” (Stone 17), thus Frederick encouraged learning about Islam. Frederick’s longing for knowledge beyond his kingdom stemmed even further, as he often invited Islamic and Hebrew scholars to his court. However, the degree of tolerance demonstrated by the Emperor was rather rare in and uncharacteristic of the Middle Ages.

As the unprecedented success of Islam continued, the East was no longer a distant presence, but a nearby and urgent menace to Christian supremacy. Said designates the Middle Ages as a mid-stage in the evolution of Orientalism for it marked a sharp escalation in the degree of alterity that was attributed to the Orient as a result of the growing threat of Islam. No longer could Christendom stand back and watch its followers succumb to the infidels; there was now the dire need to strengthen its identity by delegitimizing that of the Other. In the words of Akbari,

The Islamic Orient was both beautiful and dangerous, open to assimilation and that which must be utterly rejected. This paradox shaped premodern attitudes, determining not only how medieval Westerners saw the Islamic ‘other’ but also how they saw themselves. This mirroring function, in which the Orient serves as a kind of negative image, being everything that the West is not, was influentially formulated in and disseminated through Edward Said’s Orientalism (5).

Once Islam had brought an Oriental presence to Spain, Sicily and parts of southern France, the Orient was no longer a myth-like, distant periphery. The Crusades began as a response to Islamic invasion, with the intention of not only claiming the Holy Land, but also forcing the Muslims into conversion. However, after the First Crusade, it became clear that the Muslims were adamant in their choice to follow Islam and were unwilling to convert. Hence, missionary efforts emerged with full force, especially during the 1200s, in the hopes that by preaching Christianity to the Muslims in Europe and the Orient, these “infidels” would realize the error of their ways and convert.
Saint Francis of Assisi is a prime example of an early missionary. In 1260, Francis met with the Egyptian sultan, Malik al-Kamil, to share the Christian Word with him and his people. This may be interpreted as an early sign of tolerance, especially for the Middle Ages, for rather than using force to induce conversion, there was the intent to peacefully collaborate information about different faiths among individuals. The Franciscans continued the legacy of their founder, travelling to Muslim-dominated lands to spread the Christian message.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, they did not only preach in churches, but in town centres and wherever else they could reach the most people (Robson 1). The messages of the Bible were no longer for clergymen and scholars, but for the common man as well. However, the Franciscan efforts were, on the whole, not very successful. One problem was that their interest seemed to lie less in the conversion of infidels, and more in the pursuit of martyrdom. As John V. Tolan elaborates, “Mission to the Saracens, for the Franciscans, was part of the \textit{vita apostolica},\textsuperscript{15} serving to bring the friars to glorious martyrdom and, incidentally, to convert unbelievers” (218). The other major issue was that the Franciscans did not make any significant effort to learn about the Islamic faith or the language of most of its followers: Arabic. As a result, upon their interactions with Muslims, their messages were often not understood or well-received. Their lack of knowledge caused them to offend their listeners with their often negative comments about the Prophet (Tolan 172).

The underlying base of Orientalism is the misrepresentation of the East through a Western bias of superiority. This sense of superiority often leaves the Orientalist incapable of

\textsuperscript{14} By the late twelfth century, Franciscan missionaries had reached Syria, Jerusalem, Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, India and China, and were the only Catholics on mission in these lands (Robson 4).

\textsuperscript{15} The early Franciscans sought to model their lives as closely as possible to how the apostles lived. Saint Francis died in 1226, and only four years after Saint Francis’ death, the lack of leadership led to dissent within the Order. This led the Franciscans to become divided into the Spirituals, who closely adhered to Francis’ example of a life of poverty, and the Conventuals, who believed in living a more conventional life. For more information on the Franciscan Order, its division, and the role that the friars played in medieval Europe, see Michael Robson’s \textit{The Franciscans in the Middle Ages}. 
absorbing any factual knowledge of the East, as this would prevent his ability to affirm his prevalence. Instead, the medieval Orientalist took these facts into his own hands, and by dismantling, exaggerating and distorting them, he was able to reassemble them into neatly structured products acceptable to Christian Europe. As articulated by Blanks and Frassetto, “Indeed, the Muslim became, in a sense, a photographic negative of the self-perception of an ideal Christian self-image, one that portrayed Europeans as brave, virtuous believers in the one true God and the one true faith” (3). Thus, Christians found a way to rebuild their tarnished confidence by imposing a negative set of characteristics on their Muslim enemies. Since the Orientalist can only construct his own identity by pointing out what the Oriental is not, if he were to be open to actually learn about these foreign people, he would notice that not quite as much separates them as he may have thought. Not only do the Christian and Muslim faiths share the Old Testament as a religious foundation, but they are both monotheistic and share many similar ideas on the afterlife, retribution and devotion to God.

While the Muslims of the Middle Ages did regard their religion as the true one, they were much more tolerant of other monotheistic religions. They believed that the Jews and Christians, as “People of the Book”, had the right to worship by the rules of their own respective religions and should not be forced to convert. There was much interaction between the Muslims and their Jewish and Christian neighbours, often debating over theological issues – hence, there was an interest to learn about the Other, as opposed to the assumption of fact. The Western power to create the Oriental is “in a sense obliterating him as a human being” (Said 27), for the Oriental is no longer a unique individual, but rather a prototype for what the Orientalist has defined him to be. The Franciscan missionary attempts were thus unsuccessful as there was no real interest in the Other, and instead only the desire to transform them into what would prove most beneficial to the Christian identity. The Dominicans took on a much more informed and pragmatic
approach to their missions in the second half of the 1200s (Tolan 233). Their main focus was on the conversion of as many infidels as they could reach out to, rather than on personal ambitions of martyrdom. The Dominican tactic\textsuperscript{16} involved first learning Arabic, giving them the means to then pour over whatever information they had on the Qur’an and Hadith.\textsuperscript{17} In this way, the Dominican friars would have the knowledge necessary to be able to know their adversaries, and thus, communicate more effectively with them (Tolan 172).

In Dante’s age, members of the intelligentsia, to which the poet himself belonged, continued in the footsteps of the Dominicans in their keen interest to learn about the philosophy and theology that lay at the core of the new Other, Islam. Interest in Islamic philosophers Avicenna and Averroes thrived among medieval Christian scholars. Averroes became a particular figure of interest due to his extensive commentary on Aristotle, a revered philosopher in the Middle Ages. These philosophers, although part of the feared Islamic world, were not completely overshadowed by their religious background. The Christian Middle Ages looked to the philosophies of various cultural spheres as a means of clarifying aspects of its own theology. As explained by Ernest L. Fortin, “Philosophy led to a more adequate understanding of the revealed mysteries. It offered the faithful a means to resolve the Bible’s apparent contradictions or the difficulties raised by the discrepancies that emerged at times between its teaching and what human reason taught” (40). The impermeability of Islam made Europe incredibly uneasy. Its success seemed to know no bounds, and hence it held the possibility to destroy all that

\textsuperscript{16} Jaume I of Aragon offered particular support to the Dominicans in their efforts to induce conversion. He supported their study both of the Qur’an and the Talmud, and helped the friars to oblige Muslim and Jewish intellectuals to debate with them and endure their preaching (Tolan 233).

\textsuperscript{17} While the Qur’an offers the first account of Mohammad’s life and path towards prophethood, the Hadith refers to a collection of sayings attributed to the Prophet, as well as accounts of his daily life, which were compiled after his death during the eighth and ninth centuries.
Christianity had strived to establish since the age of Constantine. Therefore, through the access to and curiosity in the Islamic world, scholars could attempt to make sense of the unknown, while also attain knowledge of their enemy to be used as an intellectual weapon against this quickly infiltrating group.

By the late 1200s it became evident that Islam was not a temporary presence to be easily swept away, which ignited Europe with a stronger interest to learn about the religion and its people. This progressed and by 1312 the Church Council of Vienne established chairs for the teaching of Arabic, Greek and Hebrew in Paris, Oxford and Bologna, marking the formal beginning of Orientalism (Southern 1962, 72). A significant portion of Dante’s life spans between these two time periods, which proves very telling for why the poet, as well as several of his contemporaries, showed far more interest in learning about what lay behind the mystique and stereotypes of Islam than those who lived just one century earlier. Efforts to translate the Qur’an, beginning in the twelfth century, offer a clear example of interest in Islamic theology. Pietro di Toledo sought to learn accurate information about the religion which threatened his fellow man, closely reading and later translating the Qur’an into Latin (D’Ancona 193). Peter the Venerable also composed a translation of the Qur’an in the twelfth century, although it did not circulate widely at the time.\footnote{Although Peter the Venerable made the effort to translate the Qur’an, once completed, the translation was infused with a polemical undertone. This translation was produced with the goal of preventing Christians from converting to Islam, while also with the intention of convincing Muslims to abandon their religion and embrace Christianity (Hoeppner Moran Cruz 69).} Another figure who sought knowledge of Islam was Brunetto Latini (ca. 1220–1294). Latini, whom Dante calls “Lo mio maestro” (\textit{Inf.} XV, 97), spent time in Seville at the court of Alfonso X in 1260. Since Alfonso’s court welcomed Muslim intellectuals, Brunetto was able to observe these men and develop some level of understanding about their
religion and customs – albeit through a Western-Christian filter of thought, which will be discussed later.

Yet while there were those who travelled relatively close distances for their first familiarization with the Muslim world, there were others who went far beyond European ground. Dante’s contemporary Riccoldo da Montecroce emerges as an individual with considerable interest in the Orient and its people. Born in 1243, this Florentine Dominican friar lectured at Santa Maria Novella, the very church which Dante attended, and is thus a significant source to consider for his influence on the poet – which will be covered in the following chapter. In 1288, Riccoldo went on a missionary voyage to the East where he spent thirteen years before returning to Florence and composing a prominent work on the Islamic world, relaying what he had learned about the beliefs and customs associated with it (Schildgen 2002, 47). Riccoldo also studied Arabic, giving him the tool necessary to engage in theological debate with his Muslim counterparts. These are just two of many men who had direct contact with Islam through their own efforts. However, although such men provided more information about the Muslims, their Christian roots often caused them to present inaccuracies as facts.

The Orientalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was one in which Europe felt confident in the weakness of the East and thus easy to overtake, while medieval Orientalism was dominated by a European fear of Islam, a relatively new but unparalleled force. As an overall statement, the Christian West feared the Islamic East throughout the Middle Ages and sought to disseminate negative views of the new religion throughout Europe in the hopes of regaining religious dominance. However, as was the case during European imperialism, Europeans of the Middle Ages also made a distinction between the feared East, the land of the Arabs, and the wondrous East, which was commonly referred to as the Indus. Schildgen indicates that, for
Dante and his contemporaries, the Indus was a distant land in the East, a place well beyond the Christian world (1993, 177). In fact, most Christian maps – as well as Dante’s *mappaemundi* – were oriented towards the East, with this mysterious place being associated with Eden, a most heavenly yet terrestrial place. Akbari elaborates: “In the medieval imagination, the Orient was the place of origins and of mankind’s beginning; it was also, however, a place of enigma and mystery” (3). Because of its considerable distance from Europe, as well as its association with Earthly Paradise, the Indus eliminates itself as a threat to Christianity, while the Mediterranean East remains embedded in the hearts of medieval men as an unfriendly neighbour looming over Christian Europe.

Other than the distorted biographical accounts on the Prophet, one of the most important and widely circulated sources of information on Islam – especially on its views of the afterlife – in the medieval Christian world was found in the *Book of the Ladder*, a source which, as will be further discussed in the next chapter, Dante consulted as well.20 *The Book of the Ladder* was a

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19 Also important to consider is that medieval Christians saw the world as divided into three parts, according to the three known continents: Africa, Asia and Europe. Akbari explains that this division was attributed to the biblical account of Noah’s three sons, who having survived the Great Flood, would continue the human race. Medieval theologians used Noah’s sons to account for the different races known to them and the many languages spoken throughout these continents (Akbari 20-21). Akbari poignantly identifies the medieval need to compartmentalize all that was known to them: “The purpose of these schemas […] was to impose order on the abundant heterogeneity of creation, to gain control over the world by fitting it into an intellectually coherent system. Medieval writers would not have described their task as ‘imposition’ of order; rather, they would say that one ‘found’ or ‘discerned’ the order already imposed upon the world and its populations by God, whose foreknowledge and power of predestination were understood to be absolute” (21-22).

20 Before continuing, it is pertinent to note that one of the major criticisms of Asin Palacios’ work was largely based on the apparent absence of a clear means of transmission for the *mi‘raj* narratives to have been able to reach Dante’s Italy (Coffey 48). However, this preoccupation over textual transmission was eventually solved in 1949 when two previously unknown editions of the ascension narrative were published, one in Latin and another in French, by Enrico Cerulli and José Muñoz Sendino respectively. Both texts offer versions of the original *mi‘raj* narrative and thus serve as evidence that the story of Mohammad’s ascension circulated throughout thirteenth-century Castille and Léon, and therefore indicate the strong possibility that versions of these texts – whether in writing or orally – were transmitted into Dante’s Italy (Coffey 41).
translation of the Arabic original, the *Kitab al-Mi’raj*, a part of the Hadith tradition which accounts Mohammad’s night journey, with the angel Gabriel as his guide, towards his ascension into Paradise. This narrative was translated from Arabic into Castilian, Latin and Old French during the thirteenth century, and is known today by the title of the *Book of the Ladder* (Akbari 252). In its original Arabic form, now lost, the *Kitab al-Mi’raj* was a Muslim work of devotion. The first translation from the original was that in Castilian. This translation, which has also been lost, marked the beginning of a transformation: a once sacred, devotional text was reworked into one infused with anti-Islamic sentiments (Akbari 252). Since Christians did not know Arabic and due to their bias of Christian superiority, they were unable to know the true intention of the *Mi’raj* account. Spain, having endured the greatest violation by the Muslims until this point, was naturally the place which first reconstructed the text into one which cast hatred upon its ever-present enemy, Islam. As in the case described by Said in which Flaubert deprives the Egyptian courtesan of her narrative, here the unknown Castilian translator has snatched the account away from the Islamic world and made it into his own, recreating an identity for those who had endeavoured to do so for themselves.

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21 *Kitab* is the Arabic word for “book” and *Mi’raj* means “ladder” or “ascension”.

22 Prior to the elaborate Hadith account, the earliest mention of Mohammad’s ascent is found in the Qur’an: “Glory to Him who made His servant travel by night from the sacred place of worship to the furthest place of worship” (17.1).

23 The Arabic name for the archangel Gabriel is Jibrâil.

24 In the Hadith tradition, the *Mi’raj* account is preceded by the *Isra*. The *Isra* is the account of the Prophet’s descent into Hell.

25 The ascension narrative was first translated by Alfonso X’s Jewish physician, Abraham of Toledo, in Castillian. It is likely that Abraham composed this first translation by compiling various Arabic sources in order to produce a composite narrative (Coffey 41–42).

26 The original Arabic work’s author remained anonymous. He was most likely Muslim, as his work unwaveringly supports Islam and its Prophet. Furthermore, the work seems to be targeted towards Muslims, discussing various aspects of Islamic doctrine without providing additional explanations, indicating that his audience was surely familiar with the religion (Hyatte 19).
The Muslim depiction of Paradise in the original text is one that ignites all the senses, which Christian translators regarded as an overly earthly experience, lacking the spirituality found in the Christian conception of Heaven. The *Book of the Ladder* describes the Prophet’s journey through seven concentric heavenly spheres before reaching God. During his ascension, Mohammad encounters several angels of God as well as great prophets such as John the Baptist, Joseph, Moses, Abraham and even Jesus. Upon his arrival in Heaven, Mohammad finds himself amidst several magnificent gardens, filled with the finest of sensorial delights. The sensuous elements in the original *Mi’raj* were to be interpreted metaphorically for meaning beyond the physical. However, in the Castilian translation and those that came afterward, the sensual aspects were exaggerated and took on a literal meaning that became central to the perception of the Islamic Paradise (Akbari 252).

The *Book of the Ladder*\(^{27}\) depicts Mohammad in the opulent gardens of the afterlife, met by many beautiful virgins ready to sexually satisfy him and all those who have earned a place in Heaven. Not only is the sense of touch ignited with pleasure, so too is that of sight as the houses found in Paradise are built from sparkling jewels. Taste is not excluded from the sensorial overload as the Prophet comes across rivers flowing with delicious milk, honey and wine. In the Qur’an, milk and honey are seen as gifts from God to humanity and tangible signs of His greatness, with honey shown as having particular importance for its healing properties.\(^{28}\) Yet in

\[^{27}\text{See Hyatte’s English translation of the Book of the Ladder.}\]

\[^{28}\text{“It is God who sends water down from the sky and with it revives the earth when it is dead. There truly is a sign in this for people who listen. In livestock, too, you have a lesson --- We give you a drink from the contents of their bellies, between waste matter and blood, pure milk, sweet to the drinker. From the fruits of date palms and grapes you take sweet juice and wholesome provisions. There truly is a sign in this for people who use their reason. And your Lord inspired the bee, saying, ‘Build yourselves houses in the mountains and trees and what people construct. Then feed on all kinds of fruit and follow the ways made easy for you by your Lord.’ From their bellies comes a drink of different colours in which there is healing for people. There truly is a sign for those who think” (16:65-69).}\]
the *Book of the Ladder*, these natural symbols of divine power are transformed into examples of the Muslim lust for the sensorial. Akbari explains the significance of these tasty liquids in the Orientalist’s defining of Islam: “The delicious pleasures of the Islamic paradise are presented as fundamental to the deception of Muhammad’s followers, while a devotion to materiality and sensuality is thought to pervade the faith. Food remains central to the allure of the Orient – not its nutritive, satiating qualities, but its appeal to the senses, and – ultimately – its power to seduce the soul” (259).

Moreover, in the Hadith account of the *Mi’raj* attributed to Abū al-Hasan Alī ibn Ismā’īl al-Ash’arī,29 the presence of milk and wine are prescribed with an importance that is completely ignored in the *Book of the Ladder*. In this account, right before ascending the ladder towards God’s Kingdom, the Prophet is put to a test: he is placed before two cups, one filled with wine, and the other with milk.30 Mohammad chooses the milk, symbolizing the natural purity that all are born with, or *fitra*;31 thus, he turns away from the temptation of the wine and towards the original state of perfect innocence that God bestows upon all of His children. However, the *Book of the Ladder* assumes that the presence of wine and milk in the Islamic Paradise only serves as further proof that the Muslims are motivated only by instinct and sensorial desire. The final

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29 Abū al-Hasan Alī ibn Ismā’īl al-Ash’arī (837-935) was a Muslim theologian, born in Basra, Iraq. He changed the direction of Muslim theology by stressing that human reason was not capable of fully understanding the mysteries of God, and started the Ash’arī school of theology which was founded on this human incapacity (Al-Jubouri 178).

30 “Then he was brought two vessels, in one of which was wine and in the other milk. (He said:) The Rasul Allah, God’s peace and blessing on him, took the vessel of milk and drank from it, leaving aside the vessel of wine. (He said:) So Jibrail said to him: “You have been given guidance through innate disposition (*fitra*) and your community has been given guidance, and wine has been forbidden to you” (as quoted in Sells 54-55).

31 Seyit explains the *fitra* as a natural disposition towards goodness and recognizing God’s greatness (52-53), making reference to its use in the Qur’an: “So set thy face steadfastly to the one ever-true faith turning away from all that is false, in accordance with the natural disposition (*fitra*) which God has instilled into man; for not to allow any change to corrupt what God has created – this is the purpose of the one ever-true faith; but most people know it not” (Sura 30:30). Schuon further notes that the din al-*fitrah* refers to the original, innate religion, which for Muslims is Islam (88).
sensorial titillation in the *Book of the Ladder* involves the sense of sound, stimulated by the sweet songs sung by beautiful women (Akbari 253). Akbari shows that for medieval Christian readers, this depiction of the Islamic Paradise was one which somewhat resembled the Christian conception of Eden with its details of perfect natural beauty. However, its focus on the sensorial experience eliminated the element of spirituality that Christianity believed was inseparable from Paradise. As best stated by Akbari, “These elements work together to create an environment that, for the medieval Christian, was at once an imitation of their notion of the heavenly paradise and a travesty of it. The Islamic paradise was seen as a place of sensuous pleasures, where material things satisfy corporeal urges and appetites” (253). As the representative of this religion, Mohammad was automatically perceived by the Christian world as a lascivious man, incapable of truly knowing God due to his dependence on the physical, terrestrial experience.

The Castilian translation, and those which followed, may be interpreted from a number of different positions. First, they may be considered as Orientalized translations of the original work, as works amended to emphasize the European paradigm of the Islamic Other. The translations also represent the general position of Christendom towards Islam: Islam was a religion that had to be defined in order to be less feared. Yet, the more information on the enigmatic Other managed to seep into European consciousness, the more information had to be contorted as a means of defining and reinforcing the Christian identity. As expressed by Southern,

32 Akbari discusses the medieval Christian’s binary conception of Paradise: they believed in an earthy Paradise, Eden, and a divine Paradise, God’s Heavenly Kingdom. Since they perceived the Muslims as materially motivated, Christians believed that their adversaries “could conceive of paradise only in earthly, fleshy terms, with pleasures experienced in the present moment rather than in the fullness of apocalyptic time” (249).
As a practical problem it [Islam] called for action and for discrimination between the competing possibilities of Crusade, conversion, coexistence, and commercial interchange. As a theological problem it called persistently for some answer to the mystery of its existence [...] it was necessary to know the facts, and these were not easy to know. So there arose a historical problem that could not be solved, could scarcely be approached, without linguistic and literary knowledge difficult to acquire, and made more difficult by secrecy, prejudice and the strong desire not to know for fear of contamination. (1962, 3)

Through its several translations, wide circulation and the awareness of its Islamic origins, the *Book of the Ladder* became increasingly regarded as the authoritative text on Islam for medieval Christians.\(^{33}\) Hence, the translations of the *Book of the Ladder* may also be understood as the readings of an Arabic text through a completely different socio-cultural filter, causing details of the text to be exaggerated and reformed, and thus assimilated in a different way than that originally intended. The notion of reading a text through a filter determined both by one’s overall historical context and one’s individual experiences and views is the nexus of Reception Theory, a theory which must be considered for its ability to illuminate how and why Dante perceived the Orient in his own distinctive way.

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\(^{33}\) Although Christians approached the *Book of the Ladder* as a valid source on Islam, Islamic scholars at the time recognized the discrepancies in the text when compared to essential Islamic theology (Hyatte 23).
3 Jauss’ Reception Theory

Reception Theory began in West Germany in the late 1960s, instigated by a group of academics associated with the University of Konstanz. The group contributed to a major shift in literary theory which worked to elevate the status of the reader as the crucial element capable of bestowing life and meaning to a text. Yet, within this group, Hans Robert Jauss emerged as its figurehead and became intrinsically tied to the revolution of Reception Theory and how it impacted and innovated reader-response theory. Jauss created a real stir in the realm of literary theory with his 1969 essay, “The Change in the Paradigm of Literary Scholarship”, in which he stressed that literary studies were in the midst of a complete upheaval and change (Holub 1). Jauss believed that the study of literature cannot adhere to a permanent paradigm, but rather must allow a fluidity to adopt new paradigms as older ones no longer prove useful under new and ever-changing circumstances.

Jauss uses his essay to introduce a newly emerging paradigm, but before doing so, he traces the evolution of three previous ones in order to illustrate the fluctuating nature of literary interpretation. The first is that of the classicist-humanist paradigm, wherein the value of a work was based on its level of comparability to those literary models established during antiquity. The second was that of the historicist-positivist paradigm of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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Wolfgang Iser was also affiliated with the school of Konstanz and was a key player in the realm of literary theory. He differs from Jauss in that Jauss’ Reception Theory analyzes reader reception through a broader spectrum of current social and political contexts as well as historical factors and traditions. For Jauss, reader reception of a text cannot be considered outside of its context, both historic and literary. Iser, on the other hand, focuses on the individual text as opposed to its literary tradition, and how readers respond to that specific text. Holub clarifies the difference between them by indicating that Jauss’ work is preoccupied with “the macrocosm of reception”, while Iser focuses on “the microcosm of response” (83). Since my thesis will consider Dante’s work as somewhat of a response to the literary and religious tradition which preceded him, as well as that of his current milieu, it is Jauss’ Reception Theory that will act as a guiding theoretical foundation.
wherein nationalism became a powerful force in the literary world, as European nation-states worked towards unity and national status. This paradigm involved a historical approach to literature, turning to important medieval literary achievements and compiling critical editions of them as a nationalistic effort. The third major paradigm is that of aesthetic-formalism, associated with Russian Formalism. This approach no longer focused on the historical background of a text or on the literary tradition that preceded it, but rather focused on the text itself as a work of art deserving of study in its own right (Holub 3). However, Jauss indicates that these approaches are part of the past and that new requirements and ways of thought have called for a restructured paradigm that he believed had already begun to materialize in the realm of literary theory.

After World War II, the artistic world became saturated with works that were socially and temporally relevant in addition to their aesthetic appeal. As a result, the emerging paradigm had to not only take past works into account but, most importantly, had to uncover those aspects that would allow the work to preserve its relevance within entirely different social constructs. Jauss does not name this paradigm in his early essay, but with his focus on an approach to literary theory that involves the consideration of the text’s historical reception as well as its current reception by the reader, it is evident that Jauss was well on his way to defining the parameters of what would be known as Reception Theory. In 1982, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception was published as a collection of Jauss’ essays, translated into English. By this point, Jauss’ position on Reception Theory had reached full maturity. The nucleus of this theory is that a text cannot exist alone, unless it is being considered as a mere physical object. A text – with meaning – can only exist through a reader who assigns it with his own personalized value and interpretation, based on a combination of both internal and external factors. Jauss employed the phrase horizon of expectations in order to encompass these factors. The horizon of expectations varies temporally, as each historical period produces conditions which affect how a text may be
interpreted. It also varies from person to person depending on their individual quotidian experiences, paired with the literary tradition which they consider themselves to be a part of.

Prior to Jauss, a text was analyzed for its similarity to a previous work in order to determine what had influenced the author. With Jauss the analysis became much more complex: “this perpetual labour of understanding and of the active reproduction of the past cannot remain limited to the single work. On the contrary, the relationship between work and mankind, and the historical coherence of works among themselves must be seen in the interrelations of production and reception” (Jauss 15). Jauss’ interest in the dialectical nature of the author’s creation of the work and his readers’ reception of it changed the direction of literary criticism, in that the reader became just as important as the author and the text in the task of assigning meaning to a work. Reception Theory introduces the notion of the essentiality of the reader’s role, “a role as unalterable for aesthetic as for historical knowledge: as the addressee for whom the literary work is primarily destined” (Jauss 19). Just as a text cannot be passively accepted as an object, nor considered for its literal meaning alone, the reader cannot be dismissed or underestimated as the mere target of the text’s absorption. Rather, the way in which the reader ingests the essence of a text will not only affect how he interprets it but, if this same reader takes on the role of the author, his writing will be affected by what he has read throughout his life – and more importantly – how he read it based on his own horizon of expectations. Jauss elaborates:

In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees. For it is only through the process of its mediation that the work enters into the changing horizon-of-experience of a continuity in which the perpetual inversion occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production that surpasses them. (19)
While the reader cannot be approached as a completely free-thinking individual, disengaged and unaffected by his temporal surroundings, the importance of his personal experiences must not be dismissed, for they too come into a dialogue with his milieu. This intersection of internal and individual factors with the external bigger picture around the reader, form his horizon of expectations and ultimately condition his interpretation of a text. In Jauss’ view, the reader does not passively read the text as simple words on a page, but rather becomes actively engaged with the work, critically assessing it with the tools he has developed throughout his life and from the literary traditions, as well as the political and social conditions which precede him and have formed the parameters of his current world.

For those works which have acquired the status of classic literary achievements – such as Dante’s *Commedia* – there is a tendency to view them as static entities that will forever hold the same value and place in society. Yet, what Jauss wishes to communicate is that all literary works carry with them a fluidity of interpretation which may only be fixed temporarily by its current reader, which is precisely what allows the work to remain relevant in changing times and to a wide array of people. For as Jauss explains,

> A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence. (21)

Reception Theory is thus an essential tool to be employed in the analysis of Dante’s treatment and perception of the Orient. The following chapter will begin by tracing all references to the Orient and its people in Dante’s works, with primary focus on the *Commedia*. Dante’s portrayal of the Muslims and the Orient is often clouded in ambiguity, creating a challenge for the literary critic to determine the poet’s position. However, through the consideration of Dante’s horizon of
expectations, I hope to present a clearer picture of the poet’s perception of the Orient. Well-known for his broad interests in the literature, philosophy and science originating from a variety of traditions, Dante’s own interpretive paradigms were formed by what he read and his openness to pursue knowledge beyond the geopolitical and socio-cultural boundaries of medieval Christianity. Reception Theory will thus not only prove illuminating in the analysis of Dante himself and the ideological tradition responsible for his own perceptions, but also in the understanding how he differentiated himself from his contemporaries.

By applying Said’s Orientalism and Jauss’ Reception Theory as theoretical guides for this thesis, I aim to clarify what factual knowledge Dante had on the Islamic Other, and to determine how these shaped his conception of the non-Christian Other. Furthermore, knowledge of Islam fluctuated as more in-depth information about the Islamic world reached Europe, consequently producing the necessity to exaggerate and contort the images of the threatening Other. As a poet whose works began to draw interest during his life and continues to be widely studied to this day, the amount of scholarly areas that have been covered on Dante and his tradition seem endless. However, by implementing the modern theories of Said and Jauss in a close reading of Dante, the ability to extract new life and meaning from even the most studied of texts proves possible.
Chapter 2
Dante’s Perception of Islam

“[…] since one cannot ontologically obliterate the Orient […], one does have the means to capture it, treat it, describe it, improve it, radically alter it.” (Said 95)

In the attempt to determine what Dante knew about the world and people beyond his own, it is imperative to consider that the information at his disposal was often littered with inaccuracies and skewed perceptions of the Oriental Other inherited from previous generations of scholars. This chapter will explore what Dante knew – or rather, what he thought he knew – about Islam, by considering which sources he may have consulted. This will be followed by a discussion of how Dante’s knowledge of the Orient manifests itself in his Divina Commedia. By conducting an in-depth analysis of each of Dante’s references to Islam, I aim to demonstrate what the poet’s portrayals of Islam reveal about his perceptions of the Muslim world, and how this new otherness fits into the poet’s theological system of salvation.

The most significant portrayal of Islam in Dante’s Commedia is undoubtedly reflected in the description of Mohammad and his son-in-law Ali in canto XXVIII of the Inferno. Upon reading these lines, one cannot help but be struck by the gruesome picture painted by Dante:

35 Earlier versions of some of the material in this chapter and in chapter three have been accepted for publication in the following conference proceedings: Bridges Across Culture. Eds. H.J. Manzari and Amparo Alpanes. Washington, Pennsylvania: Cambridge Scholars, pending publication Summer 2015. The title of my contribution is “The Role of Islam in Dante’s Divine Comedy: Questioning the Limits of Salvation”.

36 Throughout the course of this thesis, the depiction of Mohammad that I will consistently focus on and refer to is that found within Inf. XXVIII. Some of the early commentators, such as Iacopo Alighieri, have identified the Prophet in Purg. XXXII, verses 130-135, specifically in the words “drago che per lo carro sù la coda fisse”. Since Dante does not unequivocally state his views on the Islamic religion, but only on its headship in Inf. XXVIII, the early commentators looked elsewhere in the Commedia to find answers which would align with the more common anti-Islamic views of the Middle Ages. The verses in Purgatorio, in my view, do not sufficiently suggest a
Già veggia, per mezzul perdere o lulla,  
com' io vidi un, così non si pertugia,  
rotto dal mento infin dove si trulla.  
Tra le gambe pendevan le minugia;  
là corata pareva e 'l tristo sacco  
che merda fa di quel che si trangugia.  
Mentre che tutto in lui veder m'attacco,  
guardommi e con le man s'aperse il petto,  
dicendo: "Or vedi com' io mi dilacco!  
vedi come stopiato è Mäometto!  
Dinanzi a me sen va piangendo Alì,  
fesso nel volto dal mento al ciuffetto. (Inf. XXVIII, 22-23)

Mohammad, the most holy Prophet of the Islamic faith, is transformed into a vulgar image of suffering, with his body torn open from his chin to his anus. While Ali is forced to endure a similar fate, only on a smaller scale, his face split open into a gaping wound, sliced from chin to forelock. Next to the revolting image of Conte Ugolino gnawing on the skull of Ruggiero (Inf. XXXII, 124-129; XXXIII, 1-3), and that of Satan feeding on the bodies of three notorious traitors (Inf. XXXIV, 46-67), the portrait of the two mutilated bodies of Islam’s prophets is arguably the most grisly of the entire Inferno. Upon a first reading of this passage, one is inclined to view Dante as an anti-Islamic spokesman, using the figures of Mohammad and Ali in order to underscore the negative traits that he identifies in all Muslims, and consequently reinforcing the supremacy of his own Christian faith. Yet, on closer analysis of these lines, as well as every other reference to the Islamic world made in the Commedia, a much more complex, and not entirely negative, perception of Islam will emerge. The passage quoted above offers the

reference to Mohammad. It is more likely that the dragon refers to the serpent found in Genesis, the Devil himself, who Dante portrays as “the infernal antithesis to the celestial Gryphon” (Vernon 414; note that Vernon’s analysis of the dragon is further drawn from, and is in accordance with, that of another early commentator, Benvenuto da Imola, who does not identify the dragon as a reference to the Prophet Mohammad). It is thus more likely that Dante, through the image of the dragon, was making a much more general reference to the danger of evil, the source of which spurs from Lucifer, which threatens to destroy the unity of the Church and of humanity overall. For more on the early commentators’ interpretation of Purg. XXXII, see Paola Locatin’s “Maometto negli Antichi Commenti alla Commedia”.

seasoned Dante reader a wealth of insight into what information the poet had about Islam. However, before breaking down Dante’s portrayal of Mohammad and Ali, as well as the *Commedia*’s other references to Islam, it is first imperative to consider what sources Dante may have consulted, or was indirectly exposed to, in order to understand his horizon of expectations.

1 Dante and the Qur’an

The Qur’an is obviously the fundamental text to consult when trying to familiarize oneself with Islamic doctrine and theology. However, since Dante was unable to read Arabic (Corti 183), he would have had to access the Qur’an through an intermediary source or translation. Two translations of the Qur’an were produced in Spain over a century before Dante’s birth: Robert of Ketton’s translation of 1142-43 and Mark of Toledo’s translation of 1210-11. These translations were instrumental in providing Christian scholars and theologians with insight into a religion that, until this point, was primarily known through Christian polemics. Whereas Islam was once regarded as a religion of polytheistic idolaters, these translations began to build the understanding of Islam as a monotheistic faith.

Robert of Ketton’s translation, commissioned by Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny (c. 1092-1156) placed a great deal of importance on learning about Islam through its most fundamental text. Rather than promoting the bloodshed of the Crusades, Peter believed that the

37 In addition to his push for his translation of the Qur’an, Peter met with Latin scholars who were translating Arabic works of astronomy, astrology, math and medicine. This inspired Peter to produce a collection of Islamic texts in a Latin translation. This collection, known as the *Corpus Toletanum or Islamolatinum*, included the Qur’an (Martinez Gásquez and Gray 80).
knowledge gained from Islamic sources would aid the Church in its conversion of Muslims (Martinez Gásquez and Gray 80-81). However, Robert’s translation had various discrepancies. Most notably, the division of the suras in his Latin text did not correspond to those in the original Arabic: Robert’s has 123, while the Qur’an has 114, suggesting that he was most likely translating from an Arabic liturgical version of the Qur’an. Moreover, Robert not only shortened some of the suras, but even excluded certain verses all together (Martinez Gásquez 84-85). Overall, Robert’s translation did not have the success which he had intended, circulating minimally amongst Muslims and generating little interest within the Christian community as well (Hoeppner Moran Cruz 69). Mark of Toledo’s translation was commissioned by Archbishop Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada and Mauricio, Archdeacon of the Toledan Cathedral. Like Peter, Mark translated the text in order to “take up intellectual arms” (Martinez Gásquez and Gray 87) against the invading Muslims. In his prologue, Mark does not acknowledge Robert’s translation, further suggesting the lack of impact that the first translation had in the West.

There is no evidence that Dante read the Qur’an. Although, as will be discussed later in this chapter, Dante’s punishment of Mohammad and Ali strongly suggests that he did indeed have some exposure – whether direct or otherwise – to Mark’s translation. An important feature which differentiates Mark’s translation from that of Robert of Ketton is that in Mark’s prologue he includes an anthology of legends about the Prophet. Like the polemic biographies of Mohammad discussed in the previous chapter, Mark selects details from these and other disparaging tales depicting the Prophet as a trickster and idolater (Martinez Gásquez and Gray

38 Toledo and Sicily were the epicentres of Islamic learning in the European Middle Ages. Two prominent cultural schools were led by Frederick II and, after his death, by Alfonso X (Corti 183).

39 Although there are 25 known manuscripts of Robert’s translation and only 6 of Mark’s, Mallette indicates that Mark’s was more successful well into the late Middle Ages (211; 215).
As will be demonstrated in the final section of this chapter, Dante may have been influenced by these fabricated and prejudiced biographical accounts. Because Dante did not know Arabic – at least not well enough to read and write – Mark of Toledo, and possibly Robert of Ketton, offered a linguistic bridge between the Arabic and Latin tongues.

2 Dante and Brunetto Latini

Florentine philosopher Brunetto Latini (c. 1220-1294) was a prominent figure in the city’s scholarly circle as well as in Dante’s intellectual life. Though Dante places Brunetto in Hell among the sodomites in canto XV, the two were known to have shared a close bond, in which Brunetto taught Dante a great deal about Aristotelian philosophy – and also possibly about Islam. In 1260, five years before Dante’s birth, Brunetto spent time in Seville at the court of Alfonso X of Castille. One year later he travelled to Toledo as a Florentine ambassador, allowing Brunetto to have frequent contact with Muslim scholars (Corti 194). Upon his return from Spain, Brunetto was exiled from Florence, yet still maintained correspondence and friendships with Alfonso X and several of the translators whom he had encountered at the Toledan School. Hence, Corti rightfully identifies him as an intermediary between the Arabic-Castilian and Florentine cultures.

Brunetto played a crucial part in Dante’s exposure to Latin translations of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, the textual foundation for the *Convivio*. During the late thirteenth century there were several Latin translations of Aristotle’s work, including one from the Greek by Robert Grosseteste (c. 1175-1253) entitled *Translatio Lincolniensis* or *Liber ethicorum*, as well as a translation from the Arabic entitled *Translatio Alexandrina* or *Summa Alexandrinorum*,
attributed to Toledan translator Herman the German (Corti 191-192). While the first translation was considered to be quite faithful to the original and was used by St. Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus among others, it was not used by Dante (Corti 191). Instead, Dante used the *Translatio Alexandrina*, which, although was not the first choice of many Aristotelian scholars, was brought to Dante by his trusted teacher, Brunetto. It is significant to note that during the composition of this translation, Herman consulted only Arabs, hence Dante was reading Aristotle through yet another Arabic filter. Thus, Brunetto facilitated the flow between Florentine and Islamic ideas, and consequently welcomed Dante into this cultural interdiscursivity.

Brunetto may have also contributed to Dante’s knowledge of Islam through his most famous work, the *Trésor*. In this medieval encyclopedia, Brunetto mentions the legend of Mohammad as an impostor and heretic. Considering Dante’s intellectual relationship with Brunetto, it is probable that Dante would have read his mentor’s most extensive work after Brunetto’s return to Florence in 1266. Although Brunetto’s work contained many

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40 It is uncertain whether Dante was actually Brunetto’s student, especially considering how lofty a position Brunetto held in Florence. Instead, Julia Bolton Holloway suggests that the two men’s relationship was more likely to have been one of intellectual exchange, similar to that of Plato and Socrates (xvii).

41 According to Corti, the Toledan School often had the custom of consulting Jews for translations of Arabic texts, thus making Herman’s case an exception (192).

42 “Thenceforward, the strength of Holy Church grew near and far, on this side of the sea and the other, until the time of Heraclius, who was emperor of Rome 618 years after the birth of Jesus Christ; and he reigned for 31 years, in the days of Constantine and his sons who reigned after him. The Saracens of Persia won great victories and had great military engagements against the Christians in Jerusalem, and they burned the churches and also carried off the wood of the Holy Cross, and they led away into captivity the patriarch and many others; yet, in the end, Heraclius the emperor went and killed the king of Persia and brought back the prisoners and the Holy Cross, and subjected the Persians to the law of Rome. Afterwards the evil preacher Mohammad, who was a monk, went there, and he led them away from the good faith and into error” (I.88.1).

43 Asin Palacios’ *La Escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia* was met with many attacks for its inability to prove that Dante actually read any of the Islamic texts that were his supposed influences. In defence, Asin Palacios suggested Brunetto Latini as a probable source for Dante to have learned about Islam (Gabrieli 174).
misrepresentations about Islam, it did outline the general role of the Prophet as the religious figurehead of Islam, and discuss the concept of the Muslim afterlife. Thus, since Dante had a bond with Brunetto and probably read his *Trésor*, or at the very least, was aware of its contents, he would have learned about aspects of Islam – albeit denigrating ones – through at least one source.

3 Dante and Riccoldo da Monte Croce

Another contemporary of Dante who is likely to have shaped his perception of Islam – whether directly or through their shared acquaintances or intellectual circles – is Dominican friar and missionary Riccoldo da Monte Croce (c. 1243-1320). A Florentine native, Riccoldo began lecturing at Santa Maria Novella upon his entrance into the Dominican order in 1267 (Schildgen 2007, 120). Since Dante likely attended the Dominican *studium* at this church, it is also possible that he would have encountered the friar in passing. In 1288, Riccoldo began his missionary voyage to the Orient, travelling through Palestine, Syria and Iraq, where he not only preached the Christian message to the Muslims, Mongols and other non-Christians he encountered, but also dedicated himself to learning about Islamic theology and the Arabic language. Aware that the violence of the Crusades was proving unsuccessful in curbing the spread of Islam, Riccoldo

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44 In *Convivio* 2.12, Dante indicates that he attended the “scuole de’religiosi”; he does not specify which one. As such, this could include the *Studium* of Santa Maria Novella, while Santa Croce and Santo Spirito are also possible locations. For more on the importance of Santa Maria Novella during Dante’s time, see M. Michele Mulchahey’s “Education in Dante’s Florence Revisited: Remigio de’ Girolami and the Schools of Santa Maria Novella”, especially 167-170.
recognized that knowledge of the Other would act as a much more powerful weapon. Through his studies, Riccoldo learned that the success of Islam lay in the fact that it was an easier religion to practice and believe, and that it did not depend on any sort of ecclesiastical hierarchy like that of Christianity. Nonetheless, Riccoldo used this information to attack Islam’s doctrine as being far too lenient, convoluted and irrational, and did not acknowledge any of the similarities between Islam and Christianity, (Southern, R.W. 1962, 69-70) although he was sure to have learned about them through his studies in the East.

Riccoldo remained in Baghdad for eight years and is believed to have returned to Florence around 1300 (Schildgen 2007, 120). If this is the case, he may have met Dante again prior to the poet’s exile from Florence, and could have shared his knowledge of Islam with Dante. During his travels, Riccoldo wrote his major work, a detailed refutation of the Qur’an, entitled *Contra legem saracenorum*, which circulated in Florence during the early 1300s. It survives today in 29 known manuscripts, indicating its considerable circulation (Mallette 214). In this text, Riccoldo includes a version of the *Mi’raj*, accompanied with his own anti-Islamic commentary. Riccoldo viewed this account of the Prophet’s ascension as preposterous and completely fabricated (Schildgen 2007, 120). While some Islamic scholars viewed the *Mi’raj* as an actual event, Sufi mystics such as al’Gazāli interpreted it as a symbolic representation of human ecstasy. Since Dante had great interest in Sufi mysticism, he may have paid particular attention to the *Mi’raj* – possibly provided to him by Riccoldo – as a model for salvation and mystical ascent to God (Schildgen 2007, 121-123), which he would consequently apply to the *Commedia*.  

45 While in Baghdad in 1291, Riccoldo learned of the fall of Acre to the Muslims, prompting him to write an Epistle to God, lamenting the failure of past Christian missionaries to stop Islamic hegemony (Da Monte Croce 268-269). This thus prompted him to delve further into Islamic doctrine and build a stronger understanding of the enemy.
It is also possible that Dante did not learn about the commentary on the Mi’raj directly through Ricoldo, but through Florentine poet Fazio degli Uberti. In his didactic poem *Dittamondo*, Fazio not only discusses Ricoldo’s knowledge of Islam, but even makes a clear reference to the *Book of the Ladder* when dealing with the topic of this threatening religion. Later in this chapter, I will show how Dante’s detailed depiction of Mohammad’s suffering suggests that the poet read Ricoldo’s work. Although Dante’s learning about Islam was surely not limited to the Latin translations of the Qur’an and to his two Florentine contemporaries, the consideration of these sources highlights the interdiscursive nature of Orientalist ideas, as information is seen flowing between generations, cultures and minds.

4 Dante and Cangrande della Scala

Dante may have also learned about Islam through his relationship with Cangrande della Scala, the imperial vicar of Verona and Vicenza. In Epistle XIII, Dante addresses Cangrande, dedicating the final canticle of his work, *Paradiso*, to him:

46 “L’arabico linguaggio qui appresi; / la legge Alcoran di Macometto / di punto in punto per latin distesi. / Poi di qua venni e Ricoldo m’è detto” (5.9.109-112).

47 “Ancor nel libro suo che Scala ha nome” (5.12.94-96). For more of Degli Uberti’s general discussion of Islam, see 5.7-15).

48 The epistle was referred to by several of the early commentators, including Guido da Pisa, Jacopo della Lana, l’Ottimo Commento, Pietro Alighieri, Boccaccio and Francesco da Buti – although none of them name Dante as its author. The epistle was first attributed to Dante Filippo Villani in the early fifteenth century (Hollander 4). However, since beginning in the early 1700s, several studies emerged questioning the authenticity of Dante’s authorship of the Epistle (Pietropaolo 196). For a detailed discussion see Pietropaolo’s *Dante Studies in the Age of Vico*, especially 195-200. See also Hollander’s *Dante’s Epistle to Cangrande* (1993), and later, H. Ansgar Kelly’s response to Hollander, and Hollander’s response to Kelly, both published in 1994.
Magnifico atque victorioso domino domino Cani Grandi de la Scala sacratissimi Cesarei Principatus in urbe Verona et civitate Vicentie Vicario Generali devotissimus suus Dantes Alagherii florentinus natione non moribus, vitam orat per tempora diuturna felicem et gloriis nominis perpetuum incrementum [...] Neque ipsi preheminentie vestre congruum comperi magis quam Comedie sublimem canticam que decoratur titulo Paradisi; et illam sub presenti epistola, tanquam sub epigrammate proprio dedicatam, vobis ascribo, vobis offero, vobis denique recommendo. (1; 11)

The letter, which offers Dante’s interpretation of his own poem, also identifies Cangrande as Dante’s patron. For a medieval nobleman, Cangrande was particularly tolerant of other cultures. He often welcomed non-Christian scholars to his court and showed an avid interest in Islamic traditions. The extent of Cangrande’s interest in Islam became a matter of considerable attention well after his time. On July 27, 1921, the six hundredth anniversary of Dante’s death, the city of Verona opened Cangrande’s tomb with the intention of finding an original manuscript of Dante’s Paradiso or the Epistle to his patron (Battistoni and Hall 250). While the city was disappointed to find neither of these works in the tomb, the way in which Cangrande was buried proved intriguing: he was found carefully embalmed and wrapped in a shroud of fabric typical of an Islamic burial. One of the fabrics was detailed with a series of astronomical animals, symbolizing the path that the soul of the dead must follow as it travels through the astral worlds, while another fabric was woven with an Arabic eulogy calling out to Allah (Battistoni and Hall 250). This curious burial of a Christian nobleman indicates that Cangrande himself and the members of his court were acquainted with Islamic customs and ideas, including burial traditions and the concept of the afterlife. Consequently, Dante too may have inherited such knowledge

49 Cangrande invited a friend of Dante’s, Manoello Giudeo, also known as Immanuel of Rome, to his court, demonstrating his tolerance towards the Jews as well (Battistoni and Hall 256).

50 For a detailed study of Cangrande’s tomb, see Ernst J. Grube’s “Il problema delle stoffe di Cangrande”.
during the time he spent at Cangrande’s court and through his interactions with the vicar.\textsuperscript{51}

Although no direct source for Dante’s conception of Islam has been successfully identified, the Dantean scholar “deve inventarsi dubbi, distinzioni e principi chiarificatori” (Corti 202). As part of this process, the consideration of the long tradition of Islamic study in the West helps to unravel what contributed to Dante’s own horizon of expectations.

5 Dante’s Fleeting References to the Muslim World

Asin Palacios began his quest to identify the direct influence of Islamic portrayals of the afterlife on Dante’s \textit{Commedia} with his controversial book, \textit{Islam and the Divine Comedy}, published in 1919, tracing the similarities between Dante’s work and those of various Islamic scholars; and, on a broader scale, Palacios’ book ignited a discourse on the degree of interaction and exchange of cultural influences between Christians and Muslims.\textsuperscript{52} Although the rest of this chapter will look at each of Dante’s references to Islam, my chief aim is unlike that of Asin Palacios. Rather than attempting to establish the amount of information that the poet borrowed from Islamic sources, I wish to clarify how what Dante knew about Islam formed his personal perception of

\textsuperscript{51} Dante had visited Verona several times throughout his life, and between 1315 and 1318 he remained there as Cangrande’s honoured guest (Ruud 2008, 14-15).

\textsuperscript{52} Palacios’ book generated much controversy, especially among Christian literary circles, as there was an unwillingness to accept the role of the Arabic language and literature in the works of Romance vernacular poets, like Dante. Although there was textual evidence to support the claim that Romance literature had drawn from Islamic sources, as Akbari explains, this largely fell “on deaf ears [...] due to an unwillingness to acknowledge the permeability of the cultural veil that separated Christianity and Muslim communities” (2013, 5) during the Middle Ages. According to Akbari, it was especially with the 1987 work of Maria Rosa Menocal that the discussion surrounding Islamic influence on medieval and early modern literature and culture reopened, with a particular focus on Spain (Akbari 2013, 5) and consequently, a reconsideration of Palacios’ work as well. Of Menocal’s book \textit{The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History}, see chapter five in particular, entitled “Italy, Dante, and the Anxieties of Influence”, p. 137-154.
the Muslim Other, and how these perceptions took shape in the *Commedia*. While Dante’s portrayal of Mohammad and Ali has usually acted as the focal point for most Dantean scholars interested in Islam, I will begin by first analyzing those minor and often ignored references to the Oriental world, as these seemingly insignificant images will contribute to understanding the poet’s depiction of the headship of Islam.

The first blatant reference to Islam occurs in canto VIII of the *Inferno*, as Dante the Pilgrim and Virgil approach the gloom-ridden city, Dis and catch a glimpse of the tall, flaming mosques looming in the distance:

```
Lo buon maestro disse: "Omai, figliuolo, s'appressa la città c'ha nome Dite, coi gravi cittadin, col grande stuolo."
E io: "Maestro, già le sue meschite là entro certe ne la valle cerno, vermiglie come se di foco uscite fossero." Ed ei mi disse: "Il foco eterno ch'entro l'affoca le dimostra rosse, come tu vedi in questo basso inferno." (*Inf.* VIII, 67-75)
```

This at once reveals that Dante, who had not travelled to the East, was well aware of the existence of mosques as centres of Muslim worship. Their visibility in the distance indicates that Dante had an architectural concept of a mosque, built with tall minarets used to call Muslims to prayer.\(^{53}\) Scholars such as Mary Alexandra Watt have interpreted the flames engulfing the mosques as the poet’s attempt to equate the Islamic world with Hell (Watt 22). However, Dante may have merely borrowed the exact image of the burning towers from the *Book of the Ladder*.

In the Latin translation, Mohammad sees that the devil’s dominion is surrounded by tall towers and other buildings that burn with black fire: “muri, turres, moenia et domus omnes […]

\(^{53}\) For more information on how the minaret became understood as an architectural feature inherent in Islam, see Jonathan M. Bloom’s *Minaret: Symbol of Islam*, especially 175-191.
de igne valde nigro, qui ardet continuo in se ipso” (Cerulli par. 150). Hence, rather than
revealing Dante’s hatred toward Islam, Dante’s depiction of the burning mosques may have been
an image which was readily available to him through his reading of the Book of the Ladder, or
his knowledge of it through Riccoldo da Monte Croce. Just as the tall blazing towers and
walls in the Book of the Ladder guard the abode of the Devil, marking his profane territory, so
too does Dante incorporate the burning mosques as the markers of a fortress dividing the
transgressors of lesser sins (i.e. lust, gluttony, greed, wrath) from those of the far more grave sins
(i.e. heresy, violence, fraud, treachery), including the greatest sinner of all, Satan, in the deepest
pit of Dis.

I would also suggest an alternative way of interpreting Dante’s mosques, by considering
them as representations of man’s attempt to use his mortal intellect and skill to reach God,
un-guided by reason. Through the works of Avicenna and Averroes, medieval Europeans
regarded Islam as a religion which exalts intellect above all else, thus allowing man the potential
to achieve intellect equal to that of God (Akbari 268). The tall height of the minarets, visible to
Dante and Virgil from afar, suggests man’s longing to reach the untouchable intelligence of the
heavens, for as best stated by Akbari, “The dangerous allure of Islam, for Dante, lay precisely in
its elevation of intellect, and its promise of transcendent experience mediated through the mind”
(269).

Corti concludes that while the Book of the Ladder was a source that Dante may have referred to, not only is it
unlikely that he did so directly, but also it certainly was not the only one. Instead, he blended together a variety of
textual references in order to enrich the imaginative framework of the Commedia (202).
Most of Dante’s allusions to Islam occur in the *Inferno*, for the obvious reason that non-
Christians are generally incapable of salvation.\(^{55}\) However, Dante mentions Muslim women in
canto XXIII of *Purgatorio*, a place of redemption on the eventual path of salvation, and once
again reveals his knowledge about the Muslim inhabitants of the Mediterranean and the Near
East:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{O dolce frate, che vuoi tu ch’io dica?} \\
&\text{Tempo futuro m’è già nel cospetto,} \\
&\text{cui non sarà quest’ ora molto antica,} \\
&\text{nel qual sarà in pergamo interdetto} \\
&\text{a le sfacciate donne fiorentine} \\
&\text{l’andar mostrando con le poppe il petto} \\
&\text{Quai barbare fuor mai, quai saracine,} \\
&\text{cui bisognasse, par farle ir coperte,} \\
&\text{o spirituali o altre discipline? (Purg. XXIII, 97-105)}
\end{align*}
\]

In the voice of his childhood friend Forese Donati, Dante draws attention to an underlying theme
throughout the whole work: the state of corruption in Florence,\(^{56}\) and in this case, he is focusing
on the immoral nature of Florentine women. These lines indicate that Dante was aware of the
fact that Muslim women, despite the excessive inclination to lust generally attributed to them by
Christian observers, dressed more modestly than Florentine women, who were therefore to be
judged more harshly. As a reader of Aquinas, Dante was most likely aware of the negative
portrayal of Islam in Aquinas’ *Summa contra gentiles*, in which the saint portrays Mohammad as
a man motivated by carnal pleasures and completely void of spirituality.\(^{57}\) Yet Dante chose not

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\(^{55}\) Roman military leader Cato the Younger (95 BC-46 BC) is an exception to this rule. Dante encounters him in
canto I of *Purgatorio*, as the guardian of the mountain. Cato’s place among the repentant has been the topic of much
debate, for he was both a pagan and a suicide.

\(^{56}\) Florence and most of the central and northern city-states of the Italian peninsula were in a state of turmoil during
the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The city-states were not only divided internally, but were also in conflict with
each other.

\(^{57}\) “Mahumeto qui carnalium voluptatum promissis, ad quorum desiderium carnalis concupiscientia instigat, populus
illexit. [P]raecepta etiam tradidit promissis conformia, voluptati carnali habenas relaxans, in quibus in promptu est a
carnalibus hominibus obediri” (*Summa contra gentiles* 2,1.6.7).
to focus on Aquinas’ carnal depiction of the Prophet, and instead referred to other sources. He may have learned about Muslim clothing through the translated suras of Mark of Toledo’s Qur’an, from Riccoldo’s writings on Islam, or from one of the many missionaries and merchants who had brought first-hand accounts of the Orient to Florence. By the early 1300s, these travellers began to realize that Islam was actually not a religion of licentiousness, and that its women were in fact ultimate examples of modesty (Southern 1973, 136). This passage identifies Dante as a learned man who does not follow the prejudices of Islam held by many of his predecessors, while also reveals his ingenious attempt to use the otherness of Muslim women in order to highlight the negative traits of his own people. Dante knew that his contemporaries would tend to expect the worst and most barbaric behaviour from these women, and thus uses them to highlight that even Muslim women are more respectable than Florentine ones. Although Dante may not be praising Islam, by presenting Saracen women as more demure than those of Florence, Dante strategically calls on his contemporary readers to recognize the need for change among themselves before trying to impose change on others.

Another brief reference to the Orient is made in Purgatorio. In canto I, the pilgrim describes the image and sensation before him after leaving the brutality of Hell behind him, and opening his eyes in Purgatory, a place of new hope:

Dolce color d'oriental zaffiro,
che s'accoglieva nel sereno aspetto
del mezzo, puro infino al primo giro,
a li occhi miei ricominciò diletto,
tosto ch'io usci' fuor de l'aura morta
che m'avea contristati li occhi e 'l petto. (Purg. I, 13-18)

Dante calls on the image of the Far East, the untouchable Orient of Earthly Paradise, to arouse the sentiment of wonder and awe associated with this far-off place. While the image of the Near East or Muslim-inhabited Mediterranean would have conjured thoughts of fear and anxiety in the
medieval man, Dante uses the distant Orient, with its exoticism and mystery, as a place yet to be explored, and thus untainted and full of hope. Schildgen identifies Dante’s use of a specifically Oriental gem, the sapphire, as a key detail. Usually associated with India, the Western world tied the transparent blue of the gem to the early morning light believed to shine in the East (2002, 123). Dante once again calls on another world for the sake of contrast: while the image of the modest Muslim women emphasizes the corruption of Florentine society, the calm-inducing blue light of the sapphire marks the shift the pilgrim feels as he leaves behind the gloom and hopelessness of the *Inferno*.

6 Dante and the Virtuous Muslims

In canto IV of the *Inferno*, Dante enters into Limbo, the inner rim of the underworld, whose sinners are the ultimate outsiders, belonging neither to the realm of the damned nor that of the saved. The inhabitants of Limbo are those who did not receive the sacrament of baptism, or those who had the misfortune of being born before Christianity, including Dante’s guide, Virgil. Yet, among the souls trapped in the hem of Hell, three Islamic figures stand out as exceptions to the rules of Limbo: Avicenna, Averroes and Saladin. Dante’s inclusion of these three men, born after the establishment of Christendom and aware of Christ’s existence, proves worthy of analysis.

Persian philosopher Avicenna appears in line 143 of canto IV, alongside Andalusian polymath Averroes, listed among the revered sages of antiquity; the two men are the only philosophers in this group privy to Christian revelation. Regardless of his religion, Avicenna (c. 980-1037) was a respected and widely read philosopher in the Christian Middle Ages. Drawing from Islamic sources as well as from Greek sources such as Aristotle, Avicenna offered Christian
scholars interpretations of classical works through an Islamic filter. Avicenna was renowned for his knowledge of astronomy, chemistry, mathematics, Islamic theology, logic, Neo-Platonist and Aristotelian philosophy. Dante was a known admirer of the polymath, referring to Avicenna throughout the *Convivio*, from his theory on the density of the galaxy (II, XIV, 7), to his view on the nobility of the human soul (IV, XXI, 2).

Dante had an even greater admiration and appreciation for Averroes (1126-1198), for rather than just mentioning his name, the poet honours him calling him “Averoìs che ’l gran comento feo” (*Inf.* IV, 144). Referring to Averroes’ extensive commentary on the Arabic translations of Aristotle, Dante is paying tribute to him for having made these ancient works accessible to him. For Dante, Aristotle’s system of moral virtues proved imperative to his creation of the *Commedia*. Even though Aristotle was a philosopher, not a theologian, Dante still found a way to apply the notions in the *Nichomachean Ethics* to his work, just as Averroes used Aristotle’s philosophy in conjunction with his study of Islamic theology. Hence, Dante is reliant on Averroes to interpret Aristotle, who, in the poet’s eyes, is the philosopher *par excellence*. Dante’s fondness for Averroes is even more surprising given that the Islamic philosopher was from the Muslim and Christian inhabited al-Andalus. Being directly exposed to Christendom in his daily life, there is no denying that Averroes had an in-depth knowledge of the faith that he still chose to refute. Furthermore, Averroes was not received well by all. His commentary on Aristotle’s *De anima* generated so much controversy in thirteenth-century

58 For more information on how Dante incorporated Aristotle’s *Ethics* in the *Commedia*, see William Henry Vincent Reade’s *The Moral System of Dante’s *‘Inferno’*, especially the chapter entitled “The Circles of Incontinence” (382-403). For an analysis of Averroes’ application of Aristotelian philosophy to Islamic doctrine see Oliver Leaman’s *Averroes and His Philosophy*, especially the chapters entitled “Divine Law and Human Wishes” (119-143), “What Can God Do?” (42-81) and “The Soul and Essence” (82-118).

59 As Glenn W. Most notes, Dante’s admiration for Aristotle is accentuated by the fact that Dante rarely names him. Instead, Dante refers to him with several dignified titles, including “’l maestro di color che sanno” in *Inferno* 4.131, “lo Filosofo” in *Convivio* I.1, 1 or “Phylosophus” in *De monarchia* 1.10.6 (21).
Christendom that in 1277 a papal interdiction at the University of Paris prohibited it from being taught and circulated (Schildgen 2007, 114). Yet, none of these factors had an effect on Dante’s admiration of him. Even though Avicenna and Averroes’ lack of baptism was volitional, Dante admits them into Limbo, the only “privileged” place in the *Inferno*, in recognition of the debt that Christianity, and specifically Dante, owed to these Islamic philosophers (Southern 1962, 55-56). This highlights a certain level of tolerance in Dante, focusing more on the importance of rational thought and philosophical prowess than on religious practice.

Dante may have also admitted the Islamic polymaths into Limbo in order to reflect the philosophical dialogue that they created. Avicenna was somewhat of a controversial figure in medieval Christendom due to his views on the human inability to ever completely know his Creator. As emphasized in the final canto of *Paradiso*, Christian theology professes that the ultimate reward for the blessed lies in the promise that they will have a direct vision of God in Paradise. This is yet another point of contention that Islam, and consequently Avicenna, has with Christianity, causing many Christian theologians and philosophers to rebuke Avicenna. In 1250 Aquinas produced an extensive response to Avicenna, where he adhered to the Christian tenet that the saved would indeed see God upon entrance into Paradise. As Southern points out, Aquinas used the views of Averroes to refute those of Avicenna, therefore indicating that “If, then, the error was that of Avicenna, the language of defence was that of Averroes” (1962, 55). 60 Hence, Dante may have included both men for the discourse that their opposing views would provoke, and how this could aid in the teaching of Christian theology.

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60 For more information on Aquinas’ use of the philosophy of Avicenna and Averroes in contrast with one another, see Etienne Gilson’s *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, especially the chapters entitled “The Proof of the Existence of God” (53-83) and “The Thomistic Reform” (137-174).
To say that Dante was anti-Islamic would be inaccurate. Although this may seem to be a bold statement, Virgil’s words to the pilgrim explaining the state of the souls in Limbo supports it:

\[
\text{Lo buon maestro a me: "Tu non dimandi che spiriti son questi che tu vedi?}
\]
\[
\text{Or vo’ che sappi, innanzi che più andi,}
\]
\[
\text{ch’ei non peccaro; e s’elli hanno mercedi,}
\]
\[
\text{non basta, perché non ebber battesmo,}
\]
\[
\text{ch’è porta de la fede che tu credi;}
\]
\[
\text{e s’ e’ furon dinanzi al cristianesmo,}
\]
\[
\text{non adorar debitamente a Dio. (Inf. IV, 31-38)}
\]

Virgil plainly states that those in Limbo did not sin; hence, according to Dante, Avicenna and Averroes’ choice to follow Islam is not enough to identify them as transgressors. Dante ignores Limbo’s rule to include only those who were involuntarily baptised or born pre-Christendom, reserving the best possible place of the underworld for Avicenna and Averroes, as brilliant philosophers who facilitated Dante in the development of his own work and in his understanding of Christian theology. Dante’s loophole which allows him to keep Avicenna just outside the torments of hell lies plainly in one word: philosophy. As elucidated by Akbari, “for Dante, these men’s common allegiance to the pursuit of truth through means of the intellect makes them members of a single ‘philosophical family’ (filosofica famiglia [Inf. IV, 132]), a family whose bonds continue into the afterworld” (266).

Dante’s choice to grant Avicenna and Averroes a place in Limbo thus seems justifiable: he does not view the two Muslim polymaths as a threat to Christianity, but rather as facilitators of a certain knowledge that would have been inaccessible to him and his contemporaries. Yet, Dante’s inclusion of Muslim military leader and sultan, Saladin, proves far more perplexing.
Saladin (c. 1138-1193), as he was known throughout Europe, had a particularly aggressive relationship with the Christian world. As a key player during the Third Crusade, Saladin seized Christian inhabited territories numerous times, most notably capturing Jerusalem in 1187. News of Saladin’s military successes in Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia had reached the Christian West, and, although he was feared, he was also admired for his reputation as a just and noble commander. In fact, upon his invasion of the Holy Land, many Christians welcomed Saladin as their new and capable leader who would bring them stability and peace. Like Avicenna and Averroes, Saladin voluntarily refused Christianity; yet, the Muslim Sultan went even further, invading his Christian enemies. Regardless of Saladin’s volatile anti-Christian position, Dante places him in Limbo among ancient sages who did not actively participate in the battle against Christendom. However, Dante does not simply list Saladin as a companion of these figures of antiquity. Instead, Dante specifies the sultan’s spatial position saying, “e solo, in parte, vidi ‘l Saladino” (Inf. IV, 129). Dante’s decision to separate Saladin from his fellow residents in Limbo alerts the reader to consider the Muslim as a man possessing some unique characteristic.

During the Middle Ages, Saladin was regarded as a romantic figure; his historical role as an enemy of the Church was often ignored. As discussed in the previous chapter, the stereotype of the wicked Saracen was diffused throughout the West in the eighth century. Yet, there was a progressive softening of this image as the centuries moved forward and there was more contact with Islam. The image of the “noble Saracen” became more prevalent due, in large part, to the European chronicles and literary works inspired by the romantic figure of Saladin (Hoeppner

61 The Islamic world referred to him as Sultan Yūsuf ibn Ayyūb, surnamed Salah ad-Dīn (Akbari 266).

62 For a detailed discussion of the Christian response to Saladin in Jerusalem see Geoffrey Regan’s Saladin and the Fall of Jerusalem, especially his chapter entitled “The Siege of Jerusalem” (135-155).
One of the most widely circulated sources on the Crusades during the 1300s was William of Tyre’s (c. 1130-1186) Latin chronicle. With 71 known manuscripts, Dante was likely to have consulted William’s account (Schildgen 2002, 49). William’s work presents Saladin as a remarkable military leader, able to unite the Muslims within his kingdom and beyond, in order to fight for a common cause (Krey, A. C. 159). As Southern explains, “We must ask of these minor characters not ‘what light does their place in the Comedy throw on Dante’s attitude to their character or achievement as a whole?’ but only: ‘what characteristic, however unimportant or illusory, justifies their being placed where they are?’” (1973, 135). With Saladin, his lack of baptism renders him incapable of salvation, while his uniting abilities as a valiant leader allow him to escape the tortures of the Inferno.

Dante’s deliberate separation of Saladin from his companions in Limbo is not the only spatial metaphor that applies to the sultan. The members of the “nobile castello” (Inf. IV, 106) of Limbo are composed of three main groups: philosophers, poets and warriors or political figures. Averroes is placed last among the warriors and political heads, and Dante places himself last among the great poets of “la bella scola” (Inf. IV, 94). As discerned by Akbari, the symmetrical alignment draws a link between the three men, indicating that Dante has something in common with each: rational philosophical ability and munificence (268). Saladin is further connected to Dante as a figure of exile. By being positioned “Solo, in parte”, Saladin is the most excluded member of Limbo. As a resident of the in-between, he is already in a state of exile, not quite inside or outside of Hell. Paired with his spatial position apart from his neighbours, and his...
place as the last listed warrior of Limbo, Dante seems to be creating a spatial metaphor for himself: exiled from Florence, yet still always a part of it (Akbari 268). Regarding the virtuous Muslims in Dante’s Limbo, Said says, “[... ] Saladin, Averroes and Avicenna are fixed in a visionary cosmology – fixed, laid out, boxed in, imprisoned, without much regard for anything except their “function” and the patterns they realize on the stage in which they appear” (69-70). Dante does indeed fix each of these figures, and in particular Saladin, into his own romantic conception of who they were, as influenced by his horizon of expectations. In his understanding of them, Dante disregards any conflict that they may have had with the Christian world.

Although Dante’s view of these individuals may be fixed, his view of Islam is not.

Avicenna, Averroes and Saladin’s place in Limbo is an honourable one. Dante’s decision to assign them there does not reveal his hatred for the Muslims. On the contrary, the poet admires Avicenna and Averroes as non-Christian individuals worthy of recognition for their significant contributions to philosophy and indirectly to the interpretation of Christian doctrine, and elevates Saladin as a model for the West of leadership and munificence. Dante is thus tolerant toward these Muslims, even honouring them with a place among those who “non peccaro”, and who in fact “hanno mercedi”. Although the residents of Limbo are “sospesi” (Inf. IV, 45) between salvation and damnation, in canto VII of Purgatorio, Dante further emphasizes that they remain virtuous individuals in the eyes of God: “quivi sto io con quei che le tre sante / virtù non si vestiro, e senza vizio / conobber l'altre e seguir tutte quante” (Purg. VII, 34-36). Gregory B. Stone dissects these lines, explaining that Virgil differentiates between the theological virtues (“le tre sante”) and the cardinal virtues (“tutte quante”); discussing his place in Limbo, Virgil explains that while his lack of Christian revelation leaves him without the theological virtues, his sinlessness allows him to possess the cardinal virtues (Stone 87).

Consequently, Virgil’s logic also applies to his comrades in Limbo, including the three
honourable Muslims. By Dante the Poet placing them close to Dante the Pilgrim, he may have also been alluding to the advancement of the Muslim world, which in Dante’s day had already established a strong presence within the Mediterranean (Akbari 268). Their proximity to him seems symbolic of the frequent interaction between East and West, and more specifically, of Dante’s knowledge of these foreign peoples. As the next section on Mohammad and Ali will demonstrate, Dante was not threatened by the Muslim people, their traditions, or even their beliefs, but rather by the division that this new religion had rapidly managed to create in the West. Therefore, Dante does not assign the stigma of the wicked Saracen upon the three Muslims in Limbo; instead he grants them the best possible fate for men who willingly rejected Christ.

7 Dante and the Headship of Islam

7.1 The contrapasso

Dante’s placement of Mohammad and Ali in the deep bowels of Hell so close to Satan, the embodiment of all evil, seems to suggest the poet’s extreme hatred for the two main figures of Islam, and thus for the religion that they helped to establish. However, upon closer analysis of what Dante condemns them for, it becomes clear that their vividly horrific fate does not identify Dante as an anti-Islamic medieval man. Dante’s conception of Mohammad, the prophet of a new religion, as a schismatic may seem odd to modern readers. Yet, it is likely that the poet’s source for biographical information on Mohammad came from the various polemical accounts such as the Vitae Mahometi (Martinez Gásquez 80). As noted in the previous chapter, such accounts
presented Mohammad as a Christian monk or cardinal who, after failing to become pope, founded his own heretical religion.

Dante’s depiction of Ali as a schismatic as well indicates that Dante was aware of Ali’s role in the split created between Shi’a and Sunni Islam. Although revered as a heroic figure in the Islamic world, Dante condemns Ali for his divisive acts, splitting the core of a once unified Islam in two. Each man’s schismatic sin becomes manifest in his physical suffering in Hell. Mohammad, who in Dante’s eyes created a major divide in the Orient which quickly spread to the Mediterranean, has the Prophet’s entire body sliced apart from his chin to his farting place, and his bowels vulgarly on display. Meanwhile, Ali, who created division on a smaller scale in the headship of Islam, is cut open only from his chin to his forelock. Dante’s desire for a unified universal monarchy (a topic explored further in the following chapter) could not ever be realized with the existence of such divisive individuals. This disunity was underscored as a weakness, giving hope to Christendom that Islam could possibly be defeated. However, this hope was easily shattered as Muslim forces continued to invade the West.

Mohammad and Ali’s ripped open bodies, reflecting the schismatic nature of their sin, provide a prime example of Dante’s contrapasso, the retributive law which governs his entire Inferno. Interestingly, Mohammad’s canto is the only one in which the contrapasso is explicitly mentioned. Bertran de Born, known in the Middle Ages as a French troubadour who provoked King Henry II and his son to turn against each other, utters the word in the final line of the canto:

E perché tu di me novella porti,
sappi ch’i’ son Bertram dal Bornio, quelli
che diedi al re giovane i ma’ conforti.

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65 The Muslims were commonly regarded as scattered and disunited, in contrast to the Christians who envisioned themselves as a stronger community, united in a common faith (Akbari 221).
Io feci il padre e 'l figlio in sé ribelli;
Achitofèl non fé più d'Absalone
e di David coi malvagi punzelli.
Perch’io pari’ così giunte persone,
partito porto il mio cerebro, lasso!,
dal suo principio ch’è in questo troncone.
Così s’osserva in me lo contrapasso.” (Inf. XXVIII, 133-142)

The word *contrapasso* is the vulgarization of the Latin term *contrapassum*, used by Aquinas in his *Summa theologica*. Aquinas developed the term as a substitution for the Greek word for “retribution” found in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aquinas reserves a portion of his *Summa theologica* as a commentary on Aristotle’s works, and applies the philosopher’s concept of retribution to the Old Testament’s *lex talionis* (i.e. an eye for an eye). Medieval Christians viewed Judaism as an old religion which had been superseded by the doctrine ushered in by the birth of Christ. Moreover, its theology was considered to be based on the letter over the spirit, since it refuted the revelation of Christ and the Trinity.

While the blissful state of the souls in Paradise is depicted by Dante through beams of glorious light, and the fate of the penitent souls in Purgatory is illustrated through images and carvings, or the “visibile parlare” (*Purg. X, 95*), the anguish of the damned souls in Hell is displayed in a very tangible manner: Dante encounters each soul as a physical, suffering body, forced to endure an eternal fate which appropriately reflects the sin committed during life. As Akbari explains, “Just as the Old Law of the Jews, in the view of medieval Christians, carried out the administration of justice on the literal level of the flesh rather than the spiritual level of the

immortal soul, so too the bodily phenomenon of the ‘contrapasso’ in the *Inferno* makes visible to
the bodily eye the nature of the invisible punishment of the soul” (230).\(^6^7\) It seems very
appropriate that Dante use the term *contrapasso* – linked by Aquinas to the *lex talionis* of the
Jews – in Mohammad’s canto. While this may be interpreted as a sign that Dante was criticizing
Islam for what he believed to be a lack of spirituality, Corti offers a different source of
inspiration for Dante’s *contrapasso*, suggesting that he most likely borrowed the concept from
the *Book of the Ladder* (197). In this Castilian retelling of the Arabic *Mi’raj*, Mohammad travels
into the underworld, and in this case, it is the Prophet himself who encounters the schismatic:
“Ipse quidem michi respondens dixit quod erant illi qui verba seminant ut mittant discordiam
inter gentes” (par.199). Mohammad’s guide, the angel Gabriel, explains the violent sight before
them, as the bodies of the damned are sliced and tortured (par. 199-200). Mohammad is struck
by what he sees and he realizes that these punishments are specific to each sinner, an infernal
condemnation which directly reflects the transgression committed in life: “Sub hujusmodi
namque maniere vidi peccatores omnes qui, prout erant singulorum peccata, ita diverso modo
suppliciis torquebantur” (par. 201). If Dante did indeed read or have significant knowledge of
the *Book of the Ladder* – as Corti\(^6^8\) and others claim – then Dante’s portrayal of Mohammad
does not at all represent an attack on the perceived lasciviousness of Islam. Instead, Dante may
have used the term *contrapasso* in this canto since he acquired the concept from an Islamic
source and wished to draw the reader’s attention to his intertextual reference.

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\(^6^7\) For a comprehensive study of Dante’s *contrapasso* as the legal structure which guides his *Commedia*, see Justin
Steinberg’s *Dante and the Limits of Law*.

\(^6^8\) See especially 193-202.
Not only may Dante’s notion of the *contrapasso* have been inspired by an Islamic source, but the actual punishment he assigns to Mohammad calls the Islamic *al-sharh*, also known as the *shaqq al-sadr*, tradition to mind. During the time when Dante was writing his *Commedia*, various versions of the *al-sharh* tale were widely circulating throughout the Islamic world (Coffey 69). This mystical account involves God, sometimes through the mediation of angels, splitting Mohammad’s chest open and removing the impurity that lay within his heart; this act of splintering was meant to prepare the Prophet’s heart for his reception of the Qur’an so that he may begin his prophetic mission, and be sufficiently pure of heart in order to embark on his heavenly ascension. The *al-sharh* was largely part of the oral tradition, which was eventually transcribed in Arabic and circulated throughout the East. A version of this legend later reached Europe when a Latin version of the account was included in *De generatione Machumet et nutritura eius*; this version of the ascension narrative is the first known caricature of the Prophet Mohammad, and it was widely dispersed throughout France and beyond over one hundred and sixty years prior to Dante’s composition of the *Inferno* (Coffey 75), and it has been suggested by some that the legend reached Dante’s Florence, either through written or oral means.

Moreover, the *al-sharh* is also loosely referred to in the Qur’an: “Have We not expanded for you your breast, / And taken off from you your burden, / Which pressed heavily upon your back”

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69 Hadith compilations vary in the details regarding the timing of the *al-sharh*; some indicate that this event, which marked Mohammad as a chosen prophet of God, occurred during his childhood, while others state that it took place sometime during his early adult life, shortly before the Angel Gabriel appeared to him. For more information on the *al-sharh* tradition, see Uri Rubin’s *Eye of the Beholder*, especially p. 64-70.

70 In several versions of the *al-sharh*, including one by ninth-century Persian scholar, al-Tabari, this event in the Prophet’s life is presented as a necessary precursor allowing him to embark on the *mi’raj* (Coffey 70).

71 In the first vernacular translation of the Qur’an by sixteenth-century scholar and commentator, Andrea Arrivabene, Arrivabene makes a direct link between the legend of the splitting of Mohammad’s chest and Dante’s account of Mohammad in the *Inferno*. Furthermore, Arrivabene also demonstrates that the *al-sharh* account was widespread in Dante’s Italy (Coffey 76). For more on Arrivabene’s translation of the Qur’an and his views on its influence on Dante, see Alberto Saviello’s article, “Muhammad’s Multiple Faces: Printed Images of the Prophet in Western Europe”.
(94.1-3). Although a very brief allusion, it is clearly referring to the *al-sharh* account. Since it is probable that Dante would have consulted Mark of Ketton’s translation of the Qur’an, he would have been familiar with this sura, and the tradition surrounding it through his interactions with Riccoldo, Brunetto and others who had some knowledge of Islam. Although there is no evidence that Dante directly consulted any Islamic source, his concept of the *contrapasso* and his depiction of the Prophet’s torn open body imply that he was inspired by the Islamic tradition, as opposed to assigning a cruel fate upon two figureheads of a hated religion. Mallette notes that Mark of Toledo’s translation of the Qur’an adds to this sura, using vividly physical language in order to emphasize the action of the Prophet’s chest being opened (211).\(^{72}\) Dante takes an aspect of an Islamic narrative which is meant to depict the Prophet as traditionally pious and performs a “conspicuous inversion” (Coffey 33), infernalizing the image of the Prophet in order to allow it to belong in the depths of the underworld.\(^ {73}\) The splitting open of his body that Mohammad experienced during his life, is distorted within the context of the *Inferno* as punishment for the evisceration that Dante believed that the Prophet had caused through his founding of Islam. Rather that interpreting this as an attack against Islam, Dante is instead focusing his condemnation on the headship of Islam – who in his view instigated schism – and not on its followers, while also demonstrating his rather detailed knowledge about Islamic scriptures.

It would be foolish to assume that Dante did not actively seek information about the very religion that was threatening his own. There are two linguistic details in this canto which reinforce this hypothesis. Mohammad’s use of the word “risma” in the account of his eternal

\(^{72}\) “Nonne adaperui cor tuum / et remoui a te peccatum tuum / quod tibi disrupt dorsum?” (Mark of Toledo, Liber Alchorani, F.v.35, fol. 83r-v, as quoted in Mallette 211).

\(^{73}\) The poet’s efforts to infernalize a figure who is otherwise associated with holiness, is a process that Dante does repeatedly throughout his *Inferno*, as will be further discussed in chapter two’s analysis of the episode of Lucifer in connection to the Eucharist.
damnation is the first attested use of this word, which is still used today to refer to a ream of paper (Mallette 216). The word “risma” is etymologically Arabic, from the word “rizma” meaning “the bundles of rags used in the production of paper” (Mallette 216). Mallette notes that Dante’s use of the word is closer in meaning to the Arabic term, as Mohammad and the other schismatics are made to wear poor rags in Hell instead of the refined clothing they wore during their lives (217). This small detail strengthens the notion that the basis for Dante’s portrayal of Mohammad was influenced, whether directly or indirectly, by Islamic sources.

A similar case of Arabic linguistic borrowing occurs once again in this canto, only this time regarding Ali. Tatlock explains that since Dante rhymes the name “Ali” with the words “qui” and “così” (Inf. XXVIII, 32-34), he demonstrates a phonetic understanding of the Arabic language (195). The Florentine vulgate commonly used the plural word for wings, “ali”, which carries the accent on the first syllable. However, Tatlock proposes that Dante must have heard his name spoken by either a native Arabic speaker, or a Western traveller who had heard the correct pronunciation while in the Muslim world. Dante, the author of De vulgari eloquentia, demonstrated a keen interest in language, making it probable that he would have studied whatever he could about the phonology and semantics of foreign tongues in order to contribute to his argument about the supremacy of the ever-evolving Florentine tongue.

Dante’s illustration of Ali’s punishment also suggests that the poet had a far more in-depth knowledge of Islam than many critics have been led to believe.74 Dante was likely to have consulted William of Tyre’s chronicle for information on Ali. William’s work explained the

74 Southern, for example, concludes that Dante had little knowledge about Islam (Western Views of Islam 139), and even suggests that Dante confused the figure of Ali with the character of the heretical monk Sergius often found in the European biographies of the Prophet (1973, 138).
divide between the Shi’a and Sunni Muslims and the role that Ali played in this split (Tatlock 194). Furthermore, Tatlock notes that Dante’s Ali recalls the account of Ali’s death compiled by Arabic historians (193). In the Islamic accounts, Ali is killed when a sharp sword pierces the top of his forehead (Al-Jubouri 164). Dante may have borrowed this image of the “spada” as an essential tool required in Ali’s punishment from an Islamic source. While most Latin accounts about the establishment of Islam ignore Ali entirely, Dante not only includes him, but demonstrates that he knew about Ali’s function in the religion. Dante’s contrapasso for Ali mirrors the split he created in the headship of Islam, while also recalls the Islamic accounts of Ali’s death. In no other line in this canto or elsewhere in the Commedia does Dante attack Muslim beliefs. Instead, in canto XXVIII he uses specific Muslim figures, Mohammad and Ali, just as he uses specific political figures, such as Bertran de Born, each serving to highlight the sin of schism.

7.2 Schism versus Heresy

Dante’s choice to condemn Mohammad and Ali as schismatics instead of heretics is a significant detail. The heretics of the Commedia are found in canto X, in the sixth circle of the Inferno, as individuals who lived denying the immortality of the soul. Aquinas differentiates between schism and heresy, indicating that since “every sin is a schism” heretics are always schismatics,

75 Giulio Basetti-Sani proposes that Mohammad never truly rejected Christianity. He discusses the fifth and last suras of the Qur’an in which the Prophet decides to give up Judaism and the form of Christianity that he knew of; here he suggests that since the form of Christianity known to Mohammad was not an authentic one, he never knew the true doctrine of the Church, and he should thus be understood as having rejected a distortion of Christianity (303). If we assume that Dante read the Western translations of the Qur’an, he may have also taken into account that the Christianity known in the East was not the “true” one, further contributing to his degree of openness about Islam.
whereas heresy specifically “divides man from the unity of faith” (1-2. Q.39, Art.1). Stone applies Aquinas’ conception of schism versus heresy to Dante’s Mohammad and Ali, asserting that their sin of schism does not equate to a lack of faith (56). Dante perceived Islam as a religion founded on a strong faith – so strong that it managed to unite many people to follow Mohammad and Ali’s example of devotion and to respect them as leaders. As per Maria Esposito Frank, Dante “conceive[d] of Islam and Christianity not as separate civilizations but as one (even if not homogeneous and uniform). Within that world religious differences or controversies that tore apart Christendom appeared to Dante as battles between an orthodoxy and various heterodoxies rather than between Christians and infidels or pagans” (200). Because Dante conceived Islam as an offshoot of Christianity, yet not a heresy, he could not possibly have hated an entire religion which was based on his own.

Overall, Dante does not condemn the Muslim community, for their unified stance is precisely what allowed them to grow in strength, and is thus the model of what Dante longed for amongst his own people. However, while the followers of this religion are not to blame, its headship is at fault for their initial provocation of a division which transformed the Mediterranean into a place of constant strife. The way in which each medieval Christian author, and in particular Dante, portrays Mohammad, provides the “defining foil” (Reeves xi) for how he perceived Islam as a whole. For Dante, Mohammad is at the nucleus of Islam; yet, the Prophet is attacked out of the poet’s fear of division, not for the beliefs associated with his religion – otherwise, Dante would have surely placed him in the realm of the heretics. Since the schismatics are placed further into the depths of hell than the heretics, one cannot deny that Dante viewed heresy as less grave a sin than schism. Yet, while the schismatics are punished more severely for their divisiveness, faithlessness is not a factor in their fate.
The opening image of canto XXVIII further demonstrates that Dante’s condemnation of the schismatics in this circle of Hell is not religiously driven; the canto begins with four images of undeniably politically-motivated, rather than religiously-divisive, events in history:

che già, in su la fortunata terra
di Puglia, fu del suo sangue dolente
per li Troiani e per la lunga Guerra
che de l'anella fé sì alte spoglie,
icome Livio scrive, che non erra,
con quella che sentio di colpi doglie
per contastare a Ruberto Guiscardo;
e l'altra il cui ossame ancor s'accoglie
da Ceperan, là dove fu bugiardo
ciascun Pugliese, e là da Tagliacozzo,
dove sanz' arme vinse il vecchio Alardo;
e qual forato suo membro e qual mozzo
mostrasse, d'aequar sarebbe nulla
il modo de la nona bolgia sozzo. (Inf. XXVIII, 7-21)

In these verses, Dante refers to four battles, two ancient and two modern: first, he mentions the triumph of the Trojans, or the Romans, as descendants of Aeneas, during the Samnite wars in South and central Italy in the late fourth and early fourth centuries; second, he tells of the defeat of the Romans by the Carthaginians at Cannae in 216 BC; third, he mentions the triumph of the Normans over the Saracens in 1070; and fourth, he tells of Charles of Anjou’s victories over Manfred and Coradin in 1266 and 1268, respectively. Heather Coffey identifies the significance of these passages for building anticipation for the corporeal mutilation that will eventually culminate in the image of the suffering Prophet (33-34). While I agree that all four historical events are ones which involved bodily mutilation, I propose that it is the aspect of political strife that they all share which renders them effective images to open this canto. By extension, Dante is not preparing his reader for a canto which focuses on religious-based sin, but rather one which condemns divisive actions that inject strife within a once united community – whether that strife be religious or otherwise.
To further demonstrate that the canto of the schismatics is not one reserved for religious schismatics, note the difference between the sinners found in canto X and those found in canto XXVIII. Epicurus, Frederick II and Guido Cavalcanti of canto X are all punished for their lack of faith in the afterlife, however, the schismatics of canto XXVIII are not all guilty of religious or faith-based sins of division. Pier da Medicina, Mosca di Lamberti, Curio and Bertran de Born are all considered schismatics for political reasons, responsible for divisions which lead to civil war and other political turmoil. Southern stresses that Mohammad and Ali’s placement among the other political schismatics reveals that Dante had no interest in the theological nature of the sin, unlike many of his contemporaries who focused solely on Mohammad’s role as a religious schismatic. Moreover, Mohammad describes all his fellow sinners in the ninth bolgia as follows: “tutti gli altri, che tu vedi qui / seminador di scandalo e di scisma / fuor vivi, e però son fessi così” (Inf. XXVIII, 34-36). It is significant that Dante does not discriminate between Mohammad and Ali and the other schismatics. The two Muslims are no guiltier than their Christian companions, indicating that their religion is an irrelevant factor in their fate. Southern takes this argument further, suggesting that Dante’s view of Mohammad and Ali marks the beginning of a shift towards the secular thought that would dominate the Renaissance – and that “his appearance of sympathy comes from his disillusionment with Christendom” (1973, 137).

The corruption of the Catholic clergy was something which Dante adamantly opposed; for Dante, the schism instigated by Mohammad was made possible because of this lack of Christian

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76 Little is known about Pier da Medicina other than he was known to have initiated the long-standing discord between the two noble families, Polenta and Malatesta. Hence, Dante depicts him with a mutilated face, including a severed nose and ear, and a gaping hole in his throat, gushing blood with each word he utters (Inf. XXVIII, 64-75).

77 Mosca provoked the murder of the Florentine lord Buondelmonte de’ Buondelmonti, which in turn sparked the famous feud between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines.

78 Gaius Scribonius Curio was a Roman tribune who turned his original support from Pompey to Caesar, and with Caesar’s trust, urged him to cross the Rubicon. Dante condemns Curio as an instigator of the Roman civil war.
unity. Dante is not anti-Islam; he does not condemn the religion as a whole, but rather only those who create division, regardless of whether it is a religious or a political divide. As best summarized by Stone,

There is nothing in *Inferno* XXIII to suggest that Muhammad’s sin as a ‘sower of schism’ is rooted in the generally sinful nature of Arabs as a group or Muslims as a group [...] Dante condemns Muhammad and Ali as individuals, not as emblematic representatives of a certain collectivity. More precisely, insofar as they are representative, they do not represent any ethnic or religious group but rather an erroneous political alternative (division into sectors) to the individual community. (55)

7.3 Mohammad as Arius

Most scholars agree that Dante took his understanding of Mohammad as a schismatic instead of a heretic from the widely circulated polemical biographies of the Prophet, in which he is portrayed as a heretical leader eager to steer his followers into error. Yet Esposito Frank asserts that Dante was far too well-read to have subscribed to these popular accounts, and that various details of his depiction of Mohammad indicate that the poet was in fact inspired by the figure of the early Christian theologian, Arius (c. 256-336). Although the Libyan presbyter was Christian, he actively questioned the fundamental dogmas of his faith, including the concepts of the Trinity and the Incarnation. His views created an extreme controversy within the Church which instigated the first gathering of the ecumenical council, yet Arius’ views persisted well after his death.

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79 For more information on the Arian controversy, see Rowan Williams’ *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, especially the chapter entitled, “The Theology of Arius” (95-153).
Arius’ refusal of the Trinity and Incarnation caused several medieval authors, including John of Damascus, Eulogius of Córdoba, Peter of Cluny and Riccoldo da Monte Croce to link him to Mohammad (Esposito Frank 195). Riccoldo, whose Contra legem sarracenorum Dante likely read or at the very least knew about, identified Mohammad as a follower of Arianism who was led astray by an Arian monk named Bahaira (George Tvrtkovic 97). Dante’s knowledge of and interest in Arius is made evident in canto XIII of Paradiso, when Aquinas names him as one of the individuals who misread the Scriptures and assumed to have found his own version of the truth:

Vie più che 'ndarno da riva si parte,
perché non torna tal qual e' si move,
chi pesca per lo vero e non ha l'arte.
E di ciò sono al mondo aperte prove
Parmenide, Melisso e Brisco e molti,
li quali andaro e non sapèan dove;
sì fé Sabellio e Arrio e quelli stolti
che furon come spade a le Scritture
in render torti li diritti volti. (Par. XIII, 121-129)

Although Dante mentions Arius in the realm of Paradise, he does not place him there. In fact, Dante never explicitly mentions where Arius belongs in the afterlife, which Esposito Frank believes is Dante’s way of making the reader question where such a figure should be placed (197).

A specific detail from Inferno XXVIII provides possible evidence for the connection which Dante was attempting to draw between the Prophet and Arius. When Mohammad describes his fate and that of his fellow schismatics, he paints the image of a demon whose constant duty is to tear open the sinners’ bodies with his sword:

Un diavolo è qua dietro che n'accisma
sì crudelmente, al taglio de la spada
rimettendo ciascun di questa risma,
quand' avem volta la dolente strada;
però che le ferite son richiuse
prima ch'altri dinanzi li rivada. (Inf. XXVIII, 37-42)

Notice that Dante’s mention of Arius in *Paradiso* also refers to a “spada”, a metaphor for Arius’ misinterpretation of the Scriptures, like the distorted image reflected on the blade. Esposito Frank ties the detail of the devil’s “spada” to a wide-spread account of Arius’ death by Socrates of Constantinople (197). Also known as Socrates Scholasticus, Socrates was an ecclesiastical historian who took a stand against Arius and his beliefs. In his account, Socrates describes Arius’ humiliating death in which his bowels become so wrought with pain, that he was ripped open, hemorrhaging to death in one of Emperor Constantine’s latrines.80 Arius’ exposed bowels recall the image of Mohammad’s dangling entrails. The popular Western accounts of the Prophet’s death usually entailed him being devoured by dogs, or his corpse fed on by pigs. Esposito Frank thus points out that Dante could have easily referred to one of these modes of death; however, his choice to depict the Prophet sliced open with his insides exposed suggests a deliberate reference to Arius’ death (198).

Dante’s rendering of Mohammad as a near mirror-image of that of Socrates’ Arius can once more be interpreted as an attack on Islam. However again, Dante’s gruesome depiction of the Prophet must be understood as the poet’s disapproval of anyone who causes division within a community. Since the establishment of both Arianism and Islam led to lasting divisions, Dante’s link between the head of each is understandable. Furthermore, Arius was not a heretic when he died. After being exiled for his beliefs in 325, the Church eventually permitted Arius to be

80 “On approaching the place called Constantine’s Forum, where the column of porphyry is erected, a terror arising from the consciousness of his wickedness seized him, accompanied by violent relation of the bowels: he therefore inquired whether there was a convenient place near, and being directed to the back of Constantine’s Forum, he hastened thither. Soon after a faintness came over him, and together with the evacuations his bowels protruded, followed by a copious hemorrhage, and the descent of the smaller intestines: moreover portions of his spleen and liver were brought off in the effusion of blood, so that he almost immediately died” (Socrates Scholasticus 78).
reinstated, thus officially making him no longer a heretic in the eyes of God (Esposito Frank 196). Thus, just like Dante’s Mohammad, Arius was not a heretic, but a schismatic. Aquinas’ distinction between these two sins can be applied to these controversial figures, identifying them as men who did not lack faith, but whose desire to question accepted dogmas spread to their many followers, which consequently had a divisive effect within Christendom. As summarized by Esposito Frank, Mohammad and Arius “proved themselves responsible for violating the unity of the Christian community. By lacerating the body of that community they damaged the foundational mystery of Christ’s revelation to God” (201).

If Dante were truly against Islam for its beliefs as some critics have claimed, he would have put many other Muslims in the Inferno, particularly among the heretics. Instead, the few Muslims whom he does place in Hell are given a rather privileged place in Limbo. Mohammad and Ali are the only Islamic figures punished so severely, demonstrating that Dante wished to make an example of them – along with their non-Muslim schismatic companions – as particularly sinful because of the destruction that their schisms generated within their respective communities. Dante emphasizes the degree of Mohammad’s sin in comparison to the Islamic figures in Limbo by making him the only speaking Muslim in the entire Commedia, as he explains the nature of his atrocious sin.

It is also important to note that it is Virgil who addresses Mohammad in this canto instead of Dante. This occurs only two other times in the Inferno: in canto XIII with Pier della Vigna, and canto XXVI with Ulysses. Yet as Mallette notes, canto XXVIII is the only case in which the poet does not offer an explanation as to why the pilgrim is unable to address the sinner (209). When Dante encounters Pier della Vigna as a gnarled tree, bleeding from each broken branch, the pilgrim is initially unable to speak out of shock, leaving Virgil to address the sinner,
prompting him to tell his tale so that Dante may share it with the living (Inf. XIII, 43-54). In the case of Ulysses, Dante, who did not know Greek, is cautioned by Virgil to remain silent while he addresses Ulysses in his native tongue (Inf. XXVI, 70-75). Since Dante provides no explanation for the pilgrim’s silence as Virgil asks Mohammad about his fate, the reader is left to wonder what detail of Mohammad’s account is so particular that it cannot be directly communicated to the pilgrim. Mallette offers the possibility that Dante may have been once again shocked into silence by the violent sight before him, or that he may have been unable to address Mohammad for linguistic reasons (209). While the latter cannot be the case since Virgil did not know Arabic either, it is probable that Dante was struck by the obscene image, prompting Virgil, who belonged and was accustomed to the brutalities of Hell, to step into his role as Dante’s guide by bravely facing the Prophet.

### 7.4 Mohammad as Simon Magus

As argued, Dante’s condemnation of Mohammad and Ali as schismatics does not identify the poet as being anti-Islam. However, one could argue that Dante’s Mohammad may also be understood as a Simon Magus figure, a magician trickster, lacking any legitimately spiritual power. Before analyzing Dante’s canto for traces of Simon Magus, we must first consider the origins of this figure. Simon Magus first appears in the Acts of the Apostles, wherein he is presented as a powerful sorcerer, demonstrating his tricks before the Samarians, who were fooled into believing that he had a divine power and was their messiah.\(^{81}\) Although the biblical account

\(^{81}\)“Vir autem quidam nomine Simon qui ante fuerat in civitate magus seducens gentem Samariae dicens esse se aliquem magnum cui auscultabant omnes a minimo usque ad maximum dicentes hic est virtus Dei quae vocatur Magna attendebant autem eum propter quod multo tempore magicis suis dementasset eos, cum vero credisset...
of Simon Magus ends with the sinner realizing the error of his ways, praying for forgiveness, he became an emblematic figure for the sin of simony – obviously named after him – for having attempted to purchase the gift of the Holy Spirit. However, following the popularity of this account, Simon Magus’ vices became greatly exaggerated, as medieval Christian writers accused him of promoting a variety of punishable ideologies, including sorcery, witchcraft, heresy – and even Islam (Ferreiro 1).

Alberto Ferreiro, whose book *Simon Magus in Patristic, Medieval and Early Modern Traditions* traces the evolution of the biblical figure, stresses that Simon Magus became a malleable character whom Christian authors moulded in order to support the claims they made against any “non-Christian” behaviour that they deemed deplorable (3). In fact, even Dante has a designated place for the Simonists: in the third bolgia of the eighth circle of Hell, canto XIX – although interestingly, this is not where he chooses to place the Prophet. Ferreiro notes that the *Vita Mahumeti* and other Christian polemical texts associate Mohammad with the sorcerer, connecting the two as masters of deception who fooled their followers into accepting them as divine prophets (20). Although Ferreiro does not explicitly link Dante’s Mohammad to the

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82 In his *Vita Mahumeti*, Enrico of Mainz goes so far as to incorporate a Magus figure into the biographical account of the Prophet, portraying him as the one responsible for leading the Prophet astray (Ferreiro 230). Hence, Enrico
figure of Simon Magus, Akbari points out a key and often unnoticed detail in canto XXVIII which identifies the connection between the two figures. This occurs after Mohammad tells Dante to warn his contemporary, Fra Dolcino,\(^8\) to change his schismatic ways if he wants to avoid the Prophet’s same fate. Once Mohammad has finished speaking, he places one foot, which has previously been suspended in mid-air, back onto the ground: “Poi che l'un piè per girsene sospese, / Mäometto mi disse esta parola; / indi a partirsi in terra lo distese” (\(\text{Inf. XXVIII, 61-63}\)). Like Paolo and Francesca who stop themselves as they perpetually swirl in the wind in order to address Dante and Virgil, so too does Mohammad pause his eternal pacing in the circle of the schismatics to tell his tale. However, his raised foot seems odd here, as the natural stance for someone who stops himself mid-step would be a firm one with both feet on the ground.

Akbari associates Mohammad’s suspended foot to the tradition of the suspended tomb found in the various Western biographical accounts of the Prophet (231).\(^8\) In these Christian polemical texts, Mohammad’s tomb is described as being suspended in air – only not by the force of divine power, but by several ingeniously placed magnets. The image of the suspended tomb is presented as a magician’s attempt to mimic Christ’s ascension, with the intent of highlighting the falsity of Islam’s Prophet. Moreover, while Christ’s tomb was found empty, Mohammad’s still contains his body, which Christian apologists interpreted as an emphasis of his mortality, and thus his inherent link with the terrestrial world and lascivious motivations, replaces the heretical monk, Sergius, often found in the anonymous Western biographies of Mohammad, with the sorcerer, Simon Magus.

\(^8\) Fra Dolcino (c. 1250-1307) established the Apostolic sect and was declared a heretic by Pope Clement V in 1305. His views eventually caused him to be burned at the stake two years later.

\(^8\) The prologue of Mark of Toledo’s translation of the Qur’an includes legends about Mohammad as an idolatrous trickster (Martinez Gásquez 86), which may have in turn influenced Dante.
eliminating any possibility that he could be a holy prophet. As elaborated by Akbari, the Western accounts of the Prophet’s life “describe the floating tomb of Muhammad, suspended in a parodic imitation of the true bodily ascent of Christ. This tomb, filled with the bones of the pseudo-prophet, is a carnal imitation of the divinely empty Holy Sepulchre; its apparently miraculous weightlessness is no manifestation of divinity, but simply a deceptive trick” (232).

The thirteenth-century anti-Islamic text *Liber Nicholay* specifically mentions Mohammad’s foot as one of the contents of his tomb, describing it as an object worshipped by Muslims on pilgrimage, while the *Gesta Dei per Francos* by Giubert de Nogent indicates that “the foot signifies baseness, lowness, and filth” (Akbari 232). Akbari proposes that the Christian perception of Mohammad’s foot as a venerated object may have come from crusader and missionary accounts of the Dome of the Rock, said to contain the Prophet’s footprint made during the *Mi’raj* (233), which was misinterpreted as idolatrous worship. While the suspended foot conjures the image of the suspended tomb, the work of a Simon Magus-type figure, this does not necessarily indicate that Dante viewed Islam as a religion of sorcery. Instead, Dante’s suspended foot may once again symbolize schism, as the Prophet’s feet are separated, not on one stable plane. As will be discussed in the following chapter, the concept of strength in unity is an underlying theme in Dante’s work; hence, by Mohammad standing with one foot raised, his balance is off, and his stance weak. Akbari’s interpretation of the suspended foot as the poet’s effort to recall the image of the floating tomb filled with Mohammad’s body in order to underscore the overwhelming physicality of this new religion, once again links Islam to Judaism, as a faith which placed more importance on the letter, and thus the tangible (233). However, I disagree with this, for since Dante reserved the third bolgia of the eighth circle for the Simonists, and the fourth bolgia of the eighth circle for sorcerers, necromancers, astrologers and false prophets – yet deliberately placed Mohammad elsewhere – Dante reveals that he does not
categorize the Prophet under any of these headings. In addition, since Dante saw Islam as a schism of Christianity, he could not have condemned it for its ideologies, which were inherently linked to those of his own faith. Instead, I propose that the raised foot further amplifies Mohammad – and not his followers – as a schismatic, basing his religion on a divided and weak foundation.

Dante stands apart from his contemporaries in the extent of information he had about the Islamic Other. This in turn allowed him to understand that the followers of this faith were not polytheistic idolaters with lascivious motives, but rather individuals who were loyal to their monotheistic faith and traditions founded in modesty. However, where Dante does criticize Islam is for its Prophet, who, through his choice to establish what Dante deemed to be a schism of Christianity, destroyed the strength through unity that Christendom had been attempting to sustain since Constantine. Edward Said views Dante’s portrayal of Mohammad as a contribution to Orientalist discourse, wherein certain figures, like that of the Prophet, take on fixed meanings and associations (71). While the majority of medieval Christian accounts of Mohammad depict him as an impostor, heading a sensually driven religion, Dante ignores these qualities. Instead, Dante incorporates Mohammad and Ali into the cosmology of his work in order to draw attention to and make sense of the divided state of his world.
Chapter 3
Florence, the Crusades and Salvation Through the Eyes of Dante

“Concordia discors harmonia est”.$^{85}$

As amplified in the previous chapters, Orientalism ran particularly rampant in the aftermath of the Crusades as the collision between east and west incited a combination of curiosity, fear and even animosity in perceiving the Other. While Dante’s treatment of Islam proves far more multifaceted, the sin of schism which he so strongly attributes to Islam in one towards which he shows no tolerance. The poet identifies division as the gravest ill plaguing his time, for once it has planted its roots, it has the power to spread at an incessant rate, fragmenting peoples and nations far from the ground on which it was first sown. Though Dante does attack Islam’s headship for the split that he believed Mohammad and Ali created within Christendom, he does not limit his blame to foreign peoples, and in fact, looks to his own native Florence as a fount of turmoil and fragmentation. Following his exile from Florence in 1302, Dante began to carry a particular pain within himself geared toward his native city, a pain he strongly linked to the corrupt papacy and its involvement in the Crusades. By analyzing Dante’s view of the political state of thirteenth-century Florence, paired with the impact of the Crusades on the Latin West, I will aim to show how these elements significantly contributed to the poet’s notion of salvation. While one would

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$^{85}$ This classical motto may be found in the frontispiece to F. Gaffurius, De harmonia musicorum instrumentorum opus (Milan, 1518, written 1480-1500), as cited by Voss on p. 153. The concept of “concordia discors” was originally applied to the harmony created amongst the four natural elements, which in turn brings harmony to the world. It was first used by Horace in c. 20 BC (Epistles Book I, epistle xii, 19) and was eventually associated with classical and medieval musical theory (Schnapp 1986, 17). This chapter is centered on the importance of unity in both Dante’s poetry and political views, and thus I found the Latin phrase particularly appropriate to introduce the chapter. Dante was a great admirer of Horace, as seen in Inferno IV wherein Dante grants the Roman poet a place in Limbo’s “nobile castello”; it is thus likely that Dante would have some knowledge about Horace’s notion of Harmony.
be inclined to conclude that Dante’s major criterion in order to be considered “saved” would be the individual’s loyalty to the Christian faith, just as with his treatment of the Islamic Other, Dante once again reveals himself as an anomaly among the medieval intelligentsia.

1 Dante’s Ambivalent Relationship with His Patria

Dante’s rapport with Florence was a tumultuous one. The city’s past was one to which he felt gloriously tied, yet its present was wrought with chaos which led to the poet’s eventual and excruciating banishment from it. It is common to primarily associate Dante with his role as an epic poet, the creator of a literary masterpiece that would resonate with his own generation and beyond. Yet it is also imperative to consider Dante’s political role within the Florentine commune, for his civic involvement provided him with an intimate perspective into the political machinations of the city. As indicated in the previous chapters, Dante was a great admirer of Averroes. The Islamic philosopher often emphasized the importance of pursuing an active civic life as a sign of one’s moral virtue, and also as a means of achieving the highest level of human potential.  

Dante clearly applied Averroes’ ideals to himself by actively participating in Florentine civic life: he joined the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries in 1295, participated in the state council known as the Consiglio dei Cento in 1296, and acted as one of the city’s seven priors in the supreme Council of Government in 1300.  

86 For more on Averroes’ treatment of social involvement as a means to happiness and moral virtue, see Oliver Leaman’s book entitled, Averroes and His Philosophy 1988, 157-162.

87 See Giorgio Petrocchi’s indications on Dante’s involvement in Florentine civic life in the Appendix of the Enciclopedia Dantesca, 1970-1978, pages 6-29.
soldier who loyally served his city. On June 11, 1289 he fought in the Battle of Campaldino; alongside one hundred and fifty men, Dante was described as one of the most courageous, facing his Ghibelline enemies first in line on horseback and bringing the Guelphs to victory.88

However, Dante’s political role in Florence became particularly complicated after 1300 when the Guelphs split into the Black and White Guelphs, with the former being moderates, advocating for the emperor’s power over temporal affairs, while the latter were primarily aggressive nobles who supported the papacy in its efforts to influence and control worldly affairs. Dante was a White Guelph, and in 1302 he headed a diplomatic mission to Rome where he met with Pope Boniface VIII and believed to have secured his support to resolve peacefully the conflict between the two political factions. Yet upon leaving Rome, Dante learned that Boniface, the Blacks and Charles of Valois had plotted to rid Florence of all the Whites, which led to Dante’s permanent exile from the homeland he held most dear.

The violent divide between Guelphs and Ghibellines, which eventually led to a further divide between the Blacks and the Whites, was very much a part of Dante’s reality. Dante was born five years after the Battle of Montaperti, a battle which underlines the destructive power that division has over men. On September 4, 1260, a Florentine army of 35,000 men met 20,000 of the Sienese on the hill of Montaperti for the fateful battle. However, the Florentine Guelphs and Ghibellines began to fight one another, exhausting themselves, thus weakening their position in battle, regardless of the fact that they had significantly more men in number than the Sienese

88 This battle was particularly important for it allowed the Florentine constitution to be amended, wherein any man who wished to be active in civic affairs, needed to enroll in one of the cities many guilds. The account of Dante’s role in the Battle of Campaldino has now been lost; it was originally recorded in the letter Popule meee quid feci tibi, and quoted by Leonardo Bruni (or d’Arezzo, 1369-1444) in his Vita di Dante (see Emilio Pasquini’s 2006 biography of Dante). Dante refers to the battle in Purgatorio V when he recounts how his fellow soldier, Buonconte da Montefeltro, lost his life in this combat (Purg. V, 85-129).
army. Thus, Dante was born in a city splintered at its core, a fact that, as we shall see, had a profound effect on his expectations regarding his political views and, more specifically, his opinion of the Crusades. He addresses the political turmoil in Florence throughout the

*Commedia*, most notably in *Paradiso VI*, through the voice of emperor Justinian:

> Omai puoi giudicar di quei cotali
> ch’io accusai di sopra e di lor falli,
> che son cagion di tutti vostri mali.
> L’uno al pubblico segno i gigli gialli
> oppone, e l’altro appropria quello a parte,
> si ch’è forte a veder chi più si falli.
> Faccian li Ghibellin, faccian lor arte
> sott’ altro segno, ché mal segue quello
> sempre chi la giustizia e lui diparte;
> e non l’abbatta esto Carlo novello
> coi Guelfi suoi, ma tema de li artigli
> ch’a più alto leon trasser lo vello. (*Par. VI*, 97-108)

Here Dante, through the mouth of Justinian, expresses his anger toward the Guelphs and Ghibellines for their hypocrisy and cupidity. The Guelphs’ papal support hindered a return to the model of unity exemplified by the Holy Roman Empire, while the Ghibellines claimed to act out of interest for the Empire by taking on its symbol of the eagle (“faccian lor arte sott’ altro segno”), when in reality they were part of a corrupt faction which was dismantling all the good that the Empire stood for. Dante’s ancestral ties to the Guelphs naturally led him to join the party in his early years; yet, upon seeing the papal corruption and involvement in temporal matters,\(^89\) and once the split between the Black and White Guelphs occurred, Dante found himself loyal to the White Guelphs’ cause. However, Justinian’s words indicate an overall distaste for both political factions as those who “son cagion di tutti vostri mali”. Once Dante was

\(^{89}\) Papal corruption reached an all-time high when Pope Innocent III instated plenary indulgences through the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Through these indulgences, those individuals who would agree to fund or fight in the Fifth Crusade were exempted from all temporal punishment for any sins committed over the course of their lives until that point (Stone 243).
exiled, he became demoralized in his once strong political loyalties, for he became aware that within divided political groups there will always be betrayal and greed motivated by individual interests. Although Dante’s father and, for a period of time, Dante himself, were both Guelphs, Dante does not exclude them from his criticism for it was the violent divide between them that Dante abhorred.

The political divide in Florence is not the only concern that Dante had for his city. The split between the Conventional and Spiritual Franciscans created further instability in Florence and throughout Europe. In *Paradiso* XII, Dante speaks through St. Bonaventure, who joined the Franciscan order in 1243 and later wrote a biography on St. Francis. Here Bonaventure laments that the once unified order, devoted to living a life of poverty and service to Christ’s word, had now split in two, with one side ignoring the centrality of poverty to the Franciscan message, and the other imposing it too literally:

Ma l'orbita che fé la parte somma  
di sua circunferenza, è derelitta,  
si ch'è la muffa dov' era la gromma.  
La sua famiglia, che si mosse dritta  
coi piedi a le sue orme, è tanto volta,  
che quel dinanzi a quel di retro gitta;  
et tosto si vedrà de la ricolta  
de la mala coltura, quando il loglio  
si lagnerà che l’arca li sia tolta.  
Ben dico, chi cercasse a foglio a foglio  
nostro volume, ancor troveria carta  
u’ leggerebbe ‘l mi son quel ch’i’ soglio’;  
ma non fia da Casal né d’Acquasparta,  
là onde vegnon tali a la scrittura,  
ch'uno la fugge e altro la coarta. (*Par.* XII, 112-126)

The emphasis on the backward orientation of the Franciscans highlights that they are turned away from what is right, from what would allow them to move toward God. This backwardness

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90 See note 7 in chapter one: “Medieval Orientalism: Theory/Premise and Method”.
is a quality which Dante associates with his fellow Florentines, as seen in *Inferno* XV with Brunetto Latini amongst the other sodomites. This deviant sexual behaviour is reflective of Brunetto’s decision to turn away from caritas and instead act selfishly. Selfishness and cupidity are the main reasons why Dante believes his city and the West in general is in a state of division. Brunetto warns the Pilgrim not to act as he and his fellow corrupt Florentines have: “Vecchia fama nel mondo li chiama orbi; / gent’ è avara, invidiosa e superba: / dai lor costumi fa che tu ti forbi” (*Inf.* V, 67-69). As a sodomite, Brunetto recognizes that he turned away from God, just as the Florentines turned away from good in their blindness.

The Pilgrim begins his journey lost, or blind even, as he attempts to find his way through the “selva oscura” in *Inferno* I. While he does not consider himself corrupt like his fellow Florentines, he does realize that he is a product of that environment, and thus believes that his insider knowledge has bestowed him with the ability to call for change. Dante’s preoccupation with division is not limited to Mohammad and Ali and their fellow schismatics. Rather, his local situation caused him to take notice of the destruction that division creates well beyond the confines of his city, for the Crusades were also a part of his quotidian reality, responsible for leaving the entire Latin West divided within itself in addition to its conflict with the Orient.

Dante’s treatise *Monarchia* tackles the problem of division on the grand scale, proposing a universal monarch who can unite all peoples and who has complete control over temporal affairs as the major solution: “Cum ergo scindere Imperium esset destruere ipsum, consistente Imperio in unitate Monarchie universalis, manifestum est quod Imperii auctoritate fungenti scindere Imperium non licet. Quod autem destruere Imperium sit contra ius humanum, ex superioribus est manifestum” (*Mon.*3.10.9). Dante viewed Church and State as two unrelated entities, presiding over entirely different spheres – one celestial and the other terrestrial.
respectively – and that the intersection of the two would weaken each one’s foundation by pitting them against each other, while also creating division within each.

Throughout the Monarchia, Dante does not mince words in his attack on papal involvement in temporal matters. This harsh criticism of the papacy eventually led to the work to be placed on the Index of Prohibited Books.⁹¹ Dante may have known that his political work would one day be met with censure, since he also wrote the Commedia, which through its elegantly veiled poetic language was able to communicate his political concerns to a wider audience. When Dante was exiled, he further realized the importance of the written word as a means of not only reaching the masses, but also ensuring that his views would be immortalized for generations to come. He thus assigns himself with the role of a soldier, with poetry as his weapon, using the Commedia as a beacon to call his people to unite and change their corrupt ways. In no other instance in the Commedia is Dante’s militant goal more evident than in his meeting with his ancestor, Cacciaguida.

2 Dante and the Crusades

Little is known about Dante’s great-great grandfather Cacciaguida, other than the fact that he was knighted by Emperor Conrad III, whom he followed to Damascus in 1147 where the

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⁹¹ Monarchia was met with censorship shortly after Dante’s death as well. In 1329, Cardinal Poujet, the pope’s nephew, ordered that all copies of Dante’s treatise be burned (Stone 2).
Christian army suffered defeat and he died defending Jerusalem. It has been suggested that Dante invents certain details regarding Cacciaguida, yet what is important for our purposes here, is that Dante felt great pride in being linked to such a valiant warrior saying, “io me ne gloriai” (Par. XVI, 6). But does Dante’s desire to be tied to his crusading ancestor reveal the poet’s support for the Crusades? The following section will show that this is not necessarily so.

Dante encounters Cacciaguida in Paradiso XV, in the fifth sphere, the heaven of Mars, among the warriors who lost their lives in the battle for faith. With great reverence, Dante asks Cacciaguida about the state of Florence in the generation prior to his own. In this instance, Cacciaguida describes a Florence that was still modest, yet glorious in its military ventures, and above all, peaceful:

Fiorenza dentro da la cerchia antica,  
ond' ella toglie ancora e terza e nona,  
si stava in pace, sobria e pudica.  
Non avea catenella, non corona,  
on nononne contigiate, non cintura  
che fosse a veder più che la persona. (Par. XV, 97-102)

Cacciaguida and Dante the Pilgrim both act as Dante the Poet’s spokesman here; Dante the Poet has the advantage of divine perspective since he has already completed the journey which the pilgrim now faces, and thus is granted with the privilege of hindsight, a collaborate process allowing them to express some of the Poet’s most pressing concerns about his city. The Florence that Cacciaguida is referring to is that which existed before the grisly event that unfolded on

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92 There is no documentation of Cacciaguida being knighted, only of his existence. Any details about the crusader’s life are provided by Dante in the Commedia. Dante relates the account of Conrad knighting Cacciaguida in Paradiso XV, 139-148.

93 Daniel Waley proposes that Dante was likely to have fabricated Cacciaguida’s knighthood in order to draw out a noble lineage for himself, while also distancing himself from the new wealthy families that he believed were the cause of much corruption in Florence (Waley 1988, 26-31). In fact, Raffaelo Morghen notes that medieval documents show that none of Dante’s ancestors appeared amongst the most important Florentine families, casting further doubt on Dante’s relation to Cacciaguida (Morghen 1983, 45).
Easter morning of 1215: the murder of Buondelmonte de’ Buondelmonti. For Dante’s ancestor, this is the moment in which cupidity took the reins and peace was trampled upon as Florence became wrought with civil war. As best expressed by Morghen, “la Firenze il cui giglio, allora bianco, divenne, dopo il 1215, rosso, vermiglio, macchiato di sangue per l’infuriare delle lotte cittadine” (Morghen 1983, 57).

Cacciaguida’s episode spans over the course of Paradiso XV to XVII. Yet it is significant that throughout the several lengthy speeches he delivers, Cacciaguida, a crusader himself, does not directly address crusader politics. Instead he chooses to focus on his family’s history, the state of twelfth-century Florence, the current demise of the city and, finally prophesizes Dante’s exile from his patria. It is Cacciaguida’s prophecy that is perhaps one of the most imperative components of the Commedia, for it is with these words that he ignites Dante to his poetic, yet intrinsically political, mission:

`tal di Fiorenza partir ti convene.  
Questo si vuole e questo già si cerca,  
e tosto verrà fatto a chi ciò pensa  
là dove Cristo tutto dì si merca. (Par. XVII, 48-51)

Tu lascerai ogne cosa diletta  
più caramente; e questo è quello strale  
che l’arco de lo essilio pria saetta.  
Tu proverai sì come sa di sale  
lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle  
lo scendere e ’l salir per l’altrui scale.  
E quel che più ti graverà le spalle,  
sarà la compagnia malvagia e scempia  
con la qual tu cadrai in questa valle;  
che tutta ingrata, tutta matta ed empia  
si farà contr’ a te; ma, poco appresso,  
ella, non tu, n’avrà rossa la tempia.  
Di sua bestialitate il suo processo`

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94 Buondelmonte was a Florentine nobleman who called off his betrothal to a young woman of the Amidei family in favour of a daughter of the more wealthy Donati family. In revenge, a group of men from the Amidei family plotted Buondelmonte’s murder as he walked across the Ponte Vecchio.
farà la prova; sì ch'a te fia bello
averti fatta parte per te stesso. (Par. XVII, 55-69)

In this lengthy prophecy, Cacciaguida underscores the pain involved in exile, outside one’s own element, while also stressing that even under these conditions, Dante must remain strong and take on his militant role as the head of a “parte per te stesso”, his own party with a noble goal: a call to unity. Even though Cacciaguida’s only call to fame is his role in the Second Crusade, he mostly avoids discussions of East versus West and instead focuses on those issues that are closer to home. However, there is an instance in which he does seem to be addressing the corruption within the papacy, an issue which suggests that Cacciaguida, and thus, Dante, does not support the Holy Land Crusades. In lines 49-50, the crusader vehemently criticizes Boniface for the selfish interests with which he promoted the Crusades. Cacciaguida sheds light on the pope’s use of the cross as a veil over his imperialistic motivations, and was infuriated that the papacy was a place “là dove Cristo tutto di si merca”, where Christ was being exploited as a commodity, as an idol calling men to arms in His name, when the bloodshed was in reality induced by cupidity.

Cacciaguida also criticizes the heightened materialism of Dante’s Florence:

Bellincion Berti vid’ io andar cinto
di cuoio e d'osso, e venir da lo specchio
la donna sua sanza ’l viso dipinto;
e vidi quel d’i Nerli e quel del Vecchio
esser contenti a la pelle scoperta,
e le sue donne al fuso e al pennecchio. (Par. XVII, 112-117)

He harks back to the days when simple fabrics were deemed acceptable attire, when a woman’s natural beauty was appreciated. William Anderson suggests that Cacciaguida’s harsh words are

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95 “Questo si vuole e questo già si cerca, / e tosto verrà fatto a chi ciò pensa” (Par. XVII, 49-50). This is a clear reference to Boniface VIII, who Dante learned had plotted his exile and was in a position of political success during the early fourteenth century.
in response to the Latin West’s obsession with the exoticism and luxurious goods associated with the Orient as a result of the Crusades (Anderson 30).

The Crusades led to increased travel to the East, where Christian soldiers and missionaries were exposed to customs and objects that were unknown to them. Gold-enriched silks, ceramics and other exotic items from the Orient became items of luxury that the West longed for.96 Cacciaguida’s Florence was also a city which had a much lower population than that of the thirteenth century: “Tutti color ch'a quel tempo eran ivi / da poter arme tra Marte e 'l Batista, / erano il quinto di quei ch'or son vivi. / Ma la cittadinanza, ch'è or mista / di Campi, di Certaldo e di Fegghine, / pura vediesi ne l'ultimo artista. / Oh quanto fora meglio esser vicine / quelle genti ch'io dico, e al Galluzzo” (Par. XVI, 46-53). Having much less immigration and crossing of its borders, Cacciaguida’s Florence had a fifth of the population than that of Dante’s. The increase in population led to a strain on the economy and the city’s general quality of life, and once the city’s stability had been shattered, there was a steady decline in morality which Cacciaguida bemoans.

Although the Crusades were presented as part of the quest to regain Jerusalem and fight for the Christian faith, in reality they were carried out for selfish national interests once one nation was exposed to what its neighbour had that it did not. Cacciaguida addresses this:

“Sempre la confusion de le persone / principio fu del mal de la cittade, / come del vostro il cibo che s'appone” (Par. XVI, 67-69). People from East and West were forced to interact under an atmosphere of hostility, naturally causing them to compare themselves to one another, taking note of what material goods or land the other possessed that they longed to get their hands on.

96 For more information on the importance of silk and other luxury fabrics in the Middle Ages, see David Jacoby’s article, “Silk Economics and Cross-Cultural Artistic Interaction: Byzantium, the Muslim World, and the Christian West”.
As elucidated by Franz Hettinger, “The late wars had brought the Western nations into contact with Oriental civilisation, and this, again, imparted a new character to the aspirations of the people; a character which Dante laments, as tending to moral degeneracy [...] The national principle brought with it national selfishness, and jealousies and international wars soon followed ” (Hettinger 365). The crusading world developed an acute awareness of “us versus them”, transforming a once modest cupidty into a rampant monster. The conflict between East and West did not remain limited to the grand scale, wherein only the major heads of Church and State participated; instead, it led to somewhat of a trickle-down effect, in which the smaller regions and cities within began to splinter as well, thus affecting even the mere civilian. As aptly noted by Edward Said, “But one big division, as between West and Orient, leads to other smaller ones, especially as the normal enterprises of civilization provoke such outgoing activities such as travel, conquest, new experiences” (Said 57).

The pilgrim’s encounter with Hugh Capet in *Purgatorio* XX parallaxes Cacciaguida’s – and thus Dante’s – condemnation of the papacy and all supporters of the continuous violence in the Holy Land. He deprecates the Capetian rulers for disrupting peace in France through their military and political ambitions, leading the pope to flee to Avignon, one of the most severe obstacles to obstruct the road toward the ideal monarchy that Dante desperately longed for. Like Cacciaguida, Hugo does not blame the Muslims or any non-Christians for the political anarchy and corruption of his time. Instead, as pointed out by Schildgen, Hugh’s passage “does

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97 Hugh Capet (c.939-996) was the first King of the Franks and a distant relative of Charlemagne. Dante places him amongst the avaricious in purgatory for the king benefited greatly from his ties to the Church, allowing him to take possession of a considerable amount of territory throughout France.

98 “Io fui radice de la mala pianta / che la terra cristiana tutta aduggia, / si che buon frutto rado se ne schianta” (*Purg.*, XX, 45-46). Here Hugh recognizes his role in creating strife on Christian land. In *Purgatorio* XX, 50-51 and 82-84, Hugo continues by calling out his descendants for their role in the chaotic state of tenth-century France as well.
not focus on Islam or any other outsiders; just the contrary it goes to the heart of Latin Christian power as the fount of western moral and political failure, even including those with a reputation for saintliness who had sponsored Holy Land crusades” (Schildgen 1998, 106). If Dante was truly anti-Islam and pro-Crusades, he surely would not have continuously identified his own people and religion as the guilty parties for their promulgation of division and corruption, and would have instead placed the blame on the Other. Dante is therefore proud to be related to Cacciaguida, a knight who fought during a time when the motivations for battle were still relatively pure. Yet, Dante can no longer see a shred of decency in the wars of his day, battles pushed by both the state and the papacy’s avaricious agendas.

Once Dante responds to Cacciaguida’s prophecy, the underlying militancy of the entire Commedia is brought to the forefront: “per che di provvedenza è buon ch’io m’armi, / sì che, se loco m’è tolto più caro, / io non perdessi li altri per miei carmi.” (Par. XVII, 109-111). In this instance, the pilgrim has been alerted to his fate of exile; with this forethought, Dante expresses his “clearest and most explicit statement that he believes his poem is a mission” (Mills Chiarenza 138), and realizes that he must take up intellectual arms in order to face the “fight” to change the fate of his city. Although Dante knows that he will no longer be a physical warrior, he decides to take on the role of a poetic soldier, who through the immortality of the written word, cannot be silenced and his militant ideas will resonate through time and space. From the afterlife, Cacciaguida can no longer physically engage in the battle of the faithful, which in his eyes was ultimately the battle for peace. However, through the hand of Dante the Poet, Cacciaguida manages to “transform his words into literary crosses, into heroic acts of public testimony and confession” (Schnapp 10-11), inspiring Dante the Pilgrim to action as well.
Dante was therefore not a promoter of the Holy Land Crusades, and as Southern notes, Dante alludes to the battles through Cacciaguida for two specific purposes: to draw attention to his noble lineage through his ancestral relationship to a valiant warrior, and to underscore Boniface VIII’s provocation of local wars under the guise of the Holy Wars (Southern 1973, 139). As stressed in the previous chapter, Dante’s mission was not an anti-Islamic one but rather one which condemned anything that provoked fragmentation. Hence, this very mission would not permit Dante to support the Holy Land Crusades, for in the direction that the religious wars were taking in Dante’s time, these battles were keeping East and West in conflict and promoting a heightened level of greed within medieval society. Prior to the Pilgrim’s encounter with his ancestor, he had not quite understood the meaning of his journey. Yet, Cacciaguida’s denunciation of the current state of Florence and his prediction of Dante’s exile served “to bring the perspectives of eternity and history into a more dynamic interplay, to supplement one’s contemplative *theoria* with a militant historical *praxis*” (Schnapp 24). This in turn ignited a fire beneath Dante, when he came to the realization that his words were immensely powerful, providing him with the only weapons required to face the division and greed of his world.

When discussing Dante’s view of the Crusades, Cacciaguida’s Carolingian companions in the heaven of Mars must be considered. Cacciaguida calls Dante to look up toward the cross, where he may cast his eyes upon those warriors who fought following this holy symbol. Following the two biblical warriors, Joshua and Judas Maccabeus, Charlemagne appears with his nephew and loyal paladin Roland (*Par. XVIII, 44*). Charlemagne, King of the Franks and later the *Imperator Romanorum*, was a highly revered figure in Dante’s age. His exceptional abilities as a leader allowed him to expand his kingdom to include much of Western and Central Europe; he eventually took hold of Italy where he was crowned emperor by Pope Leo III. Roland served as a noble warrior alongside his uncle, and lost his life at the hand of a Saracen. Both
Charlemagne and Roland became figures of great cultural importance, romanticized by their depictions in the *Chanson de Roland*.99

By placing these souls in paradise, it may seem as though Dante is showing his support for the Crusades. Rather, I would suggest that he is instead honouring men who fought for the honourable cause of unity. Charlemagne’s efforts to expand his empire throughout Europe adhere to Dante’s model of the universal monarch, who through just rule and in pursuit of peace, yearns to unite.100 Roland, as Charlemagne’s faithful paladin, is devoted to the same purpose as his leader, and is thus rewarded with the same place in heaven. While Dante could not support the Holy Land Crusades for the power that these battles would bring to the papacy and the corruption associated with them, he did show his admiration for those military figures whose efforts had the potential to reinstate peace and unity like that which existed under imperial Rome.

The final pair of combatants to appear in the heaven of Mars is Godfrey of Bouillon and Robert Guiscard (*Par. XVIII*, 47-48). Godfrey was a Norman duke whose leadership abilities put an end to the divisiveness that plagued Southern Italy and Sicily in the early eleventh-century. He also acted as a central figure in the First Crusade, leading his troops to successfully reclaim Jerusalem in 1099, ultimately earning him the title of Jerusalem’s first Christian ruler and establishing peace – albeit temporary – in the Holy Land as well (Schildgen 2002, 49; 71).

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99 For more on how the paladins from the *chanson de geste*, especially Charlemagne, were romanticized in the Middle Ages and used as propaganda to promote the Crusades, see Barton Sholod’s *Charlemagne in Spain: The Cultural Legacy of Roncesvalles*, especially p. 91-109 and Matthew Gabriele and Jace Stuckey’s *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade* 2008, especially p. 137-148.

100 “[…] omnis concordia dependet ab unitate, que est in voluntatibus […] ergo genus humanum optime se habens ab unitate que est in voluntatibus dependet. Sed hoc esse non potest nisi sit voluntas una, domina et regulatrix omnium aliarum in unum, cum mortalium voluntates propter blandas adolescentie delectationes indigente directivo, ut in ultimis ad Nicomacum docet Phyllosophus. Nec ista una potest esse, nisi sit princeps unus omnium, cuius voluntas domina et regulatrix aliarum omnium esse possit. Quod si omnes consequentie superiores vere sunt, quod sunt, necesse est ad optime se habere humanum genus esse in mundo Monarcham, et per consequens Monarchiam ad bene esse mundi” (*Mon.* 1.15.8-10)
Like Charlemagne and Roland, these men were also committed to restoring peace throughout the Latin West and the Holy Land. Although they sought to achieve this through violent means, their intentions were noble and thus rewarded by Dante. By placing these warriors in the heaven of Mars, Dante is not promoting crusade politics, but rather he is once again drawing the reader’s attention to the importance of fighting for unity, whether it be with the sword, as the Carolingian knights had done, or by means of the word, as Dante attempted to do throughout the *Commedia*.

As best summarized by Schildgen,

[...], rather than applauding religious military action against Saracens, as generally believed, Dante singles out exemplary figures who struggled for political-religious unity, which no doubt often translated into military action against Islam, as in the *Chanson de Roland*, but this is not Dante’s primary interest. Those selected [...] were all engaged, according to Dante’s view, in struggles against internal factionalism. (Schildgen 1998, 101)

In between the two aforementioned pairs of warriors, two more men appear as the most interesting pair for the purpose of our study due to their close ties to the Saracen world: William and Renouard (*Par.* XVIII, 46), both from one of the other widely-circulated *chanson de geste*, known as *Aliscans*.

William was the son of the Count of Aimeri de Narbonne, who acted as one of Charlemagne’s advisors and fought on behalf of the Franks in the Battle of Aliscans, where he met his demise. Yet what stands out about this figure is that he fell in love with a Saracen woman named Orable. The daughter of the Saracen king of Cordova, Desramé, Orable converted to Christianity in order to wed her beloved warrior. It is noteworthy that Dante should choose to place a man who fell in love with the Other in such a privileged place in the afterlife.

Marriage, as a covenant which unites, brought together two people from divided faiths and

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worlds, and this is something that Dante seems to encourage here. Even though this conversion to Christianity occurred in order to place both individuals on an even plane and allow for a strong union, William’s salvation seems to indirectly show that Dante believed that in essence, human beings are all the same, capable of loving each other regardless of their religious or cultural differences.

Renouard is an exceptionally interesting figure to consider. He first appears in *Aliscans* as a somewhat mythological giant-like Saracen figure, armed with a brute and super-human strength. He is another of Desramé’s twelve children, and thus Orable’s brother and William’s brother-in-law. Renouard was sold into slavery to the Franks, and worked as a scullion at the court of Louis the Pious. It was here that William had the opportunity to observe the giant and recognized that his stature and force would make him an excellent companion on the battlefield. In the second battle of Aliscans, Renouard took on the Saracen troops with vigour, saved the Franks from defeat, and eventually converted to Christianity as well.

Although Dante only mentions Renouard in passing, merely listing him amongst the other warriors of the faith, the fact that Dante includes yet another Saracen convert into paradise highlights the importance that the poet places on conversion as a means of establishing peace. This underscores Dante’s ideological ties to St. Francis, who, as discussed in chapter one, stressed the importance of poverty and thus the dangers of greed in the hearts of men. Dante’s preoccupation with the cupidity at the root of crusading motivations naturally drew him to

102 For more on the figure of Renouard and his role in the *chanson de geste* tradition, see José Manuel Pedros Bartolomé and Mary Fitzhugh Parra 206-207.

103 These details are found in the *Aliscans* and nowhere in actual chronologies. Robert and Jean Hollander note that Renouard was not a historical figure, although his role in the Aliscans led Dante and his contemporaries to believe that he was once a living warrior (Hollander 2007, 502).
admire Francis’ teachings. Moreover, Francis’ focus on conversion as the solution to the East/West divide also appealed to Dante. In *Paradiso XI*, Dante puts Francis’ peaceful method on display:

E poi che, per la sete del martiro,  
ne la presenza del Soldan superba  
predicò Cristo e li altri che 'l seguiro,  
e per trovare a conversione acerba  
troppo la gente e per non stare indarno,  
redissi al frutto de l’italica erba. (100-105)

During his missions to the East, Francis realized that it was imperative that he and his followers respect the authority of Muslim rulers as men who had been granted rule over their respective territories by God. This reflects Francis’ view of the Crusades, for he “was interested in the welfare of Muslims’ souls, *not in their land*” (Stone 243).

As also indicated in the first chapter, St. Domenic shared a similar view of the Crusades to that of Francis, only that Domenic placed more emphasis on learning about the Islamic Other in order to communicate more successfully with them. Dante thus depicts Francis and Domenic as knights in their own right, as “brothers in arms” (Watt 2005, 66) who engaged in an intellectual and spiritual battle against greed and division:

L’essercito di Cristo, che sì caro  
costò a riarmar, dietro a la ‘nsegna  
si movea tardo, sospeccioso e raro,  
quando lo ‘mperador che sempre regna  
provide a la milizia, ch’era in forse,  
per sola grazia, non per esser degna;  
e, come è detto, a sua sposa soccorse  
con due campioni, al cui fare, al cui dire  
lo popol disvïato si raccorse. (*Par.* XII, 37-45)

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104 Francis’ mission for peace was exemplified in 1215 when he pleaded with Pope Innocent III not to call for another crusade. Although his efforts were in vain, they are a testament for the “non-violent alternative to the Crusades” that the saint promoted (Stone 242). While the Franciscans were violent towards themselves through acts of martyrdom, they focused on converting – as opposed to killing – Muslims.
As a Christian and an admirer of Francis, peace was at the centre of the idyllic hopes Dante had for his city, continent and ultimately, the world.\textsuperscript{105} Barbara Barclay Carter further emphasizes this, indicating that for Dante, war was only to occur as a last resort, when all other peaceful methods had already been employed (Barclay Carter 350-351).

Western Christians became especially disillusioned with the idea of the Crusades following the fall of Acre in 1291 when they suffered a tremendous defeat at the hand of the Muslims. Neither Dante’s political vision nor his writing could escape the influence of such a battle; he has Guido da Montefeltro refer to it in \textit{Inferno} XXVII:

\begin{verbatim}
Lo principe d’i novi Farisei,
avendo guerra presso a Laterano,
e non con Saracìn né con Giudei,
ché ciascun suo nimico era Cristiano,
e nessun era stato a vincer Acri
né mercatante in terra di Soldano
né sommo officio né ordini sacri
guardò in sé, né in me quel capestro
che solea fare i suoi cinti più macri. (85-93)
\end{verbatim}

Through Guido’s words, Dante issues a harsh criticism of Boniface VIII for having instigated war amongst the Christian monarchs instead of lending support to the men at Acre. This once again shows that Dante was more concerned with the inter-fighting within Latin Christendom than with the clash between Islam and Christianity. After the fall of Acre, Christians – especially those in the Italian peninsula who were closest to the papacy – became particularly critical of the Church’s involvement in the wars. It became obvious that the Church had transformed the crusade into “a malleable instrument” (Tyerman 54) that it could manipulate in order to call

\textsuperscript{105} Dante plainly states the importance of peace near the beginning of his work, presenting it as a virtue offered to man by God as the key to unlock true happiness: “Unde manifestum est quod pax universalis est optimum eorum que ad nostram beatitudinem ordinantur. Hinc est quod pastoribus de sursum sonuit non divitie, non voluptates, non honores, non longitudo vite, non sanitas, non robur, non pulcritudo, sed pax; inquit enim celestis militia: ‘Gloria in altissimis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bone voluntatis’” (\textit{Mon.} I.4.2-3).
faithful Christians to arms in order to satisfy their imperialistic ambitions under the pretense of faith. Crusading became synonymous not only with the cross and preaching God’s word, but with indulgences and church taxation. This was something that Dante deplored, and it is through Cacciaguida that he is able to express his strong sentiment.

Guido’s lines are not only significant to this chapter because of their criticism of the papacy, but also to this study as a whole for their blatant references to the Muslims and Jews, using the pejorative terms “Saracin” and “Giudei”. As explained in chapter one, prior to the 1500s the term “Saracen” was used to refer to all followers of Islam, regardless of their ethnicity, and was a term which carried allusions to idolatry and lasciviousness. Guido’s use of the word “Giudei” as opposed to “Ebrei” is significant as well; while the latter would link this group to the biblical patriarchs, the respected ancestors of Christianity, such as Moses and Noah, identifying them for their specific ethnic roots, the former focuses solely on religious otherness, blurring and almost erasing their connection to the honoured figures of the Old Testament. This type of distinction between Hebrew and Jew robs an entire people of their ancestral honour, and instead transforms them into a religiously superseded group, presenting “the Jew and, by extension, Judaism, as marginal, subordinate, and inferior in contrast with the normative and dominant Christian” (Cox 2002, 24).

The term “Giudeo” carried a further sub-layer of negativity; although the word comes from the name Giuda, the fourth son of Jacob and known as the founder of the Israelites, in

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106 Those who dared rebel against the pope’s political mandates would be marred with the title of “crucesignanti” and deemed enemies of the Church and of Christ Himself (Tyerman 53).

107 The word “ebreo” is first used in the Old Testament to refer to Abraham (Genesis: 14:13) who, along with Jacob, played a crucial role in the founding of the Israelites. For an analysis of Abraham’s role in the covenant of the Israelites, see George E. Mendenhall’s article, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition”, especially p.62-76.
Italian he shares the same name as Giuda Iscariota, Christ’s ultimate traitor. Hence, the choice to use the word Giudei over Ebrei was a deliberate one in order to present these people as completely separate from Christianity regardless of their ancestral ties, while also presenting them as traitors of the Christians, the faith believed to have superseded their own. Here, Guido is drawing the pilgrim’s attention to the fact that this “principe d'i novi Farisei” did not show support for a battle against the ‘deplorable’ races – which he so aptly refers to using the negative terms “Saracin” and “Giudei” – instead, the papal “principe” not-so-subtly encouraged inter-Christian fighting and animosity. Dante has Guido use these words in order to show that these religious groups were plagued by an overwhelming sense of otherness in the eyes of the Christian crusaders. Through this differentiation, the crusaders were able to justify raging against these religious groups whose otherness identified them as a threat to be reckoned with.

Furthermore, the use of “Soldano” once again evokes the image of the Middle East, signalling to the reader that Dante is offering a perspective of this region and its peoples – though not necessarily his own perspective. The fact that Dante places these words in the mouth of Guido, an inhabitant of hell, distances the poet from the sinner. Just as Dante’s understanding of the Muslims is far more advanced than many of his predecessors and contemporaries in his ability to recognize that they do not stem from a Saracen race and are not simply idolaters or sowers of schism, so too does he understand that the Jews are more than just followers of a non-Christian faith, and are in fact ancestors of the Old Testament patriarchs.108

Shifting focus briefly toward the commentators and their interpretation of these verses, it shall become apparent that while they too were aware of Dante’s disapproval of the corruption

108 Dante particularly honours the patriarchs by noting that these great souls were the only ones to ever leave Limbo and rise to paradise (Inf. IV, 43-63).
with which the papacy drove the Crusades forward, they did not attribute any significance to the choice of terms that Guido uses when referring to the Muslim and Jewish crusaders. As men of a European-Christian twelfth-century society, the early commentators undoubtedly shared the same temporal horizon of expectations as Dante; however, as Jauss’ theory emphasizes, this horizon can also differ significantly from person to person. This is demonstrated by the ways in which the early commentators sometimes misinterpreted Dante’s references to non-Christians, amongst other aspects of the medieval world. For example, Jacopo della Lana states,

Cioè Bonifacio papa avendo guerra con li Colonesi, li quali sono gentili uomini di Roma e possenti. E non con saracini nè con giudei: quasi a dire: elli avea guerra con ogni buono cristiano, nè non con quelli cristiani che funno a vincere li saracini in Acri, nè non con quelli cristiani che navicano in le terre vietate dal Soldano, ma con ciascun dritto e fedele Cristiano. (della Lana, 1324-1328, AV)

Jacopo recognizes that Dante was clearly criticizing Boniface VIII for creating strife among Christians. In fact, he goes even further by interpreting that Boniface caused discord among the Christians within Rome who were removed from the crusade efforts, instead of lending his support where it was needed – on Muslim territory. Yet, regarding Guido’s use of the word “Saraceni”, Jacopo does not read any further into this, and even uses the term himself in his commentary. Since this was a common term to refer to the inhabitants of the Muslim world, it would not have struck the commentator as anything to be further analyzed.

Andrea Lancia also offers his analysis of these lines; one which is more in-depth and perhaps more interpretive:

Lo principe ec. Cioè papa Bonifazio principe de' Cardinali, li quali chiama Farisei, cioè divisi; e dice, ch'avea guerra con li Colonesi, che stanno presso a Laterano (Laterano è il grande palagio di Roma, dove dimora il Papa), ciò sono suoi prossimi; e non per cagione di fede: onde argomenta, che la guerra non era giustificata dalla parte del Papa. Dice, che li suoi nimici non erano Saracini, nè Giudei, nè Cristiani, e tali che non erano stati contra la Chiesa in Acri, o altrove, e non avevano portato a' Saracini ferro, o arme, ne’ quali così è lecito al Pastore della Chiesa procedere col ferro. (Andrea Lancia 1333, AV)
Andrea explicitly refers to Boniface as a divisive leader, something to which Dante alludes throughout the *Inferno*, and that the commentator keenly observes in these verses. Just as Dante condemns the Prophet for his divisiveness, leading his followers into a schismatic faith, Dante identifies Boniface as a corrupt leader who turned away from his duty as a moral leader of the Church, and instead used his position to lead his followers to war against one another. Andrea extends this argument by explaining that Boniface removed himself from the battle for faith – in which he should have been fully immersed – and instead treated his Christian men as enemies, pitting them against one another. Again, while the term “Saracini” is repeated without additional interpretation as a common way to refer to the followers of Islam, Andrea recognizes Dante’s lack of support for both the papacy and its role in the quickly declining crusade effort.

Schildgen points out that Dante only alludes to the Holy Land Crusades in the *Commedia* and that he is completely silent on them throughout the *Monarchia* (Schildgen 1998, 99). She goes further with this, saying “That Dante should now propose a Middle Eastern military adventure as a solution to institutional crises of his times is an absurdity, for not once in the *Monarchia* does he hint at such a proposal” (Schildgen 2002, 74). As a political treatise, one would think that Dante would at least touch upon the Crusades. Instead, he focuses on the damaging effects of papal corruption and the overall division of his medieval reality. Through an overview of the ideas expressed both in the *Commedia* and *Monarchia*, Schildgen shows that Dante proposes a three-pronged solution to righting the wrongs of his time; a solution that, interestingly enough, has nothing to do with the suppression of Islam. First, Dante calls for a reform of the Law, emulating the model set by imperial Rome, followed by an extensive reform of the Church limiting its involvement in temporal affairs, and finally, the conversion of men from a life of sin to one of caritas (Schildgen 1998, 117). Although the character of Renouard
undergoes a conversion from Islam to Christianity, Dante is not necessarily promoting the conversion from a non-Christian religion to his own, but rather any necessary conversion that will allow divisions to be nullified and peace established. Dante’s inclusion of a Saracen convert in paradise plants the seed for questioning the poet’s system of salvation, a question that is tackled head-on in canto XIX wherein the possibility of salvation beyond Christianity is considered.

3 Dante’s Conception of Divine Justice and Salvation

In the heaven of Jupiter, the pilgrim encounters a splendid sight before him: in this sixth sphere devoted to just rulers, the souls before him come together divinely to spell out a phrase from the Book of Wisdom which reads, “Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram”. These words serve to remind all earthly rulers of the importance of justice in their daily governing, with no room for corruption or division in one’s kingdom. Another divine transformation unfolds before Dante when the souls forming the final “M” of this Latin phrase takes on the shape of an eagle, the symbol of Imperial Rome.\footnote{Justinian refers to the eagle as the Roman Empire in \textit{Par.} VI, 1-9. For more on the eagle as a symbol for the Imperial Rome, and the importance it acquired in medieval Christianity, see Rudolf Wittkower’s article, “Eagle and Serpent. A Study in the Migration of Symbols” 1939, especially p. 308-321. Wittkower’s article serves particularly useful to this study for its discussion of the origins of this symbol, which he traces to ancient Greek literature wherein the eagle symbolizes a political oracle and superior strength in the face of its enemies. The medieval – and thus Dante’s conception of the eagle as a symbol of strength, unity and ultimately of Imperial Rome, developed through the readings of ancient Greek texts, including those of Homer and Aristophanes.} As the eagle begins to address the pilgrim, he takes note of the fact that the voices of many souls are addressing him as one unified voice through the image of the eagle. This emphasizes the importance that Dante placed on unity, wherein a series of disconnected voices only emits noise, while a collection of voices united in a shared message has the power to be truly heard:
Parea dinanzi a me con l'ali aperte
la bella image che nel dolce frui
liete facevan l'anime conserte [...]
ch'io vidi e anche udi' parlar lo rostro,
e sonar ne la voce e "io" e 'mio,`
quand' era nel concetto e ‘noi’ e ‘nostro’. (Par. XIX, 1-3; 10-12)

The fact that Dante depicts this collection of souls united in one voice and in the image of an eagle indicates that he is presenting the reader with a symbolic model for his universal monarchy. Hence, when the monarchic eagle begins to address the pilgrim and focuses on the question of God’s justice, he recognizes that its voice is one of great authority in the Commedia.

The eagle is quick to stress that no human being can, nor should he hope to, ever fully understand God’s will:

Però ne la giustizia sempiterna
la vista che riceve il vostro mondo
com' occhio per lo mare, entro s'interna;
che, ben che da la proda veggia il fondo,
in pelago nol vede; e nondimeno
èli, ma cela lui l'esser profondo.
Lume non è, se non vien dal sereno
che non si turba mai; anzi è tenèbra
od ombra de la carne o suo veleno.
Assai t'è mo aperta la latebra
che t'ascondeva la giustizia viva,
di che facei question cotanto crebra. (Par.XIX, 58-69)

The bottom of the ocean, with its floor veiled in darkness and mystery is used as a metaphor for divine justice, which God keeps forever in His shadows. The terrestrial world is not privy to God’s will, a piece of treasured knowledge reserved only for those welcomed into God’s kingdom. Yet the pilgrim occupies a sort of middle ground in this schema, for although he is a mortal being, he has been granted the privilege of passing through the realm of the blessed.
Dante’s doubt has been gnawing away at his mind and spirit, creating great turmoil within him, spurring him to ask the eagle for some clarity, even though he knows that his humanity does not give him the right to truly know. As conveyed by Vittorio Russo, “Difficile non riconoscere in questi versi l’angoscia con cui Dante stesso vive tale problematica teologica e insieme quasi la difesa della dignità del suo dubbio, rimovibile ma non risolvibile” (Russo 1983, 93). The eagle thus takes on the challenge of addressing Dante’s qualms, as the divine bird utters the questions that it knows lie heavily on the pilgrim’s mind:

\texttt{Ché tu dicevi: ‘Un uom nasce a la riva? \} \\
\texttt{de l’Indo, e quivi non è chi ragioni} \\
\texttt{di Cristo né chi legga né chi scriva;} \\
\texttt{e tutti suoi voleri e atti buoni} \\
\texttt{sono, quanto ragione umana vede,} \\
\texttt{sanza peccato in vita o in sermoni.} \\
\texttt{Muore non battezzato e sanza fede:} \\
\texttt{ov’ è questa giustizia che ‘l condanna?} \\
\texttt{ov’ è la colpa sua, se ei non crede?’ (Par. XIX, 70-78)}

The eagle specifically refers to the Indus here, the distant periphery of the medieval world where non-Christians were known to live and, at no fault of their own, were unexposed to Christ and His teachings. It raises the complex question of the ability for a person to be innocent and pure-hearted even if he has not been baptized, and so, where does this leave him in the afterlife? Dante’s several and deliberate references to Islam, especially in \textit{Inferno} XXVIII, and his choice to treat its followers in a far less stereotypical way than his contemporaries, shows that he would have been particularly concerned with this question and how it would apply to the many Muslims that were now a prominent part of his medieval reality. Yet the divine creature does not simply accept such questioning, and continues his speech by reprimanding Dante and the many others who have dared question God’s will:

\begin{flushright}
110 “Sapete come attento io m'apparecchio / ad ascoltar; sapete qual è quello / dubbio che m'è digiun cotanto vecchio” (\textit{Par.} XIX, 31-33).
\end{flushright}
Or tu chi se', che vuol sedere a scranna,
per giudicare di lungi mille miglia
con la veduta corta d'una spanna?
Certo a colui che meco s'assottiglia,
se la Scrittura sovra voi non fosse,
da dubitar sarebbe a maraviglia.
Oh terreni animali! oh menti grosse!" (Par. XIX, 79-85)

Dante’s mortality is brought to the forefront here; even though he has been permitted into paradise, he is there as a guest and, more importantly, as a terrestrial being. No matter how grand his intellect, Dante’s very humanity limits his ability to ever fully know divine truth, which in this case, is God’s system of salvation. Yet, the poet includes this instance of almost blasphemous questioning as a means of creating theological dialogue. As best stated by Schildgen,

In introducing the Indus [...], Dante introduces a religious contradiction not easily resolved either in his poem or by Christianity itself. Rather than strictly reflecting popular contemporary political, social and religious convictions or prejudices about the places beyond the Roman Christian cultural space, Dante draws in these border territories to serve his own poetic and ideological purposes. (Schildgen 1993, 178)

As shown in the first chapter, the Indus was often referred to by Christian scholars in order to evoke exoticism and an almost mysterious sense of otherness due to its inaccessibility. Although Dante also exploits the concept of the Indus for its otherness here, his purpose is not to condemn its inhabitants for their non-Christianity, but to highlight these individuals as living beings who are also subject to God’s judgement. Since Catholic doctrine holds that all men share the same Creator, these non-Christians must be included in God’s system of salvation. Yet by Dante mentioning the Indus, he forces the reader to ask exactly where do its non-Christian inhabitants fit into a Christian concept of the afterlife wherein one God is believed to preside over the souls of all the earth.
Dante was a product of an age wrought with tension, brought on by the fragmentation of the social constructs which surrounded him; his *Commedia* seems to thrive on tension, particularly in the *Inferno* where there are several allusions to biblical events or theological concepts that have been transformed into infernal reflections of the originals.  

By the time we reach paradise, the chaos of hell has been left far behind, where through the power of “La gloria di colui che tutto move” (*Par. I, 1*), we are instead in a realm of peace and harmony. However, Dante has the incessant need to revive the sense of tension that he was all too familiar with, as a means of uncovering different – and thus, not necessarily Christian – levels of truth. Dante’s goal was not one of achieving one total truth, for as he indicates in *Monarchia*, he recognizes the human incapacity to ever grasp truth in its totality:

> Propter quod sciendum primo, quod Deus et natura nil otiosum facit, sed quicquid prodit in esse est ad aliquam operationem. Non enim essentia ulla creatae ultimus finis est in intentione creantis, in quantum creans, sed propria essentie operatio: unde est quod non operatio propria propter essentiam, sed hec propter illum habet ut sit. Est ergo aliqua propria operatio humane universitatis, ad quam ipsa universitas hominum in tanta multitudine ordinatur; ad quam quidem operationem nec homo unus, nec domus una, nec una vicinia, nec una civitas, nec regnum particulare pertingere potest. Que autem sit illa, manifestum fiet si ultimum de potentia totius humanitatis appareat. (*Mon. I.3, 3-4*)

Here Dante expresses that humanity cannot achieve its full potential – and thus the maximum level of truth attainable by man – without collaborating with one another as a network, interchanging countless variations of truth. Hence, truth in Dante’s view is not exclusively Christian. Instead, it is composed of multiple layers, spread over space and time. Gregory B. Stone elaborates: “Dante thus regards truth as collective, historical, and multiple: truth is the sum total of all that humans can possibly know, past, present, and future, here, there, and everywhere” (Stone 36). It is for this reason that Dante includes Islamic figures such as

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111 A prominent example is that of Lucifer who appears in the final cantos of *Inferno*. The three-headed beast is an infernal parody of the Holy Trinity.
Avicenna and Averroes in his *Commedia* and *Monarchia*,¹¹² for they are two men who prompted dialogue, questioned the truths that they knew; by including them in his works, Dante shows that he is open to the truths that these Muslim philosophers had to offer. It is not in despite of their different religion, but *because* of it that Dante admires these Islamic polymaths, for their religious exposure allowed them access to a completely different set of truths from those of Dante’s, and thus offer a certain balance to otherwise divergent views.

Dante may have included Renouard for a similar reason, for as William’s companion, the Moor “proves to be a necessary presence, a fundamentally equal partner to the civilizing hero” (Bartolomé and Parra 206). While William shows his Saracen partner the civilized way to head into battle, Renouard introduces William to the powers of brute force; both approaches offer their own distinct strengths, and are thus both correct. However, when placed side by side, these men and the tactics – or truths, if you will – that they have to offer, create a balance and unity that allow them to maximize their human potential in the heat of battle.

In his conception of truth as multi-faceted, Dante consequently recognized discord that naturally arises from competing ideas. However, Dante’s quest was not for a single and superior truth, but rather one in pursuit of peace. Hence, he looked to his model of the universal monarch, who does not have loyalties to one religion or nation, but to all under his dominion, for in this way the ruler may facilitate the exchange of different truths while still maintaining peace. In his

¹¹² Dante mentions Averroes as one who shares Dante’s own beliefs regarding human potential as a collective project: “Et quia potentia ista per unum hominem seu per aliquam particularium comunitatum superius distinctarum tota simul in actum reduci non potest, necesse est multitudinem esse in humano genere, per quam quidem tota potentia hec actuetur; sicut necesse est multitudinem rerum generabilium ut potentia tota materie prime semper sub actu sit: aliter esset dare potentiam separatam, quod est impossibile. Et huic sententie concordat Averrois in commento super hiis que De anima” (*Mon.* I.3, 8-9).
Monarchia, Dante describes his ideal ruler as one who is not bound by any territory, for only in this way may he remain unbiased and unmotivated by greed:

[..] quod iustitie maxime contrariatur cupiditas, ut innuit Aristoteles in quinto ad Nicomacum. Remota cupiditate omnino, nichil iustitie restat adversum; unde sententia Phylosophi est ut que lege determinari possunt nullo modo iudici relinquantur. Et hoc metu cupiditatis fieri oportet, de facili mentes hominum detorquentis. Ubi ergo non est quod possit optari, impossibile est ibi cupiditatem esse: destructis enim objectis, passiones esse non possunt. Sed Monarcha non habet quod possit optare: sua nanque iurisdictio terminatur Occeano solum: quod non contingit principibus aliis, quorum principatus ad alios terminantur, ut puta regis Castelle ad illum qui regis Aragonum. Ex quo sequitur quod Monarcha sincerissimum inter mortales iustitie possit esse subiectum. (Mon. I.11, 11-12)

It is thus significant that Dante should have an eagle, the symbol of imperial Rome, residing in the heaven of Jupiter, devoted to just rulers, speak not only about the justice administered by the Heavenly Ruler, but also about the level of justice that the supreme temporal ruler should aim to uphold. The fact that Dante does not limit the idea of his monarch to his own religion nor his own territory once again indicates that he could not have been anti-Islam. He longs for the most just and most noble-hearted ruler – qualities that are not prescribed by one’s religious loyalties. Stone explains further: “The religious identity of a perfect ruler (whether he be, for instance, Christian or Muslim) is an ‘accident,’ such as his being blond or dark-haired, European or Asian. Neither a ruler nor his subjects need religion in order to acquire the perfect moral virtues that ground the ideal state [...] Since he governs a multicultural, religiously plural global polity, the Monarch’s teachings cannot be drawn from any single religious discourse” (Stone 30-31). The eagle ushers Dante’s political views as outlined in the Monarchia into God’s kingdom.

By embodying the concept of the ideal monarch through its symbolic form, paired with its questioning of divine justice, the eagle offers an ambiguous response to the possibility of salvation beyond Christianity:

Esso ricominciò: "A questo regno non salì mai chi non credette 'n Cristo,
né pria né poi ch'el si chiavasse al legno.
Ma vedi: molti gridan 'Cristo, Cristo!'
che saranno in giudicio assai men prope
a lui, che tal che non conosce Cristo;
e tai Cristian dannerà l'Etìòpe,
quando si partiranno i due collegi,
l'uno in eterno ricco e l'altro inòpe. (Par.XIX, 103-111)

Here the eagle at once expresses both a conservative and tolerant view of salvation; it begins by stating what we would expect of a Christian authority on salvation, noting that the only ones who have ever been welcomed into “questo regno” were believers in Christ. Yet, soon thereafter, it directs the spotlight on those superficial Christians, individuals who have been baptized and identify themselves as Christians only when it benefits them, while completely disregarding the moral tenets that lie at the foundation of the faith. The eagle indicates that following Judgement Day, such souls will actually be further away from Christ than those who were never exposed to Him.

The eagle goes even further that it will in fact be the non-Christians – and gives the example of the Ethiopians – who will judge these false Christians; even though they have not received the sacrament of baptism, they lived just lives and thus are in a more privileged position than those Christians who claim the title but yet are not true believers. The eagle’s ambiguous explanation leaves the pilgrim and the reader perplexed, for although belief in Christ seems to be necessary for access into paradise, non-Christians do not seem to be completely shut out from earning God’s grace. Moreover, when it says that those admitted into heaven believed in Christ “né pria né poi ch'el si chiavasse al legno” (Par. XIX, 105), the eagle further opens up the possibility of salvation to non-Christians. This line suggests that belief in Christ can be acquired even after death; hence, God’s grace alone is enough to grant any soul salvation. The divine creature emphasizes that the reason why God’s justice is not meant to be understood is because it is not bound by any restrictive set of laws regarding justice:
La prima volontà, ch'è da sé buona,
da sé, ch'è sommo ben, mai non si mosse.
Cotanto è giusto quanto a lei consuona:
nullo creato bene a sé la tira,
ma essa, radiando, lui cagiona. (*Par.* XIX, 86-90)

Whatever He decides is ultimately correct, whether or not it adheres to the standard criteria as outlined by Christian theology. As summarized by Stone, the eagle insists that justice “is not some objective or external standard that might stand apart from God and to which God’s actions, to be deemed ‘just,’ must conform. Rather, whatever God wills and however God acts is necessarily ‘just’” (Stone 262). Therefore, God does not adhere to a system of justice, but rather, it is He who determines what is just; this suggests that the salvation of Muslims and other non-Christians is viable should He will it.

Other than Renouard, the Saracen convert, there are no souls in Dante’s *Paradiso* who died while still loyal to the Muslim religion. However, the pagan soul of Ripheus has been granted a place in the heights of heaven, once again challenging the confines of Christian salvation. Ripheus is a minor character in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, a just Trojan warrior who died in the throes of battle in which he and his fellow men were disguised as Greeks in the attempt to ambush the enemy (*Aeneid* II.339, 394, 426). Dante introduces Ripheus through the voice of the imperial eagle, who continues to address the pilgrim in *Paradiso* XX: “Chi crederebbe giù nel mondo errante / che Rifëo Troiano in questo tondo / fosse la quinta de le luci sante?” (*Par.* XX, 67-69). Dante builds intrigue around this figure, introducing him with the question of how strange it is that a Trojan should be found among the saved. Dante knew that his readers would be surprised to find a non-Christian in heaven, and by including the Trojan, he is blatantly challenging Christian dogma.
Roman emperor Trajan also appears alongside Ripheus (Par. XX, 45), however his placement here seems much more understandable given the legend surrounding the pagan emperor that Dante surely would have been familiar with. The legend entailed that Pope Gregory the Great had restored Trajan to life just in time for him to perform an act of faith and avoid eternal damnation. However, Ripheus had never been mentioned by any other Christian scholar prior to Dante (Fortin 145), and thus the poet had no source to justify his salvation. Dante’s Inferno is littered with pagan souls that he chose to condemn, and while he does permit Cato\textsuperscript{113} and Statius\textsuperscript{114} into purgatory on the road to redemption, the unredeemed, fully pagan Ripheus in Paradiso XX continues the process of questioning divine justice and salvation which took precedence in the previous canto. The eagle once again tells the pilgrim that Ripheus’ placement here does not require justification as God’s justice is not meant to be comprehended by man: “Ora conosce assai di quel che ’l mondo / veder non può de la divina grazia, / ben che sua vista non discerna il fondo” (Par.XX, 70-72). As noted by Stone, “Ripheus is the exemplary ‘virtuous pagan’. Neither Christian nor Jew, he stands outside the fold of the ‘chosen people’ to whom God has granted the possibility of salvation. Yet here he is, most certainly, in heaven – a

\textsuperscript{113} Cato appears in Purgatorio I as the guardian at the shores of Mount Purgatory. Known historically as a pagan and a suicide, Dante’s choice to place Cato in the realm of penitent souls working towards salvation once again does not adhere to conventional Christian dogma. Rather than compromising his moral integrity and fall tempted to the corruption around him, Cato gave up his life; this channels Christ’s sacrifice which in itself is a form of suicide, and may be why Dante allowed Cato to escape eternal damnation.

\textsuperscript{114} Dante permits yet another pagan soul into purgatory with the appearance of the first-century Roman poet, Statius in cantos XXI and XXII. Although the soul tells the account of his conversion to Christianity, there is neither documentation nor anything in the literary tradition to support this, and was thus most likely an invention of Dante’s. Statius represents reason illuminated by faith, for he was granted the grace to be able to understand the underlying Christian message in Virgil’s poetry: “Facesti come quei che va di notte, / che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova, / ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte, / quando dicesti: ‘Secol si rinova; / torna giustizia e primo tempo umano, / e progenie scende da ciel nova.’ / Per te poeta fui, per te cristiano: / ma perché veggi mei ciò ch’io disegno, / a colorare stenderò la mano” (Purg. XXII, 67-75). Although not quite as shocking as the appearance of Ripheus in paradise, Cato and Statius’ presence in purgatory, on the road to salvation, once again “disrupts the claims to an exclusively Judaeo-Christian heaven” (Schildgen 1993, 177).
fact by which the eagle means to startle us into being ‘slow to judge’ concerning who belongs among the chosen” (Stone 265).

In order to determine why Dante would overlook Ripheus’ non-Christianity, we must look to the origins of this character in the Aeneid. Virgil describes the warrior as “uniquely the most just of all the Trojans, the most faithful preserver of equity; but the gods decided otherwise” (Aeneid II, 532–3). In the sphere of heaven devoted to the importance of justice, it makes sense that Dante consider Ripheus here. In Virgil’s brief description, Ripheus possesses some of those characteristics that Dante deemed crucial for the ideal monarch: a just, loyal, individual who fought in the battle of Troy, giving up his life to establish peace. Although like Charlemagne and his paladins, Ripheus was forced to employ violence, his motivations were admirable. By placing the pagan in heaven, Dante wishes to stress that there are certain qualities that are so pure that should one possess them, he is not necessarily bound by the religion that he happens to be a part of. As Stone states, Ripheus “was a Christian living in a non-Christian community” (Stone 265), thus should God choose to do so, He may grant salvation to those who possess Christian-type qualities even if they are not Christian. The eagle goes on to explain why Ripheus has been saved:

L'altra, per grazia che da sì profonda
fontana stilla, che mai creatura
non pince l'occhio infino a la prima onda,
tutto suo amor là giù pose a drittura:
per che, di grazia in grazia, Dio li aperse
l'occhio a la nostra redenzion futura;
ond' ei credette in quella, e non sofferse
da indi il puzzo più del paganesmo. (Par.XX, 118-125)

Through God’s grace alone, Ripheus was granted foresight of Christ’s existence, and thus became a believer in a pre-Christian era. Dante’s inclusion of a pagan in paradise opens the door
of salvation to Muslims and other non-Christians, and should God wish to overlook their religion, through His grace He may grant them a place in heaven.

For Dante, whose main objective was to call on his fellow men to unite peacefully under the rule of one just universal emperor, he could not have been completely closed off to the salvation of non-Christians, for these men would have to be included in the universal plan that he had in mind – certainly as subjects of this monarchy and possibly even as its ruler. His almost utopian vision is founded on unity and peace, and not on any particular religion. Christian theology deems God as the essence of unity, and it is man’s duty to aim to emulate his Creator as closely as possible. Dante took this concept further, and determined that the monarch should take on a uniting role on earth, following the model of God’s reign over heaven. Though the emperor can never hope to achieve the same level of perfection, if he follows the example of the Divine Ruler closely, he may achieve his full potential as terrestrial ruler. The West’s goal of Christian supremacy and imperial expansionism that lay at the heart of its crusading efforts was of no interest to Dante. As conveyed by Frederick Quinn,

115 Islam has a very similar concept of God, referred to as *tawhid*, or divine unity. This term not only denotes monotheism, but also denotes God’s dominion over all beings, regardless of where they are from or what religion they practice, for as noted in the Qur’an, “Indeed, all who are in the heavens and on the earth belong to Him. Those who call upon others beside God are not really partner-gods; they are only following assumptions and telling lies” (10:66). While man can never reach the perfection exemplified by God, it should be his life’s mission to strive to emulate his Creator. Of *tawhid* Said says, “God’s transcendental unity (*tawhid*) is something to be achieved and understood over and over by the devout Muslim” (Said 1979, 269). Thus, God is the pinnacle of unity and wholeness, which although man should aim to resemble, may never fully be equal to. For further analysis of the Islamic concept of *tawhid*, see Muhammad ‘Abdul Haq’s article, “The Perspective of At-*Tawhid*” 1983, especially p.1-3 and p.15-18.

116 “Humanum genus filius est celi, quod est perfectissimum in omni opere suo: generat enim homo hominem et sol, iuxta secundum De naturali auditu. Ergo optime se habet humanum genus cum vestigia celi, in quantum propria natura permitcit, ymitatur. Et cum celum totum unico motu, scilicet Primi Mobilis, et ab unico motore, qui Deus est, reguletur in omnibus suis partibus, motibus et motoribus, ut phylosophando evidentissime humana ratio deprehendit, si vere sillogizatum est, humanum genus tunc optime se habet, quando ab unico principe tanquam ab unico motore, et unica lege tanquam unico motu, in suis motoribus et motibus reguletur. Propter quod necessarium appareat ad bene esse mundi Monarchiam esse, sive unicum principatum qui 'Imperium' appellatur” (Mon. I, 1-3).
*The Divine Comedy* drew on the growing number of pilgrim narratives and travelers’ accounts coming into Europe, but parted with them in a significant way. Instead of the aggressive mentality of us against them that informed most such religious commentaries, Dante’s subject matter was broader than the Crusades and Islam; it was about the moral failures of emerging European society, widespread clerical corruption in the Catholic church, and papal ignorance.” (Quinn 53-54)

Dante was clearly a unique thinker amongst his contemporaries; several of his early commentators viewed the Crusades and the notion of salvation in a far more conventional way than their poetic predecessor. Rather than being overly concerned about the salvation of the individual, Dante’s vision required that mankind as a whole be saved, led by a just, peace-motivated and religiously neutral monarch. Each individual must strive to live honourably, not for his own selfish reasons, but for the good of his fellow man. Hence, the Muslims and other non-Christians are included in this schema, for they too have the ability to contribute to and facilitate the establishment of a united universal monarchy. While the salvation referred to in the *Commedia* is of the religious sort, Dante’s poetic mission is in fact a secular one, wherein individuals from all corners of the world may unite under a capable and fair emperor’s rule. This will in turn allow peace to be cultivated, which will eliminate cupidity between men, and consequently bring mankind as a whole closer to the light of salvation. For, as best expressed by Stone, “[...] the saving in question involves saving the world, not saving the individual’s soul. Or, perhaps more precisely, the salvation of the soul is dependent upon the salvation of the world” (5).

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117 Stone extensively discusses the *Commedia’s* secular aim. Stone points to Dante’s epistle to Can Grande della Scala as the source which reveals that the poet’s concept of justice was secular as well. Stone goes further to trace the origins of the secularization of justice to Frederick II and his *Liber augustalis*. For more information, see Stone 15-19.
Chapter 4
The Jews as Precursors to Concepts of Islamic Otherness

“[…] social egalitarianism is achieved not by eliminating categories […] but by replacing all other identities with a normative, dominant label, itself a construction but with the veneer of authority and truth” (Cox 2005, 25).

In comparison to his comments on Islam, Dante's overt references to contemporary Judaism in the *Commedia* are both scarce and brief, and even his silent and more subtle allusions to the Jewish presence in European culture and society are not quantitatively impressive. Yet these references and allusions are highly significant, for they contribute to Dante's concept of otherness in his political dream of universal monarchy. The category of the Other constitutes a threat to the idea of unity presupposed by Dante's theory of monarchy. This category includes Jews as well as Muslims, and though Dante's views on the latter are more conspicuous, they are not independent of his perception of the former, by which they are partly conditioned. My purpose in this chapter is to show how Dante's perception of contemporary Judaism enters his discourse on unity and social egalitarianism, to explore the role of the Jews in his poetical design for terrestrial harmony, and, ultimately, to see how contemporary Judaism figures in his theological approach to the spiritual salvation of mankind. I shall begin my analysis with a purview of the historical background with which Dante worked.

The tendency to identify aspects of otherness lies at the core of human self-definition. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, medieval Christians sought to make sense of the new and quickly permeating Islamic presence around them by highlighting any differences that lay between each religious group. However, this need to religiously distinguish themselves from a
people so seemingly different, had been a part of the Christian reality from the beginning of the Church’s establishment. With a theological foundation inherited from the Judaic scriptures, the Christian religion was born into an instantly paradoxical position: while Christianity was to rely on the Old Testament, it also had to differentiate itself as a new religious force divinely ordained to supersede the old interpretation of the teachings of Abraham and Moses, replacing them with new ones based on the teachings of Christ and the apostles. Before Islam, Christendom had been faced with an otherness that they had managed to control. Those who were once pagan were mostly muted under Constantine’s empire and onward, and the Jews – although many were permitted to preserve their religious customs under certain conditions – were overpowered by a strong Christian presence. Yet, once Islamic forces invaded, and settled in, Christian-inhabited territories, a resurgence of anti-Judaic sentiment began to emerge. Christian fear of Muslim otherness created an association between Islam and Judaism as enemies of the Church in the minds of medieval western Christians. Christianity’s experience with the Jews armed them with a set of notions of alterity, ones which they would apply – whether consciously or not – to their perceptions of the Muslims. The shared otherness assigned to both parties by Christendom demonstrates the importance of considering Christian treatment of the Muslims in conjunction with Christian dealings with the Jews.
1 Medieval Perceptions of the Jews and the Link to Islam: A Historical Background

1.1 Anti-Semitic Beginnings in Europe

The Jewish population in medieval Europe varied throughout the continent, affecting the degree of animosity towards its religious followers, with those regions most densely populated with Jews taking more measures to control them. In the central Middle Ages, the main areas of Jewish settlement were Spain, France and the Rhineland, with a small number living in the Apulian region, and even fewer in northern Italy during this period (Richards 98). Although Jewish population in northern Italy increased in the fifteenth century, the Jewish presence during Dante’s age was not an overly present one, with Jewish communities commonly confined to specific areas within larger cities (Hede 102). That being said, it is pertinent to outline the overall perceptions of the Jews during the Middle Ages, tracing the roots of these views to the early days of Christian-Jewish relations of the thirteenth century in order to have an understanding of how such perceptions of otherness originated, permeated throughout Europe, and manifested themselves in different ways throughout the centuries leading up to Dante’s time. The medieval Christendom’s perception of the Jews was one founded primarily on religious otherness, falling under the category of anti-Judaism as opposed to anti-Semitism.\(^{119}\) While

\(^{118}\) Following the Black Death, many Jews migrated to northern Italy to occupy roles in merchant class that had been emptied by the plague. By the early 1500s, there were more than 200 Jewish communities in northern Italy, twenty times more than two centuries prior (Richards 109-110).

\(^{119}\) When discussing disparaging attitudes towards the Jews, it is common to often use the terms “anti-Semitism” and “anti-Judaism” interchangeably in order to highlight the differences that render the Jews unequal to the Christians. A key authority on the distinction between these two terms is twentieth-century historian Gavin Langmuir. He identifies anti-Judaism as a phenomenon that began in the early days of Christianity; in this form, the discomfort that the Christians felt towards the Jews was primarily based on their religious otherness as interpreted through “evidence” found in the gospels, and through their presence as rivals of Christianity. In contrast, anti-Semitism is a
Christians did attempt to construct the identity of the Jews using aspects of racial difference as well, these differences were primarily to highlight that the Jews were physically identifiable as being part of a now superseded religion. Later in this chapter, as Dante’s representation of the Jews is analyzed, the poet will be highlighted as a unique figure amidst his contemporaries, for although he does condemn Jews who caused discord, he does not attack the Jews for their beliefs. Instead, similarly to Dante’s approach to the Muslims, he subtly expresses his concern for the unwillingness of the Jews to accept Christianity and consequently, their contribution to the lack of egalitarianism in medieval Europe. Without some semblance of unity amongst all people on European soil, Dante knew that his hopes for a universal monarchy would be impossible; thus, rather than highlight the differences of Islam and Judaism in comparison to Christianity, he often leads his reader to understand that all three religions actually have much in common.

The awareness of the Jews as a distinct group cloaked under the veil of otherness is one which began well before Christianity; in ancient Rome, Jews were regarded as being inherently different from the growing pagan majority. However, although they were seen as different, they were not treated with violence and their religious practices were tolerated by the pagan Empire. Dante, who looked to the Roman Empire as emblematic of peace and stability, may have adopted this level of somewhat tolerance, as will be demonstrated in the second half of this chapter. However, although Jews under the pre-Christian Empire were permitted to practice their faith, they were nonetheless seen as outsiders. Once Christianity began to establish its presence within term which was coined at the end of the nineteenth century to refer to a modern – yet, disparaging – conception of the Jews through a Christian lens.
Europe, what was once a mere perception of Jewish otherness based on racial prejudice began to escalate into one of religious “separatism” and a rejection of Hellenistic culture and beliefs (Stroumsa 4). Hence, with the birth of the Church, Christendom’s relationship with the Jews became one of a religiously-motivated concern, aiming to secure its position as the newly powerful, “true” faith.

The theology of Augustine became the authoritative set of guidelines as to how the Jews were to be treated via biblical exegesis compiled by the saint. He defines a new beginning of history as one which was ushered in by the Incarnation, and although that which came before cannot be erased nor forgotten, it must be seen as an era of an old set of beliefs which has come to a close, with the age of Christianity indicating a new beginning of truth. With this conception of Christianity as that which would inherit from, and at the same time override, Judaism, Augustine was conscious of the need to justify this dichotomy of reliance on, yet superiority over, the Jews, and perhaps even more importantly, the fact that Christ was a Jew.

It should be noted that the first official set of restrictions regarding the treatment of the Jews was the Theodosian Code of 429. It was established by Roman Emperor Theodosius II in 429, and its laws began to be fully enforced in 439 (M. Cohen 32-33). While only a small number of the thousands of laws within this Code concern the Jews, these provided an early framework of religious otherness that would follow the Jews in the centuries ahead – and would later be expanded upon by Augustine. The Code indicated that Jews were not to hold public office, except in the capacity of tax collectors, while also declaring them as a heretical group that needed to be restricted in order to protect the now developing Church. With the establishment of the Theodosian Code, the Jews became associated with heresy as well as paganism (Linder 62); later, with the birth of Islam, this Christian assigning of religious otherness would also be assigned to the Muslims. However, the Code did not condone violence towards them; instead, it recognized the legitimacy of the Jews as ancestors of the Christians, and included rules which permitted that they have the freedom to practice their religion (16.8.20).

Augustine professed a new and universal structure of time; he presents a concept of history as one encapsulated in seven days and he envisions his current time as taking place on the sixth day, an ongoing present which will not end until the apocalypse and the Last Judgement of all souls (De civitate Dei 22:30).

The Council of Nicaea on May 20, 325AD by Constantine established the dogma of Father/Son since, during the course of Jesus’ life, he was not officially considered to be God incarnate, but rather a teacher, Messiah or King of the Jews (Battistoni 102). With this formal declaration, the dogmas of the Incarnation and the Holy Trinity were established as key differentiators of Christianity versus Judaism – and later, differentiation from Islam as well.
Augustine, by whom Dante’s concepts of theology was largely influenced, argued that the Jews must indeed be protected, not only because they were the descendants of the Old Patriarchs, but also because they had a crucial role to fulfill in the divine plan for the salvation of humanity (De civitate Dei 18:46). Aspects of Augustine’s teachings can be traced in Dante’s references to the Jews, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

During the eighth and ninth centuries, there was a degree tolerance shown towards the Jews; part of the reason for this was due to the quickly burgeoning presence of Islam. As early on as the 630s, a time of religious distress as the Arab conquests of Christian territories began, the association of Jews with Muslims became common amongst Medieval Christians (Cutler and Cutler 89). Not only were the Muslims different from the Christians in terms of their beliefs, but they were perceived to have taken fundamental truths from Christianity and distorted them to suit the needs of their schismatic and false religion. However, this same approach could not be equally applied to the Jews. While the Jews could not be fully accepted by Christians since the Church’s very power was dependent on the ideology of “succession which situates Christians as the true Israel of the present and Jews the false Israel of the past” (Pasto 440), by the same token, they could not be labelled as a schismatic group in the way that Islam was, for Judaism came first, and without it, Christianity could not have existed. With the establishment of Islam, the Church was faced with a type of religious otherness that they had not

123 For more on Augustine’s depiction of the Jews, see Paula Fredriksen’s Augustine and the Jews.

124 Such tolerance was particularly demonstrated by the Carolingian kings who allowed the Jews to own land, build synagogues, and encourage them to immigrate and live on their land – not as complete outsiders, but as merchants, doctors, diplomats and soldiers (Richards 90).

125 Cutler and Cutler expand on how the belief of Muslim-Jew cooperation began in the early years of Islam, providing the example of King Egica of Spain who, in the 690s, accused the Jews in his kingdom of forming an allegiance with the Muslims (90). Another similar case occurred amongst the Venetians, who transmitted the charge that the Jews were cooperating with the Muslims to attack the Christians (91).
had the experience dealing with in the past. Unlike paganism, Islam was monotheistic, and even believed in the teaching of the Old and New Testaments; yet the religion also introduced a third set of teachings, which made Islam further removed from Christianity than Judaism. Once Islam presented itself as a major power threatening further dissemination throughout Europe, the Jews now represented a dichotomous presence in Christendom: they needed to be controlled, yet they needed to be acknowledged, and even respected, for their contributions to Christianity. Judaism and Islam’s shared refusal of the Trinity, shared tradition of circumcision and their shared use of Semitic languages\textsuperscript{126} marked both religions as doctrinally backward, consumed with flesh-over-spirit in their religious practices, and as culturally different in the minds of Christians.

There was a considerable rise in anti-Judaism between the eleventh and twelfth centuries;\textsuperscript{127} massacres of Jewish civilians paired with hateful acts such as burning of the Talmud were a manifestation of the threat that Christians felt to maintain their dominance. These acts are associated with a series of rumours which began to circulate in the first decade of the eleventh century, which indicated that the Saracens had destroyed the Holy Sepulchre and beheaded the patriarch of Jerusalem all at the instigation of the Jews (Richards 90). Although the true threat was recognized as being delivered primarily through Islamic invaders, the Jews began to be regarded as a much more prominent enemy of Christendom which would act as an ally to Muslim forces. The Fourth Lateran Council is a most telling event in understanding how

\textsuperscript{126} Christians considered Indo-European languages (i.e. Latin and Greek) as sacred tongues, hence, the Jews and Muslims’ choice to continue to speak in their Semitic languages (i.e. Hebrew and Arabic, respectively), further ostracized them within medieval Christian thought (Cutler and Cutler 92).

\textsuperscript{127} Although massacres of the Jews occurred sporadically throughout Europe, those in the Rhineland in 1096 and 1146 and in England in 1189 and 1190 were of a larger scale. News of these killings spread throughout Europe. The burning of the Talmud and other Jewish texts occurred in Paris between 1239 and 1248 and in Oxford in 1244 and Bourges in 1251, their texts were disputed in Barcelona in 1263, and confiscated in Puglia in 1270 (Kruger 31). These are but a few of the many explosions of hatred towards Jews throughout Western Europe.
Jews were approached and treated by the Church in the thirteenth century. It was convened by Pope Innocent III in 1215, and along with a call to reform the clergy, eradicate heresy and support the Crusades against all infidels, the bull also outlined new policies regarding the Jews. One of the most basic means of underscoring the otherness of the Jews was the bull’s requirement that all Jews be marked by special clothing, serving to identify them – and, in a sense, shame them – for their religious ascriptions. The Fourth Lateran Council not only applied such restrictions and means of identification to the Jews, but also to the Muslims and even to prostitutes on European soil (Richards 10). It is worth noting that this “badge of infamy” was not introduced in Italy until the fifteenth century, hence, two centuries after Dante. Yet, although the badge was not specifically part of Dante’s immediate reality, the perception of Jewish otherness was. Furthermore, from the early days of the badge’s existence, as well as other indications in the papal bull, it became clear that Muslims (and prostitutes) became officially associated with the Jews through the otherness which plagued any group placed under the categorical umbrella of the infidels.

128 These restrictions included, but were not limited to, banning the Jews from holding public office and practicing usury, and also forcing them to abide by curfews set by this bull (Richards 10).

129 The linking together of these three groups is thought to be due to their associations with the carnal. The prostitutes’ link to lasciviousness is an obvious one, and as discussed in previous chapters, the perception of Muslims as being carnally motivated also justifies this grouping. The perception of Jews as carnal was based on the Christian belief that Judaism is more concerned with materiality than spirituality. Such perceptions were made popular by Augustine, who depicts the Jews as spiritually blind and linked to the carnal (Adversus Iudaeos PL. 42.51-67). The Old Testament was regarded as a set of scriptures which placed the letter over the spirit, whereas the New Testament was seen as a set of more elevated scripture, superseding the literality of that which came before it. Since Judaism maintained the superiority of the Old Testament, the religion was tied to the letter, hence, the physical. Jewish and Islamic texts detailing how food must be consumed (i.e. the practices of kosher and halal, respectively) would be interpreted by Christians as a preoccupation with physical consumption, and by extension, the carnal. The Jewish and Islamic-shared religious practice of male circumcision was also seen as an indication that these faiths were physically driven, in contrast to Christians who professed their spiritual superiority for valuing the “circumcision of the heart” (Augustine, On the Spirit and the Letter 1.470) over the flesh. Examples of the carnal perception of the Jews are found in various artistic representations and religious sermons; they were depicted with horns on their heads, unusually large genitalia, lusting after innocent Christian maidens (Richards 14-20).
For European Christians, Islam had once been but a distant presence, residing in the untouchable periphery of the Orient; yet, as Muslim troops established themselves on European soil during the Crusades, the threat that this religious group posed was now all too real. In contrast to Islam, the once external enemy which had now managed to invade Europe, the Jews had always been an internal enemy for the Christians. Once the Crusades began and targeted all infidels, Jews and Muslim became associated with each other. This sentiment was likely more strongly present due to the tendency to view “the Jew as ally of the Muslim” (Cutler and Cutler 2), two religious groups, one old and the other new, who refused to accept Christianity. Edward Said points out the similarity between Orientalism and anti-Semitism, an aspect of his book that few critics have focused on. Said touches on this link in the introduction of his book, saying, “I have found myself writing the history of a strange secret sharer of Western anti-Semitism. That anti-Semitism and, as I have discussed it its Islamic branch, Orientalism resemble each other very closely is a historical, cultural, and political truth that needs only to be mentioned to an Arab Palestinian for its irony to be perfectly understood” (27-28). Said’s use of the term “secret sharers” is particularly appropriate when analyzing Christian-Jewish relations versus Christian-Muslim relations; although the Jews and the Muslims are considered different from each other – in name, religious practices, language, place of origin, etc. – there was still the

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130 Allan and Helen Cutler add to their explanation of Jews and Muslims as perceived allies by noting that there are accounts dating back to the seventh century in which Jews rejoiced when Christian territory was overtaken by the Muslims (123).

131 The majority of discussions relating to Said’s book are focused on Orientalism as a term directed towards Islam, especially during eighteenth and nineteenth-century French and British colonialism, as well as its earlier roots when Islam began to gain prominence in the seventh century, and later, looking on its persistence into the modern era, as discussed in chapter one. However, in recent years, the link between how the Christians perceived the Jews and how they approached the Muslims has begun to become part of the Orientalism dialogue. Notably, James Pasto’s article, “Islam’s ‘Strange Secret Sharer’: Orientalism, Judaism, and the Jewish Question” focuses on Said’s rather brief discussion of the connection between Orientalism and anti-Semitism, wherein the way in which the Christians classified the Jews as “Others” would teach them how to approach the new and threatening “Other” in Islam. However, unlike Said, Pasto completely differentiates between Orientalism and anti-Semitism as he does not consider them to be comparable discourses.
tendency within Christendom to see them in parallel. Thus, as a thesis which focuses primarily on aspects of Orientalism in Dante, it is imperative to understand how medieval Orientalism was formed and influenced by the presence of the Jews, and by extension, how Dante’s depiction of the Jews is tied to his perception of the Muslims. Yet, unlike his contemporaries, Dante’s references to the Jews will reveal that he did not share the belief that the two religious groups were conspiring in an evil alliance against Christianity.

Majorcan philosopher and Franciscan tertiary, Raymond Lull (1232-1315), wrote extensively on the way in which the Jews should be perceived by honourable Christians. While his missionary work was dedicated to the conversion of Muslims to Christianity, he often included the Jews in his efforts as the presence of another non-Christian group could only strengthen the position of Islam. In fact, in Raymond’s writings, he addresses the Muslims as individuals who must be considered in connection with the Jews (Bonner 16). In his Doctrina pueril, Lull professes a conflicting view of Judaism; while he acknowledges that Judaism must be respected by both Muslims and Christians as the religion which allowed for the birth of Christianity, at the same time he denigrates the Jews as infidels for not accepting Christ as the son of God and instead, choosing to rely solely on the Old Law of Moses. To take this denigration further, Lull classifies the Muslims as infidels along with the Jews; while the Jews who lived before Christianity are not to blame, both post-Christian Jews and Muslims are declared infidels for their unwillingness to accept Christian doctrine. Nicholas of Lyra (1270-

See chapters 69 and 71 of Doctrina pueril (p. 182-185 and 177-179 in the critical edition of Joan Santanach) for Raymond Lull’s full discussion of Judaism and Islam and their statuses within Christendom.

In Lull’s Liber predicationis, Lull clearly aligns the Jews with the Muslims as followers of blind religions: “We have therefore proven sufficiently clearly the most blessed Trinity of God, without which the prophecy could not be true. And inasmuch as the Jews and the Saracens blaspheme it [the Trinity] they fall into a contradiction – namely, that the prophecy is true and that it is not true whence it has been demonstrated that they are in error and in anger of God” (66:9; translated by J. Cohen, 217). For an analysis on Lull’s Doctrina pueril, as well as other mentions of
1349) was another figure who directly addressed the Jews and Muslims as individuals connected through their otherness. Although a Jewish convert to Christianity, Nicholas’ Jewish roots would not lead him to be more tolerant towards the Jews; instead, he wrote biblical commentary in which he denigrated the Jews as sinful, similar to the Muslims, in their obsession with all things terrestrial. In his Postilla biblical commentaries, Nicholas writes, “it is obvious that the Jews have fallen into the error of the Saracens, who define the beatitude of the future life as the corporeal delights of food and sex”. Here, not only are the Jews and the Muslims equated for their faulty religious ascriptions, but they are both associated with the carnal.

The significance in identifying Raymond Lull and Nicholas of Lyra here is that they were both contemporaries of Dante. From Spain and France, respectively, both garnered attention for their works. Lull’s avid writing and missionary efforts throughout Europe and later, to North Africa, as well as Nicholas’ eventual position as the head of the Franciscan order in 1319, allowed both of their teachings to spread more widely through both the written and spoken word. As such, it is likely that Dante had knowledge of how Jews and Muslims were linked by such figures as Raymond and Nicholas – whether directly or indirectly. As shall be demonstrated in the second half of this chapter, while such viewpoints seem to have influenced Dante’s perception of both non-Christian peoples, as seen with his unique approach to Islam in the previous chapters, Dante’s perception of the Jews does not simply adhere to the common perceptions of his time. Like Lull, Dante does not assign blame to the Old Testament Jews; yet unlike Lull, Dante does not simply condemn those Jews born after Christ, one of several cases –

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134 As quoted by Philip Krey in “Nicholas of Lyra”, p. 158-161 from the *Biblia latina*, vol. IV, p. 337r.
as will be discussed in the second part of this chapter – in which the poet takes a unique stance amongst his contemporaries. The following subsections will examine Christian stereotypes of the Jews, as well as specific charges made against the Jews in the attempt for Christians to define their faith as superior. These disparaging perceptions of and charges against the Jews prove particularly interesting to understanding Orientalism in the Middle Ages for, as will be demonstrated, they are strikingly similar to those made by Christians against the Muslims in order to underscore the falsity of their beliefs. As the following specific acts of prejudice towards the Jews are discussed, the link between Jews and Muslims through the medieval Christian lens will become indisputable. However, as will be presented in the second part of this section, Dante’s perception of the Jews does not fall in line with the medieval Christian tendency to equate them with the Muslims.

1.2 The Apocalypse, the Antichrist and the Demonic Jew

As discussed in chapter one, Muslim invasions were initially understood as stemming from an apocalyptic force from God in retribution for the sins committed by mankind, with the Prophet Mohammad often portrayed as the anti-Christ leading humanity astray through his wickedness. Similarly, the Jews were included in the apocalyptic view of the world, perceived as individuals who were in fact necessary in order for the apocalypse to occur. In the writings of the Calabrese theologian Gioacchino da Fiore (1135-1202), the apocalypse is described as an imminent event which will bring forth the perfection of the human spirit in preparation for the Second Coming. Gioacchino indicates that a key component of this final cleansing of the human soul involves the necessity to convert all Jews – alongside any other non-believers – to Christianity. In his
discussion of this cleansing, he refers to a seven-headed dragon, the great dragon refers to one of the heads of a seven-headed dragon, taken from the Book of Revelation (13:11; 19:20), and can generally be interpreted as a false prophet, the anti-Christ or, more specifically, the dragon is interpreted as Saladin, the great Muslim leader, by such theologians as Giaocchino himself (Ciccia 67). The Book of Revelations indicates that this dragon will eventually be cast into a lake of fire, where all false prophets are doomed to reside for eternity (20:10). From Gioacchino’s discussion of the image of the dragon representing a false prophet or, more specifically, the Muslim sultan, Saladin, as well as the conversion of the Jews as part of the apocalyptic view of time, the link between Jews and Muslims as infidels who will meet their final retribution at the end of days becomes more apparent. It must be noted, however, that although Gioacchino advocated the importance that all Jews convert, he never negated the Law of Moses and the prophetic truths found in the Old Testament (Lerner 30). Thus, although the Jews could not be permitted to maintain their religion, they could not be destroyed either, for they are the descendants of Christianity, and it was their ancestors who bore witness to Christ’s existence on earth. Dante knew about Gioacchino’s work since he names the figure in Paradiso XII; as will be discussed in the final subsection of this chapter entitled “Can the Jews be Saved?”, Dante’s reference to Gioacchino da Fiore will be analyzed for its suggestion that the way in which the Jews were treated by the Christians is directly related to the respect for the Old Testament Patriarchs as well as the hopeful utopian view of the world that both Dante and Gioacchino shared.

135 “The Jews and many pagan races will be converted to the Lord, and all people will rejoice in the beauty of peace because the great dragon’s head will be crushed and will be imprisoned in the abyss”. From Gioacchino da Fiore’s Adversus Judaeos (1957); quoted in Robert E. Lerner, The Feast of Saint Abraham: Medieval Millenarians and the Jews, 31). For more on Gioacchino da Fiore’s views on the conversion of the Jews as pertinent to the Apocalypse and the Second Coming, see Lerner’s chapter entitled, “Joachim and the Jews: The Reunion of Shem and Japheth”, p. 23-37.
Of central importance to the medieval apocalyptic world view is the rise in prominence of the figure of the anti-Christ. As explained in chapter one, the Prophet Mohammad was often equated with the Anti-Christ as an apocalyptic force sent to earth by God to punish them for their sins. Similarly, prior to the birth of Islam, the image of the demonic Jew was originally linked to the Anti-Christ. The perception of the Jew as the Anti-Christ became a correlation made in the minds of medieval Christians through the idea that a Jew who remains a Jew after the advent of Christianity is a parody of Christ himself and, thus, the anti-Christ (Richards 2). As an agent of the Devil, this Anti-Christ would deceive Christians into following his falsity, and it would be the Anti-Christ, embodied by the image of a stereotypical demonic Jew, who would lead mankind to the apocalypse. The Jew as the Anti-Christ was the precursor to how Christians would demonize the Saracen as the Anti-Christ.

The Jew as the Anti-Christ is an idea which also stemmed from the belief that the Jews were responsible for committing deicide. Accusations of deicide began in the fourth century as the Holy Roman Empire established Christianity as the state religion and the Empire sought to establish the religion’s superiority to any other which preceded it. Medieval Christian art and literature would often include images of blood and flesh in association with the Jews, with the aim of emphasizing not only their participation in Christ’s death. The charge of deicide was also made against the Muslims as Islam began to gain prominence within Christian-inhabited Europe. As the Crusades came to an end, the animosity towards these non-Christians had reached such epic proportions that it was common to blame both the Jews and Muslims for the killing of Christ, as separate religious peoples who had joined forces for the purpose of murdering Jesus in an evil pact of alliance. There were several paintings and wall frescoes dated between the
thirteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy which depicted both Jews and Muslims participating together in Christ’s death. Artistic renderings of Jews incorporated characteristics which were commonly associated with the demonic, such as a hooked nose, sinister facial expressions and even devil horns and tails; passion plays would also portray the Jews as demonic beings guilty of deicide (Richards 101). Moreover, the Jews were also said to be agents of the Devil himself, a notion that was “supported” by various popular legends. Such depictions also served as a precursor to how Christians would portray the Muslims when Islam became a force of which to be fearful; the eventual stereotypical depictions of the Muslims as followers of Satan was indirectly inherited from the demonic characteristics of the Jews – the original Other that afflicted Christendom. Like the demonic legends about the Jews, the various polemical legends of the Prophet Mohammad, discussed in chapter one, identify the Muslims as blind people following a wicked and heretical leader. The connection between the Devil and the Jews or the Muslims underscored not only that they were malicious people, but also that they were bound to the physical, and willingly blind to the spiritual truth of Christianity. It is significant to note the

136 Although many of these depictions are anonymous, there are two that were claimed by notable Italian artists. A flagellation scene by Giotto, arguably the greatest artist of Dante’s time, introduced the association of Jew and Muslim into contemporary art – especially for their shared collaboration in Christ’s death. In this flagellation scene (c. 1305), within the fresco of Christ’s passion at the Cappella degli Scrovegni in Padua, Giotto depicted dark-skinned Muslim aiding the Jews in the flagellation of Christ (Cutler and Cutler 109). Another such depiction is the Crucifixion scene by Florentine painter, Andrea di Bonaiuto, on the front altar wall of the Spanish Chapel in Santa Maria Novella, Florence (c. 1350), shows both groups participating in deicide. In such depictions, the Jews are typically identified by the Jewish badge of infamy, while the Muslims are identified by their dark skin and short curly dark hair (Cutler and Cutler 101-103).

137 In addition to artistic representations of the demonic Jew, this stereotype was often disseminated through the Vulgate Bible’s mistranslated verse of the Hebrew book of Exodus 34: 35; the original described Moses saying, “and behold the skin of his face sent forth beams” which was mistranslated as “his face had horns” (Richards 101).

138 One of the most common of these legends was that of Theophilus, a discredited archdeacon who was said to have used Jewish intermediaries – and, in some accounts a Jewish magician – to contact the Devil to aid him to take back his former position. When the time arrived for Theophilus to renounce Christ and give up his soul to the Devil, Theophilus recants his sins, appeals to the Madonna, who eventually rescues him from the Devil and his evil Jewish cohorts (Strickland 122). The legend of Theophilus and the Devil exists in several variations, most of which include the Jews as collaborators in Theophilus’ communication with the Devil. For a detailed analysis of the various versions of this legend, see Adrienne Williams Boyarin’s Miracles of the Virgin in Medieval England, p. 42-103.
prominence of the stereotypes of the demonic/Anti-Christ Jew during the Middle Ages since these were accepted depictions that were part of Dante’s reality. However, as will be demonstrated in the second half of this chapter, Dante’s references to the Jews indicates that he did not accept these common stereotypes for he does not emphasize Judas’ Jewishness as a factor in his damnation, nor does Judas’ association with Lucifer appear to be as a result of his Jewishness.

1.3 The Jews as Sorcerers, Cannibals and Desecrators of the Sacred

Like Mohammad and his Muslim followers, the Jews have also been linked to sorcery and the use of tricks in the semblance of miracles in attempt to mimic Christ’s ability to perform real miracles. Christians looked to certain Hebrew texts that the Jews would use to refer to their religious practices, and transformed them into terms which alluded to sorcery. For example, the Hebrew words for “synagogue” and “Sabbath” were used by Christians to refer to the meetings of witches and other agents of dark magic (Richards 20). Even the languages spoken by Jews and Muslims were interpreted as proof of their evil nature; Christians would eavesdrop as they chanted in Hebrew while at their synagogues; these unfamiliar sounds were believed to be undeniable signs of Jewish ties to sorcery and demonic acts (Cox 2005, 19-20), and the peculiar sounds of the Arabic language would later be interpreted in a similar way. Since sorcery was seen as a practice which extended from Devil-worship, the connection between Jewish practices and magic was a natural one for medieval Christians. Like the other negative stereotypes outlined thus far, the notion of the Jews as poison-savvy individuals set on attacking the
Christians in denial of spiritual truths of the New Law, the Muslims also became entrapped in this stereotype, accused of collaborating with the Jews in their poisoning efforts.\textsuperscript{139}

To add to the stereotype of the malicious Jew, Jews were believed to commit the blasphemous act of host desecration (Richards 104). Once the Fourth Lateran Council established transubstantiation as one of the basic tenets of Christianity in 1215, the position of the Jews on this aspect needed to be determined. Since Judaism does not acknowledge Christ as the son of God, the official instatement of transubstantiation was refused by the Jews, automatically assigning them with the role of Host desecrators.\textsuperscript{140} Furthermore, perhaps the most dishonourable charge made against the Jews was that their religious beliefs led them to perform ritualistic murders, especially of Christian children (Richards 105). As also previously outlined in the first two chapters, the Muslims would later be accused of similar crimes against children. These charges were, however, often discredited; for example, Emperor Frederick II organized a commission of scholars to investigate such claims of Jewish violence against Christian children. This commission rejected such accounts, leading Frederick to acquit the charged Jews in 1236 (Richards 105). As indicated in chapters one and two, Frederick also showed a similar tolerance towards the Muslims within his kingdom. Frederick II’s tolerance is significant here since Dante, whose considerable knowledge of Frederick’s openness to non-Christian peoples at his court, is likely to have also heard of such charges against the Jews and

\textsuperscript{139} For example, in 1321 in France there was a case in which Jews were accused of allying with the Muslims in a plot to poison all the wells in France. Since the cleanliness of the water in France was lacking at the time, many died. With this, hysteria began and the blame was quickly directed towards both non-Christian groups (Richards 103).

\textsuperscript{140} One of the first charges of Host desecration occurred in Berlin in 1243. As a result, not only were those Jews thought to be involved in this incident burned to death, but all local Jews, meant as a message from the Church to all non-believers and blasphemers that they would meet grave punishment (Richards 104).
consequently affecting his perception of them, as will be demonstrated in the second half of this chapter wherein Dante’s references to Judaism are analyzed.

1.4 The Jewish Intelligentsia in Medieval Europe

Beginning in the late twelfth century, there was an intellectual “rebirth” in Western Europe reliant on the recovery and translation of ancient texts, mediated greatly through Arabic and, to a lesser yet still significant extent, through Hebrew intellectuals (Kruger 31). This intellectual movement allowed for Christians, Jews and Muslims to meet freely and exchange philosophical, religious and mathematical knowledge from each of their learning contexts. The sanctioning of such interactions reached its peak during Dante’s time, especially during his years in Florence. Dante’s involvement in Florentine politics in conjunction with his desire to expand his knowledge base through his intellectual interactions allowed him access to a diverse group of individuals, belonging to a multitude of cultures and religions. In addition to his interest in Islam, Dante’s fascination with Kabbalah also influenced aspects of his work, including his depiction of Paradise as well as his understanding of the apocalypse.141 Yet, just as my aim is unlike that of Asin Palacios in attempting to show the degree of influence that Islam had on Dante, so too is it not my aim to trace the amount of influence that Hebrew mysticism had on Dante. Instead, I wish to establish what Dante knew about the Jews and how his perception of this otherness would affect his perception of the Muslims.

As highlighted in chapter two, Dante engaged in conversation with non-Christians, in particular during his time spent at the court of Cangrande della Scala, where he developed a

141 For specific instances in which Dante’s depiction of Paradise and his views on the apocalypse were influenced by Kabbalah, see Sandra Debenedetti Stow’s *Dante e la mistica ebraica*, especially p. 117-132.
significant interest in Islamic mysticism. It was there where Dante’s direct exposure to Jewish theology was made possible and encouraged to flourish under the open-minded and tolerant rule of Cangrande. The interactions there significantly contributed to Dante’s interest in different belief systems, including Islamic mysticism, Kabbalah and overall Hebrew mysticism (Debenedetti Stow 11). Kabbalah began to disseminate throughout Europe in the second half of the twelfth century, beginning in Provence and the Germanic territories; shortly thereafter it became a common part of religious debate in Spain through the work of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia, who eventually brought it to Italy in the 1270s. At the turn of the thirteenth century, as Dante’s intellectual exploration was reaching its new heights prior to his exile, Italy became the most important centre for the study of mystical Kabbalah (Debenedetti Stow 19). More specifically, Verona, the very place in which Cangrande held his court, had a strong and respected Jewish presence. The Jews of Verona were not closed amongst themselves; they were recognized as being very knowledgeable about the three major faiths and were conscious of the intellectual benefits of leaving the lines of communication open between members of all three (Battistoni 119). It is thus logical to assume that Dante, being a man of great interest in all expressions of faith, would have learned a considerable amount of information about Judaism from Jews themselves.

There are two notable Jewish men that have been linked to Dante and his formation of thought surrounding Judaism: Hillel ben Samuel and Manoello Giudeo. Hillel (1220-1295) came from a long ancestry of prominent Jews in Verona; he eventually studied the Talmud in Barcelona. In the 1250s he was invited to Naples at the court of Frederick II.142 a ruler of

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142 As discussed in chapter one, Frederick II’s rule was one of relative tolerance towards non-Christians, primarily for the purposes of exchanging knowledge. His kingdom extended beyond Naples, to southern Italy, specifically
comparable religious openness to that of Cangrande. It was there that Hillel encountered Muslim scholars with whom he was free to discuss differences of faith, and at the end of Frederick’s rule in 1267 he moved to Rome and studied at an academy of biblical exegetes and translators from Arabic (Battistoni and Hall 256). Here he met and befriended Manoello Giudeo, an educated Jew who would eventually be invited as a guest to Cangrande’s court and would also become a friend of Dante’s. Although Hillel’s intended audience was the Jews, he took great pains to draw upon the teachings of all three religions, acting as “uno straordinario ponte fra molti mondi” (Battistoni 43), showing the similarities between their belief systems, especially regarding the immortality of the soul.  

Although there is no evidence that Dante ever met Hillel, Hillel’s intellectual exchanges with Manoello Giudeo – who did know Dante - have been documented. As such, Dante may have been indirectly aware of Hillel’s beliefs through his friendship with Manoello, and thus, would have had the understanding that many of Judaism’s teachings had not been superseded by Christianity – and that they were in fact inherited from Judaism.

Manoello Giudeo (1261-1328) of Rome was a well-known Jewish scholar during Dante’s time and was admired by Cangrande for his knowledge about the teachings of twelfth-century Spanish-Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, one of the most influential, yet controversial figures in Sicily and Puglia where he allowed non-Christians – most notably the Muslims, who were persecuted elsewhere – to preserve their language and traditions.

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143 Hillel’s most notable work is entitled *Tagmule ha-Nefesh, or Rewards of the Soul*, which aimed to clarify the concept of immortality of the soul and resolve the issue of the soul receiving rewards or punishments in the afterlife.

144 Giorgio Battistoni holds that it is likely that Dante and Hillel did in fact meet while they were both in Verona, but that there is no possible proof of this since all data about Hillel stop in 1295 in Forlì (43).
of medieval Jewish philosophy for his adaptation of Aristotelian thought to Biblical faith. Dante certainly knew about Maimonides’ philosophy either through Thomas Aquinas, whose works Dante read and who referred respectfully to Maimonides as “Rabbi Moyses” (*Summa Contra Gentiles* 1:4), or through Manoello who was deemed an expert on the philosopher’s teachings. The religious controversy surrounding Maimonides’ teachings is what led Cangrande della Scala to invite Manoello Giudeo to his court to contribute to the debates. Dante may have met Manoello at the court in Verona, and if not, likely knew of one another through their other acquaintances there, and it was during his time there that he was considerably influenced by Hebrew eschatology, even more so than that of Islam (Battistoni 45-46). Dante’s openness to learn about a belief system other than that of Christianity is a further testament to his pursuit of truth as a collective term, which cannot consist solely of one set of beliefs, but rather must be pursued as a multi-faceted concept, a wholeness that can never be fully grasped by closing oneself off to a teaching beyond one’s geographical or temporal limitations.

With the presence of informed non-Christians, Christians could not simply claim superiority to Judaism and Islam; they had to *prove* this was so. Particularly during the thirteenth century, intense theological polemics arose, with the Christians seeking to permanently prove their supersessionist doctrine. During this time, scholars along with Dominican and Franciscan friars sought to prove the weaknesses of Judaism through the analysis of not only the Old Testament, but also the Talmud and other Jewish writings. Formal public debates were

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145 Although Maimonides was generally respected in the twelfth century, he proved to be a controversial figure after his death as his followers attempted to apply his concepts of Aristotelianism to Judaism in a manner which many Jews believed weakened the fundamental beliefs of their faith (Battistoni 22; Fox 11).

146 There has been some debate over the centuries about whether or not Dante and Manoello knew each another. Up until the early twentieth century, it was commonly suggested that they did in fact meet, although author Umberto Cassuto has attempted to demonstrate a lack of evidence for this. For one of the few detailed studies regarding Dante and Manoello and their possible interactions or influences on each other see Cassuto’s *Dante and Manoello*. 
performed throughout Europe to determine the truth of Christianity over Judaism and Islam, the most notable of which occurred in Paris and Barcelona, known as the Disputations, in 1240 and 1263 respectively (Cox 2005, 72). Although the Disputations focused on attacking Judaism, they could not avoid incorporating Islam into these arguments of otherness as a false and heretical religion which could thus not possibly supersede Christian truths. What proves interesting about such debates is that although their primary purpose was to refute non-Christian truths, they also revealed that learned Christians were acknowledging that members of these other religions had knowledge that they did not. Through these interactions, along with the general presence of both Jewish and Muslim intellectuals, members of each of the three religions were able to tap into a foreign set of truths that, although contained differences, also revealed points of intersection. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Dante was a product of his own learned environment; once a citizen of a city where travelling scholars, missionaries and scholars convened, Dante also embarked on his own travels to courts which offered platforms for intellectual exchange, and exposed him to a concept of otherness that was not limited by the stereotypes that were commonplace during his time. Dante’s innate thirst for knowledge and his ability to question Christian dogmas – as he does throughout his Commedia – indicate the poet’s openness to the notion that there are many truths beyond those accepted by Christianity, and that the pursuit of knowledge should involve a holistic approach, as opposed to a unilateral one.

147 For more on the Disputations, see David Berger’s “Mission to the Jews and Jewish-Christian Contacts in the Polemical Literature of the High Middle Ages”, p. 579-591.
Dante’s Perception and Depiction of the Jews

Although there was a degree of anti-Judaism in Italy during Dante’s time, there was significant tolerance shown towards them – as demonstrated by Jewish intelligentsia being invited to various Italian courts and through the recognition that they were the descendants of those who formed the foundation of Christianity. Unlike the Muslims, the Jews were still ultimately permitted to live among Christians and even continue to practice their religion. Hence, Dante’s reality was not one of severe prejudices towards the Jews; in fact, it was not until the year of Dante’s death in 1321 that Pope John XXII exiled the Jews from Rome (Alfie 323). Although there is no evidence to clearly suggest that Dante was particularly and personally concerned with the presence of Jewish communities scattered throughout the Italian peninsula, his references to the Jews throughout the *Commedia* indicate the impossibility to ignore the presence of a people who descended from the ancient patriarchs and whose existence alone acted as reminder that, without them, Christian truths would not have had the initial seeds from which to germinate.

Upon first glance, Dante’s references to Judaism can be interpreted as being anti-Judaic; however, on closer analysis this is not quite the case. Scholar Giorgio Battistoni supports this, emphasizing that the blame for Dante being perceived as anti-Judaic lies on these early commentators who read his work through an anti-Semitic filter (10). Hence, Jauss’ reception theory comes to the forefront once again in the analysis of Dante’s perception of the Jews; just as Dante’s references to Islam – especially his gruesome depictions of Mohammad and Ali – have been easily identified as anti-Islamic, the same has been done to Dante’s references to Judaism.

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148 For a general account of Dante’s lack of preoccupation with the Jewish presence in his geographical reality, see R.J. Moore’s *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, especially p. 147-150.
Only, it must be noted that Dante’s references towards the Jews and their beliefs are done in a far less obvious way than those done towards the Muslims, as will be demonstrated in the following section of this chapter.

2.1 Giudecca: Home of the Jews?

Dante named the deepest pit of *Inferno*, “Giudecca” a place filled with such great evil that it housed Lucifer himself, the ultimate traitor of God. As discussed in chapter three, the word “Giudei” was used pejoratively to refer to the Jews who chose to adhere to their religion even after the advent of Christianity, versus the term “Ebrei” which carries more positive connotations denoting the ancient Hebrews or biblical patriarchs to whom Christianity owes its beginnings. Moreover, while the Hebrews of biblical antiquity were viewed as “belonging to history and thus, safely located in the past”, the medieval Jews were perceived as “a living, contemporary problem for Christianity’s assertions of lineage and supersession, reject[ing] Christianity and thus implicitly, from a Christian perspective, their Hebrew forefathers as well” (Cox 2005, 16).

With Jews living among Christians, the Jews posed a current and proximate threat through their strong adherence to their faith and denial of Christian supersessionism; in the eyes of medieval Christians, the Jews were a separate race from the Hebrews who, having lived prior to Christ, could not be blamed for their beliefs, but instead, only recognized and admired as founders of Old Testament teachings.

Returning to the text, the pejorative connotation of the term “giudei” during Dante’s time seems to suggest that the poet named the darkest place within his *Inferno* after the Jews in order to highlight their evil nature or, perhaps, their betrayal of Christianity through their refutation of
it. However, upon closer analysis, this natural initial assumption reveals to be unfounded. Etymologically, the word “ebreo” is frequently featured in relation, yet in contrast to “giudeo”, referring specifically to the context in which Dante used each word in order to make the necessary distinction. The former is that which Dante uses to refer to the ancient Hebrew peoples – the common association with this word at the time – and the latter derives from “Giuda”, the disciple who betrayed Christ, and is thus not at all related to the Jews.\textsuperscript{149} Although the etymological work done by Angelico Prati on these two words does acknowledge that “Giudeo” did take on a pejorative connotation – especially from the fourteenth century onwards – this was not Dante’s intended meaning when he chose to name the worst place in Inferno “Giudecca”. In Prati’s entry under the word “ebreo”, he notes that contemporaries of Dante used the term “giudeo” to negatively refer to the Jews. He provides the examples of Cecco Angiolieri (1260-1312) of Siena who used the word to refer to the Jews as a people who were cruel and hard of heart, and of Cino da Pistoia (1270-1336) who used the word to denote those who were non-believers, and as a result, evil in nature. Yet, in Prati’s etymological tracing of these words, he does not name Dante as having used “giudeo” to negatively refer to the Jews in any way.

Moreover, although Giudecca eventually became the name used to refer to the Jewish ghetto in Venice in the sixteenth century, Dante’s use of the word did not denote the Jews. This is made evident by the three traitors being devoured in each of Lucifer’s three mouths: Judas, Cassius and Brutus. Cassius and Brutus are punished as Roman traitors who killed the first Roman Emperor, Caesar, while Judas is damned for his betrayal of Jesus, leading to His crucifixion. These three souls are the focus of this region of Hell, with the common element shared among them being their act of betrayal; the fact that not all three are Jewish is significant.

\textsuperscript{149} Prati, \textit{Vocabolario etimologico italiano}. 
in that it dismisses the assumption that Dante’s Giudecca is a Jewish ghetto within the *Inferno* (Hede 102).

Dante’s Lucifer is a physical parody of the Holy Trinity; the distorted trinity’s physicality, expressed through the tangible images of the sinners in the *Inferno*, show that this infernal trinity is completely void of the spiritual, and thus powerless and subject to the punishments of the *Inferno*. However, although Judas’ inclusion within this false trinity is undeniably significant, the reasons for his inclusion can be interpreted in two distinct ways. First, that Judas, who identified Christ to Pontius Pilate’s soldiers for thirty pieces of silver, is included as the traitor of the Church, in contrast to Brutus and Cassius who are the traitors of the Empire, thus revealing Dante’s symbolic image of a distorted trinity as the culmination of the conflict between Church and Empire which runs throughout his *Commedia*; in this interpretation, Judas’ Jewishness is an irrelevant factor in his fate. A second possible interpretation is that Judas’ Jewishness does indeed carry significance in Dante’s choice to place him in Satan’s mouth; in this case, Judas can be understood as a representative of the transition from Judaism as the respected religion of the biblical patriarchs, to that of a religion which refuses the new teachings of Christianity and instead adheres to a now defunct and superseded set of beliefs. Yet, what I wish to propose is that this is not Dante’s way of attacking the Jewish religion and its people, but rather an instance of him calling out the lack of unity that plagued his time. Although, as a product of the medieval age, Dante’s concept of social egalitarianism would be far less progressive than current definitions of the term, his desire that all people be united

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150 Although early modern manifestations of the philosophy of egalitarianism began with John Locke’s ideas of moral rights (Dunn 240), the concept originally stems from the Christian concept that God loves all of his human creations equally: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (Acts 10:34-35). Dante, as a product of a Catholic society and with great interest in biblical exegesis, incorporates this concept into his *Commedia* as well as into his ideas of a universal
under one monarch required that Jews, Christians and Muslims recognize the similarities between then, and that those individuals who sowed discord be eliminated.

The three traitors in Lucifer’s mouths are symbols of division; on one level, they are symbolic of the aforementioned division between Church and Empire, with Judas on one side and Cassius and Brutus on the other, respectively. Yet, on another level, Judas’ inclusion serves to highlight that this infernal trinity is the exact opposite of what the Trinity represents. While the Holy Trinity is composed of three parts – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – which although are each distinct, are all divinely united as one, instead, the infernal trinity is divided at its very core. Lucifer is impotent to stop his suffering, contributing to his own pain as he flaps his six wings and further freezes himself into the waters of Cocito. The souls within his mouths are equally powerless in that their weakness lies in the very fact that they were each self-serving during their lives, seeking to betray their benefactors for personal gain. To extend this further, Cassius and Brutus created division within their Empire, while Judas’ betrayal of Jesus led to a distinct division between Jews and Christians. In short, Jesus’ birth unto Jewish parents originally identified Judaism as a religion deserving of respect through the eyes of the early Christians; however, it was Judas’ actions that began a long history of identifying the Jews as Christ killers and followers of an old and overly literal religion. In the mouth of Lucifer, Judas appears as a physical reminder of the disunity that comes with betraying Christ. As the last sight which Dante the Pilgrim sees before leaving the Inferno, the impotent Lucifer, whose three faces are

monarchy. Although social egalitarianism can be sub-divided into economic, moral, legal, political, gender and racial categories, the general term advocates the equality between all people in society.

151 “e quale svolazzava, / sì che tre venti si movean da ello: quindi Cocito tutto s'aggelava. / Con sei occhi piangêa, e per tre menti / gocciava 'l pianto e sanguinosa bava. / Da ogne bocca dirompea co' denti / un peccatore, a guisa di maciulla, si che tre ne facea così dolenti” (Inf. XXXIV: 50-57).
dripping with tears, drool and blood, and the three traitors flailing helplessly within his mouth, serve to emphasize the destructive and hopeless nature that disunity creates, and one which Dante is about to leave behind as he proceeds into Purgatory. As best expressed by Susan Signe Morrison, “Once Dante leaves hell he also tries to leave the Jewish past of Christianity. […] The fantasy of the whole, coherent, unified Christian body is maintained by setting it in opposition to the defecating, fluid, leaking, stinking Jewish body” (84). While I am not in agreement with Morrison’s suggestion that Dante is denigrating the Jews for their beliefs or their overall otherness in this instance, I do agree that he is calling out the religious division to which he believes that the Jews, along with the primary culprits, the Muslim headship, contributed. As established in the previous chapter, Dante’s *Commedia*’s militant goal was to promote the importance of establishing a peaceful and united universal monarchy; one which would include all faiths and ethnicities, but in which each of these parties would peacefully unite under one universal monarch.

Dante’s choice to name this region of *Inferno* “Giudecca” was more about the fact that Judas – in Italian, Giuda – was placed there as a traitor, not as a Jew. It was especially during the late Middle Ages, after Dante’s time that the term “giudei” became a term of denigration used against the Jews (Richards 100); as such, Dante’s Giudecca was not created as a realm dedicated to the punishment of the Jews. Moreover, at no point in the final canto of *Inferno*, nor anywhere else in the poem, is Giudecca categorized as being the home of the Jews, only that it is reserved for those who have betrayed their kin. In Dante’s categorization of his law of the *contrapasso*, he makes clear statements throughout the *Inferno* about what exact sin the souls in each section of Hell have committed in order to justify the reason for their placement there; with this in mind, it is reasonable to assume that Dante would have made a statement about Giudecca being related to the belief in Judaism as a sin or, at the very least, included post-biblical Jewish sinners within
its quarters. Not only are there none to be found in Giudecca, but there is not one post-biblical
Jew to be found in the entire Commedia; while the Hebrew patriarchs of the Old Testament are
found throughout Paradiso, the Jews of Dante’s Florence are entirely absent (Tomasch 248).

While the very absence of the Jews paired with the naming of the deepest pit of Hell as Giudecca
can be interpreted as the poet’s way of making them be metonymically present – which is what
Sylvia Tomasch ascertains (248-249) – it seems instead that Dante’s aim was to focus on the sin
of a betrayal so severe that it caused a rupture in both an empire and a religion, with the name of
this region referring to the greatest traitor of one’s kin: he who betrayed Christ. Tomash
suggests that the fact that Judas is the worst of the three sinners in Lucifer’s mouths, being
ingested head-first, indicates that there is a particular connection between the two, with Judas as
a human demon who betrayed God on earth, and Lucifer who betrayed God in Heaven (251).

Tomasch uses this link between Judas and Satan to infer that Dante is correlating the Jews with
the demonic, as evil forces on earth that are betraying the laws of God. Instead, I would like
to propose another interpretation in connection with the way in which Dante portrays the Prophet
Mohammad.

As established in chapter two, Dante’s horrific depiction of the disembowelled Muslim
Prophet was not meant to denigrate all followers of Islam, but rather only he who caused a
schism in a faith which was once unified. Similarly, Judas’ inclusion in Giudecca – and, more
specifically, his especially terrible punishment of being consumed head-first in Lucifer’s mouth
– is due to his role as a traitor. By leading Christ to His crucifixion and, in broader terms,
creating a further rift between Jews and Christians, two peoples that are inherently connected and

152 Tomash goes even further, asserting that Dante’s construction of the city of Dis and his choice to name the
centre of Hell “Giudecca” was a poetic strategy on his part which anticipates what would later be implemented in
Western societies: the segregation of the Jews in European public policy (252-253).
need to remain so in order to facilitate Dante’s ideal of unity, Judas’ actions mark the epitome of betrayal. As will be demonstrated in the analysis of the Hebrew patriarchs in Paradiso, it shall become evident that Dante acknowledged them as people of faith, a faith which Dante respected for its early teachings about God and the commandments that His human creations must strive to adhere to. Thus, it would not be logical to suggest that Dante was opposed to Jewish teachings or its adherents, but that any individual of any religion – Jewish, Christian or Muslim – who creates division amongst the group to which he belongs, is a traitor in his own right, and therefore deserving of punishment.

An instance in Inferno IX further supports my point that Dante’s Giudecca is not the designated punishing ground for the Jews, but instead, for the greatest traitors of the realms of both Heaven and Earth. In this canto, as Dante the Pilgrim and Virgil have been denied entry into the gates of Dis, Dante asks his guide if he or anyone else from Limbo has ever been able to leave from there and descend so deep into Hell; to this, Virgil explains that although rare, it has indeed happened to him once before:

"Di rado
incontra," mi rispose, "che di noi
faccia il cammino alcun per qual io vado.
Ver è ch'altra fiata qua giù fui,
congiurato da quella Eritón cruda
che richiamava l'ombre a' corpi sui.
Di poco era di me la carne nuda,
ch'ella mi fece intrar dentr' a quel muro,
per trarne un spirto del cerchio di Giuda.
Quell' è 'l più basso loco e 'l più oscuro,
e 'l più lontan dal ciel che tutto gira.” (19-29)

Virgil tells about the only other time that he had been permitted into the deepest pit of the Inferno, Giudecca; only, he does not refer to the place by its name, but rather to the human soul after which this locale is named, Giuda. Later, once the pilgrim and Virgil arrive at the fourth ring of the ninth circle of Inferno, it is referred to by its name, as designated by the poet (Inf.
XXXIV, 116-117); however, at this earlier point in the cantica, the reader is offered a pre-emptive warning of what is to come before them as they travel deeper into Hell with Dante and Virgil. Should the poet have wished to alert his readers that Giudecca was the realm which enclosed all Jews, he would have likely have had Virgil refer to it as “il cerchio dei Giudei”. However, through the use of the word “Giuda”, Dante seems to deliberately avoid associating Giudecca with the Jews, and instead emphasizes that the most dismal place in Inferno is the home of Judas, the ultimate human traitor through his simultaneous betrayal of both humanity and the heavens, through his betrayal of Christ, both man and God. It is not the religion of the inhabitants that is highlighted, but rather their most sinful action, indicating that the choice to adhere to Judaism over Christianity is not a factor in the fate of those destined to Giudecca.

2.2 The Jews Linked to Spiritual Hunger?

Lingering on the episode of Lucifer in Inferno XXXIV wherein the fallen angel masticates on the souls of the three greatest traitors, the act of eating is an aspect of this canto that is worth analyzing further, especially for what it reveals about Judas, and what, if anything, this reveals about Dante’s perception of the Jews. The episode of Lucifer’s gruesome meal brings the act of eating to the forefront of the reader’s mind, and suggests a link, albeit an infernally twisted link, to the Eucharist:

Con sei occhi piangèa, e per tre menti
gocciava 'l pianto e sanguinosa bava.
Da ogne bocca dirompea co' denti
un peccatore, a guisa di maciulla,
sì che tre ne facea così dolenti.
A quel dinanzi il mordere era nulla
verso 'l graffiar, che tal volta la schiena
rimanea de la pelle tutta brulla.
"Quell' anima là sù c'ha maggior pena,"
disse 'l maestro, "è Giuda Scariotto, che 'l capo ha dentro e fuor le gambe mena. De li altri due c'hanno il capo di sotto, quel che pende dal nero ceffo è Bruto: vedi come si storce, e non fa motto!; e l'altro è Cassio, che par sì membruto (Inf. XXXIV, 53-67)

The fact that Judas is being devoured head-first, while Brutus and Cassius are being dangling from Lucifer’s mouths feet-first, identifies Judas as the greater traitor amongst the three souls.

As a disciple who betrayed on two levels, by committing a betrayal of “doppio corpo” (Battistoni 112), since Jesus was both human and divine, Judas’ fate is the most severe of the three human sinners, while Lucifer’s betrayal, as a fallen angel, surpasses even that of Judas. Lucifer, the ultimate of the spiritual traitors, whose lack of spiritual nourishment caused him to betray God Himself, is damned to eternal hunger as he devours the souls of the three traitors. The three heads of Lucifer, and his act of frenzied eating point to a representation of a contorted Holy Trinity paired with a distorted representation of the Holy Eucharist. In the gospel of John 6:35, Jesus reveals the true purpose of the Eucharist: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry.” Hence, the body is meant to feed the void within us, satiating our hunger through divine knowledge. However in Hell, the Holy Communion becomes exceedingly perverse, and it is clear that Lucifer, as well as the souls he consumes, most notably Judas, are spiritually famished.

As the only Jew in Satan’s mouth and linked to the act of eating, is Judas’ inclusion here an indication of Dante’s underlying anti-Judaic sentiments? Dante scholars, such as Sylvia Tomasch, stress the link between spiritual hunger and the Jews within medieval Christendom. Tomasch explains that the Jews’ denial of the host identified them as a particular threat to the Christians during a time when there was an overall crisis in gaining significant belief in the Eucharist (260). In response to this threat, the Church declared the doctrine of transubstantiation
in 1215, and later, the feast of Corpus Christi in 1264. However, these attempts failed to have the impact that the Church had hoped for, gaining much criticism and doubt from non-Christians and Christians alike. The frustration of the Church at its failure to secure the Eucharist’s validity throughout Christendom, manifested itself in hostility towards the Jews. As mentioned in the previous section, stories began circulating about the Jews being involved in host desecration, or of Jews murdering Christians and using Christian blood to make Passover matzo bread (Tomasch 260). Tomasch asserts that the image of Judas being eaten reminds the reader that he was a participant in two other very important meals: the Passover meal, since he was a Jew and partook in its religious practices, as well as in that of the Last Supper as a disciple of Christ. However, in both of these meals, Judas was the consumer not the consumed.

While both of these meals are meant to bring the individual closer to God, in Judas’ case, they failed to feed his spiritual emptiness since his heart was plagued by the intention to betray. Tomasch takes this further by suggesting that it was Judas’ very Jewishness that caused him to betray Christ: “During the Last Supper, Judas was the sole participant who stayed within the old definition of the feast, the Jew who, remaining Jewish, condemned himself by ‘eating and drinking damnation’ instead of the body and blood of Christ” (260). There were widespread accounts of Judas choosing to eat only the bitter herbs consumed as part of the Passover ritual, instead of the bread and wine (Tomasch 260), adding to Tomasch’s stance that Judas’ inclusion in the mouth of Lucifer was due to his adherence to superseded Jewish traditions while in the presence of Jesus. While I do agree that Judas’ placement in the deepest pit of the Inferno is linked to the Last Supper and the act of eating, I propose a reason for this link different from that of Tomasch: Judas’ betrayal is directly linked to the crucial meal of the Eucharist and the notion

153 Within Tomasch’s own analysis here, she refers to a quote by Gertrud Schiller in Iconography of Christian Art, Vol. II, p. 35.
of spiritual hunger, rather than to his actual religious ascription. As the final meal in Christ’s life during which He broke bread, transformed it into His own flesh and shared it with his disciples, it is a momentous act central to Christian faith. Through the consumption of this flesh, man has the ability to gain divine wisdom. Yet, as stated in the gospel of John 13:27 in reference to Judas’ eating of the holy bread, “After he took the morsel, Satan entered him” (Latin: “et post buccellam tunc introivit in illum Satanas”). These words indicate that Judas’ soul was damned and fully taken over by Satan from the very moment he ingested the bread. Furthermore, while those disciples loyal and devoted to Christ were brought closer to Him through their consumption of His body, in the mouth of Judas this sacred flesh was transformed into evil. Judas’ contrapasso falls in line with his tremendous sin. As clarified by William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, “Now in Hell, the one through whose mouth Satan entered by false reception of the Eucharist, in a singularly exact punishment, enters the mouth of Satan and is eaten by him for all eternity” (381). Moreover, the fact that Judas suffers the same fate as Cassius and Brutus – non-Jews – further emphasizes that his punishment within this region of the Inferno has nothing to do with his religion. Giorgio Battistoni supports this view, underscoring that all three sinners in the mouths of Lucifer are guilty of regicide, and he also offers another important point regarding the status of Jesus as King of the Jews during His life, rather than God incarnate. To expand, it was only with the Council of Nicea in 325AD that the dogma of Father/Son was established by Constantine; prior to this time, Jesus was recognized primarily as the King of the Jews, a Teacher, or great prophet, by fellow civilians and especially by His disciples, including Judas (Battistoni 102). Dante, being knowledgeable about the history of religious doctrine, would have had a solid understanding of this, and, as such, his punishment of Judas here – along with two other traitors of their respective king (i.e. Caesar, considered king of the Romans) – points to Judas being condemned as a regicidal traitor and not as a Jew.
The instance of Judas, Cassius and Brutus is not the only time in which the poet refers to the particularly evil nature of regicide. In *Purgatorio* XXI, Statius refers to the severity of regicide, saying, “Nel tempo che 'l buon Tito, con l'aiuto / del sommo rege, vendicò le fora / ond' uscì 'l sangue per Giuda venduto” (82-84). Here, Statius justifies Titus’ vendetta, stressing that it was one executed not for religious reasons, but for political ones. In this case, as Battistoni indicates, Judas’ crime is not a Christian one but a Roman one, since it was one which betrayed a king (105-106). Again, the destructive nature of dividing acts are brought to the forefront of Dante’s poem. By murdering one’s king, the same individual under which all men are to be united, the perpetrator is eliminating the possibility for a unifying force. In order for Dante’s ideal universal monarchy to ever become a reality, there must be peace and respect for the man leading the monarchy into united greatness. Thus, in the case of Judas’ appearance in the canto of Lucifer, it is the act of betrayal – an act which leads to hatred and division – which Dante is condemning; only in this case, it is a politically-charged division, rather than a religious one.

2.3 The Jews Likened to Lot’s Wife?

Dante seldom refers to the Jews directly, yet their presence is at times felt through connotative associations. It is through these indirect references to the Jews that much can be learned about how Dante perceived them, and by extension, how this shaped his perception of the Muslims and how non-Christians in general fit into his medieval-Christian understanding of the afterlife. A prime example of an indirect reference to the Jews is found in *Inferno* IX and the episode of Medusa. Before attempting to enter into the gates of Dis, the pilgrim and his guide are met by the wrath of three Furies who frighten Dante by informing him that Medusa will soon come to turn him to stone. Virgil’s response to this threat is to offer Dante direction as to how he must
comport himself should Medusa come before them. The choice of wording in this sequence is what proves significant to understanding Dante’s portrayal and perception of the Jews:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Vegna Medusa: } & \text{ sì 'l farem di smalto,} \\
& \text{dicevan tutte riguardando in giuso;} \\
& \text{"mal non vengiammo in Tesëo l'assalto."} \\
& \text{"Volgiti 'n dietro e tien lo viso chiuso;} \\
& \text{ché se 'l Gorgón si mostra e tu 'l vedessi,} \\
& \text{nulla sarebbe di tornar mai suso." (Inf. IX, 52-57)}
\end{align*}
\]

Upon reading these verses, it is clear that Virgil – a product of a pagan era – fully accepts and believes in the danger of Medusa as presented to him by the Furies. This indicates that Virgil, a pagan, is still bound by pagan beliefs and although he is perhaps more spiritually elevated than most of the other souls in Inferno, he is ultimately still limited by his lack of knowledge about Christ. Meanwhile the pilgrim covers his eyes – not because he believes that Medusa can harm him, but rather, out of respect for his guide. Although the pilgrim and Virgil’s distinct reactions to the Furies’ warnings reveal the poet’s perception of the pagans as individuals who will always be in the dark without the light of Christ, what does this reveal about the Jews? At first glance, seemingly nothing; however, in the lines following these, the poet offers a cryptic message, inviting the reader to delve beyond words alone: “O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani, / mirate la dottrina che s'asconde / sotto 'l velame de li versi strani” (61-63). Here, the poet is calling out to those of sound intellect, those who have the ability to look beneath the literal meaning and know that there is more to be discovered under the veil of his words. One possible interpretation is that the poet was calling out any system of belief which relies solely on the literal – which, in the eyes of medieval Christians, included the Jews for their reliance on the Old Testament alone.

Furthermore, both prominent Dante scholars Giuseppe Mazzotta (1979, 284-294) and Catherine Cox (2005, 39-42) have deduced that the threat of the Medusa was meant to direct the reader to a Pauline binarism of the literal and the spiritual. Cox takes this further, linking this episode to the brief account of Lot’s wife in Genesis 19, which sheds light on how the threat of the Medusa can
be interpreted as an indirect reference to the Jews. The biblical narrative tells of Lot and his family being visited by two heavenly angels who offer them the chance to flee before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; with this offer, the angels also issue a warning to the family: “Flee for your lives! Don’t look back, and don’t stop anywhere in the plain! Flee to the mountains or you will be swept away!” (Genesis 19:17).\textsuperscript{154} However, while Lot and his daughters obey the angels’ command, his wife chooses to look back, and as punishment for her disobedience, she is turned into a statue of salt. By Lot’s wife looking back, she revealed herself as being unwilling to fully leave behind the environment of immorality that she had been living in for many years; even though she was warned of the risk that awaited her should she choose to hold onto the past, she ignored this and decided to do so anyway. Similarly, the episode of the threat of Medusa tells the reader about the danger which lies in holding onto the past, a past which has been superseded by a new and hopeful present.

Dante’s reference of the account of Lot’s wife, an account of the Old Testament and thus, the set of Scripture adhered to by the Jews, suggests that he may have been issuing a warning that those who choose the past are bound to face a punishment of petrification – presented as a literal or corporeal petrification in each of the accounts – yet beneath the veil of the “versi strani”, what such a choice truly leads to is the petrification of one’s soul. However, rather than Dante make a covert statement against the Jews and their ‘primitive’ beliefs, it is more likely that he was simply warning his readers of the dangers that come with focusing on the past. In reference to the episode of Lot’s wife, Augustine tellingly states, “no one who starts out on the

\textsuperscript{154} “Salva animam tuam: noli respicere post tergum, nec stes in omni circa regione: sed in monte salvum te fac, ne et tu simul pereas”.
Dante, an admirer of Augustine’s teachings and known to be an avid reader of his texts would have likely been aware of the saint’s comments on Lot’s wife. It appears that Dante is applying Augustine’s view to his episode of Medusa. Looking back towards the teachings of Judaism is not dangerous; in fact, this is a necessary task for all Christians since their New Testament is founded on those teachings. What is dangerous is man’s desire to reminisce on what he has left behind - the familiar – and to return back to a time when he felt most comfortable. To do so would mean a lack of self-growth and development; in fact, as Dante and Virgil exit from Hell and towards the hope of Purgatory, Virgil says to the pilgrim, “e oramai è da partire, ché tutto avem veduto." (Inf. XXXIV, 68-69). These words indicate the importance of moving forward and being open to the knowledge and spiritual truths that lie ahead.

Virgil’s earlier warning to the pilgrim during the canto of Medusa also echoes the lesson found in Genesis 2 in the account of Adam and Eve. By Virgil cautioning Dante that “se 'l Gorgón si mostra e tu 'l vedessi, / nulla sarebbe di tornar mai suso” (Inf. IX, 56-57), he touches on the human tendency towards what is forbidden; no matter how many people may have been harmed by the forbidden fruit – symbolically speaking – the desire for what we cannot have can consume man should he lack spiritual strength. Catherine Cox identifies the Medusa episode with the biblical lessons found in the story of Adam and Eve, as well as in that of Lot’s wife, and she attributes these links to Dante’s attempt to warn his readers to steer away from the teachings of paganism. Yet, Dante could not have been directing his readers away from Judaic teachings since they were part of Christian beliefs. Instead, it is more likely that the poet was attempting to draw attention to the necessity of considering all truths from all faiths, which would mean not

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155 “Neminem in via liberationis suae praeterita desiderare debere”.
closing oneself off from the teachings which came after Judaism – nor those which came after Christianity, such as Islam. As discussed in chapter three, Dante’s interest in and openness to the teachings of other religions demonstrates his search for spiritual truths beyond the narrow confines of Christianity. Here too, in the episode of Medusa, Dante subtly underscores that looking ahead, with openness to receive the teachings that we may encounter along the way, is the only way to exit from intellectual and spiritual petrification, and to have access to as much truth as our mere humanity may allow.

While the poet does not seem to be taking a stance against Judaism, he may be suggesting that the Jews are flawed in their unwillingness to be open to any other religions’ teachings other than their own. Being the first of the three major religions to which Dante was exposed, the poet seems to be expressing his frustration with its followers for the rigidity with which they adhere to their beliefs – a frustration that Dante seems to feel towards those of any faith who lacked openness to other truths – for it was this very rigidity which led to deep divisions between the followers of each distinct religion. It is for this reason that Cox rightfully identifies Dante’s Medusa as “an ideologically motivated construction of the unknowable Other” (2005, 53). Medusa should be less so specifically identified with the Jews, but instead with all Others, with those that the individual perceives as inherently different from oneself. Rather than focus our efforts on attempting to highlight our differences by looking back on history and attempting to trace which set of beliefs came before the other with the aim of identifying one “true” belief system, it is more important to have a collective understanding of one’s past, while still looking ahead on how to build on the truths that we already possess. Should Dante the Pilgrim have chosen to look back at the Gorgon, he would have been surrendering to a limited existence of stifled physicality.
Another possible interpretation of this episode focuses more on the role of Virgil than that of Medusa in relation to Dante’s view of the Jews. As mentioned, the fact that Virgil is the one to issue the warning not to look back at Medusa is significant, since as a pagan himself, he is susceptible to believing in a danger of pagan origin, while Dante is not. Further to this aspect, Virgil is significant in this episode – and throughout the entirety of the *Commedia* – due to the role that he assumes as a witness to the pilgrim’s spiritual development. By extension of being a witness, Virgil assumes the role of what Cox calls, “the Christological role of ‘Jew’” (2005, 71). Dante must face the horrors of Hell if he wishes to climb out of spiritual darkness; yet he requires the guidance of a soul who belongs to that realm of horror, who can bear witness to the pilgrim’s voyage throughout the afterlife, a voyage willed from above that Dante was uniquely selected to embark upon. Hence, Dante the Pilgrim is part of God’s plan for his own spiritual redemption, just as Christ’s coming to Earth, death and resurrection were part of God’s plan for the spiritual salvation of all mankind. Using this analogy, Virgil acts as a witness of Dante’s journey just as the Jews act as witnesses to the life and death of Christ. Therefore, rather than the Medusa figure being representative of the Jews as individuals entrapped in an old set of beliefs, it seems more plausible that Virgil – a witness to Dante’s spiritual development – is indirectly representing the role of the Jews. This suggests that the poet was not expressing anti-Jewish sentiments, but rather the *necessity* of the Jews as witnesses of Christ.

2.4 The Condemned Jewish High Priests: Caiaphas and Annas

While Judas is in part guilty for his role in deicide, as previously discussed, his primary guilt stems from his great betrayal of his benefactor, Christ. The Christian charge of deicide is one which originates from the role of those key Jewish figures who set in motion the plot to have
Jesus crucified. The main individuals behind this are Caiaphas, the Jewish High Priest and Roman prefect, who interrogated Jesus in the aim to find evidence that he was presenting himself as the Son of God, and Annas, Caiaphas’ father-in-law and another Jewish High Priest who stood on the council at the Sanhedrin trial (Matthew 26:57-67). Dante places these Jewish figures within canto XXIII of the *Inferno* amongst the hypocrites:

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Quel confitto che tu miri,  
consigliò i Farisei che convenia  
porre un uom per lo popolo a’ martiri.  
Attraversato è, nudo, ne la via,  
come tu vedi, ed è mestier ch’el senta  
qualunque passa, come pesa, pria.  
È a tal modo il socero si stenta  
in questa fossa, e li altri dal concilio  
che fu per li Giudei mala sementa (Inf. XXIII, 115-123)
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For their role in the crucifixion of Christ, these two men, along with all others on the Jewish Council who tried Jesus at the Sanhedrin, now suffer a similar fate in the afterlife as they are condemned to be nailed down to the floor and suffer the pain of crucifixion for eternity. This passage is particularly interesting for it is the only time in the *Commedia* where Dante makes a clear and direct reference to the Jews and associates them with evil. The harsh tones of his words, spoken by the condemned soul of Fra Catalano, can be understood as the poet expressing his hatred toward the Jews for their role in deicide. Yet, upon taking a closer look, Dante’s view of the Jews cannot be summarized in such a negative way.

First, the poet speaks of Caiaphas and Annas as the seed or the origin of Jewish evil; this is significant in that Jews existed long before these High Priests, yet they were the Jews of the Old Testament which Dante revered. These two Jews are different in that they took action which attacked Jesus, the leader of Christians on Earth, leading to his death which consequently caused the Christians to harbour great anger and resentment towards the Jews. Similarly to how Dante condemns the Prophet Mohammad for having led a religion which created ideological division
and war, so too does Dante condemn these high priests for having instigated the inquisition against Jesus, identifying him as an enemy of the Jews and, conversely, making the Christians enemies of the Jews as well. As Battistoni accurately points out, “Caifa, Anna e i Sommi Sacerdoti, dunque, colpevoli non in quanto deicidi […] ma in quanto giudici che non avevano applicato imparzialmente la legge della quale erano depositari; Legge che essi avevano invertita piegandola, dal bene commune, al loro tornaconto” (112). Caiaphas, Annas and the other High Priests demanded that Jesus be condemned to death in order to ensure the survival of the Jewish nation – and, indirectly, to ensure that they would be able to maintain their own positions of religious power. And so, these New Testament Jewish figures are not condemned for their act of deicide, but rather for the use of their positions of trust and authority within the religious sphere to cause harm to others, while benefiting themselves.

The fact that Dante did not condemn them for deicide is important to highlight, since this further shows that the poet did not perceive all Jews as inherently evil Christ killers; instead, he identifies specific individuals as malicious, and thus requiring appropriate punishment for their sins. Had Dante been anti-Judaic and believed that simply choosing to belong to this religion was a sin within itself, he would have dedicated a section of the Inferno specifically for all Jews. Like Dante’s view of Mohammad as a man who, under the emblem of religion, led his followers into the establishment of a fragmenting religion, the Jewish High Priests used their posts within the Jewish clergy and council to underscore Jesus and anyone who followed him as outsiders, thus bringing the “us versus them” (i.e. the Jews versus the Christians) conflict to the forefront. Moreover, as Jay Ruud points out, unlike Dante’s contemporaries, the poet never places blame on contemporary Jews for the ‘sins’ of their ancestors, nor does he speak of any punishment that must be assigned to all contemporary Jews for what came before them (2013, 149); instead, Dante singles out specific New Testament Jews whose actions led to further strife between
Christians and Jews. Similarly, Dante does not blame contemporary Muslims for their choice to adhere to this “schismatic” religion, and instead directs condemnation only towards those who caused the religious division on the first place: Mohammad and Ali.

2.5 The Ambiguous Laughing Jew

Another of Dante’s references to the Jews, which occurs in Paradiso V, proves worthy of analysis due to the ambiguity of the poet’s phrasing. In this canto, Beatrice imparts upon the pilgrim a lesson on free will and the way in which man should take charge of his life, while still being mindful of his service to God. As part of this lesson, Beatrice makes specific reference to a Jew who mocks the Christian through his laughter:

Siate, Cristiani, a muovervi più gravi:
non siate come penna ad ogne vento,
e non crediate ch’ogne acqua vi lavi.
Avete il novo e ’l vecchio Testamento,
e ’l pastor de la Chiesa che vi guida;
questo vi basti a vostro salvamento.
Se mala cupidigia altro vi grida,
uomini siete, e non pecore matte,
sì che ’l Giudeo di voi tra voi non rida!
Non fate com’ agnel che lascia il latte
de la sua madre, e semplice e lascivo
seco medesmo a suo piacer combatte! (Par. V, 73-84)

Here, Beatrice warns the pilgrim, along with all Christians, that taking a stance in one’s life is crucial to a full existence while on Earth. When the pilgrim encounters “gli ignavi” in the Ante-Inferno, the reader first learns of the importance that the poet places on taking an active stance in life. Now in Paradise, Beatrice reiterates this message, only taking it further by stressing that

156 “Questo misero modo / tegnon l'anime triste di coloro / che visser sanza 'nfamia e sanza lodo. / Mischiate sono a quel cattivo coro / de lì angeli che non furon ribelli / né fur fedeli a Dio, ma per sé fuoro. / Caccianli i ciel per non esser men belli, / né lo profondo inferno li riceve, / ch'alcuna gloria i rei avrebber d'elli” (Inf. III, 34-42).
in addition to using free will to take part in life, one must also not misuse free will to commit evil and then expect to have those acts simply washed away without seeking forgiveness with a pure heart. She follows her views on free will with an exhortation to read both the Old and New Testaments attentively. This exhortation reveals the poet’s position on both testaments, affirming what Mazzotta calls “an alliance” between the Old and the New (1993, 54). This supports the notion that Dante believed in the necessity of the Jews and their teachings; although he acknowledged that Christian teachings should be acquired through the New Testament, he also recognizes the Old Testament – that of the Jews – as an equally important text for the observant Christian to consider.

Returning to Dante’s relationship with Islamic texts – which although he could not read in their original language and had learned of through indirect or translated sources – his curiosity about and interest in the teachings of other faiths also applied to the Jews. Furthermore, since each of the three religions shared and accepted the Old Testament teachings as their foundation, Dante could not hold disdain towards the Jews nor the Muslims. The issue he had with the Jews, which he also had towards the Muslims, was their complete rejection of Christian doctrine, contributing to conflict and division throughout Europe. The lines which follow about the laughing Jew who mocks those Christians who have gone astray are worthy of further consideration. At first glance, they seem to be an expression of frustration with the Jews, who are both outsiders through their refusal of Christianity, yet insiders at the same time through the very fact that they live amongst Christians, and their Old Testament teachings are ones on which the Christians rely. The poet, through his mouthpiece, Beatrice, expresses this conflicting dualism of the Jews within a Christian context when she refers to them as “di voi tra voi”. Rather than expressing a frustration with the Jewish presence within Christendom, Dante seems to be acknowledging that the Jews are part of Christendom, and that within every Christian, there are
aspects of Judaism that have been subconsciously intertwined into their religious identity from centuries before. Although he acknowledges the imprint that Judaism has left on Christendom, the poet’s words highlight the distress that Christians felt when determining how to qualify the Jews, be it as their religious patriarchs or killers of the Messiah. Dante’s words seem to suggest that the poet was aware of the anxiety amongst his fellow Christians as they were taught to recognize their Jewish ancestry, while at the same time severing themselves from what they viewed as superseded teachings.

Furthermore, when Beatrice speaks of the cleansing waters (Par. V, 75-76), it is noteworthy that she says that these waters will not wash all sins away for those who possess the knowledge of both the Old and New Testaments. Here, Beatrice is stressing that since Christians were born unto a world which contained both sets of teachings, it is their spiritual duty to abide by the teachings in both. Conversely, this seems to suggest that Dante – via Beatrice – viewed the Jews with a level of tolerance and understanding for their differences in belief; unlike the Christians, they were born unto a time wherein Judaism was their only choice for a monotheistic religion in Europe, and thus they made the correct choice at that time. It is for this reason that Beatrice mentions the Jew who will laugh in scorn at those Christians who choose to stray from Christ’s teachings, which they have been fortunate enough to have been exposed to. The poet refers to the “pecore matte”, those who have veered off of “la diritta via” (Inf. I, 3), the spiritual path that Dante had been trying to come back to himself and, militantly, to direct all mankind towards through the Commedia. While it may be understandable – and even forgivable – that the Jew adhere to the religion to which he was originally born, Christians are expected to recognize and follow both the Old and the New. In considering the Muslims in this argument, while Dante did not necessarily ascribe to Muslim teachings, he does consistently stress the importance of being open to multiple sets of teachings in order to be exposed to as many possible truths
accessible to humanity. Therefore, Dante’s laughing Jew is not evidence of his anti-Judaic sentiments, but rather, that the Jew “di voi tra voi” laughs because even he too recognizes that there are truths beyond the Hebrew teachings, and for the Christians to deny these new teachings, is an action deemed mock-worthy.

The unnamed Jew in this canto can be further interpreted as serving a role similar to that once performed by Virgil. The pagan poet who can no longer serve as Dante’s guide in Paradise, led the pilgrim throughout *Inferno* and most of *Purgatorio*, teaching him how to navigate through these portions of the afterlife, while also attempting to clarify God’s system of salvation within these quarters that were unfamiliar to Dante. Dante’s Virgil is a Christianized one who, although born before Christ, is depicted as a guide who holds a lantern which illuminates the truths that came after his time.\(^{157}\) Now no longer able to serve such a role in Paradise, Beatrice takes over as Dante’s guide. Yet, her blessed existence has her lead Dante in a very different way from how Virgil led; Beatrice’s Christianity makes her further removed from human sentiments and already in possession of the teachings of the New Testament. Virgil, a sinful yet respected soul, is closest to Dante himself, and now with Virgil gone, the unnamed and absent laughing Jew momentarily fills the void left behind by Virgil. By Beatrice mentioning the threat of his mocking laughter, he exists within the narrative. Just as Virgil would often interject the pilgrim’s interactions with sinners or in moments of spiritual weakness, reprimanding him to remember why he is on this voyage, so too does the laughing Jew serve as a reminder to remain focused on the task at hand: his spiritual salvation through the understanding of God’s teachings in both the Old and New Testaments.

\(^{157}\) In *Purgatorio* XXII, Statius speaks of Virgil’s function in his own life, and as Dante’s mouthpiece, of Virgil’s function in medieval Christian society: “Facesti come quei che va di notte, / che porta il lume dietro e sé non giova, / ma dopo sé fa le persone dotte” (67-69).
Catherine Cox makes an interesting statement about the purpose of the laughing Jew, saying that he “elicits fear and contempt, silently lurking, his identity unrecognized, this hypothetical interloper haunts Christian society, awaiting the opportunity to deride the unwitting Christian whose ignorance is exposed” (2005, 68). Her interpretation suggests that Dante was making a negative remark about the Jews overall, as religious Others who could easily blend into Christian society through their existence “di voi tra voi”. Yet, the fact that the Jews have such a minor presence throughout the Commedia – as will be further demonstrated in the examples ahead – and that they are often presented with some level of esteem and recognition of their inherent necessity to Christianity, I would like to propose otherwise. The mention of the laughing Jew should not be read as an anti-Jewish reference, but rather that the presence of the Jews is a necessary one to serve as a reminder of where Christianity came from. The Jewish patriarchs lived the Old Testament, and their descendants are to remain unscathed. The threat of the laughing Jew is used by the poet to remind his fellow Christians that although they may believe to have superseded Judaism through their superior beliefs, the Jews possess truths which are equally valid, and that through them witnessing the life of Christ, they are qualified to recognize the ignorance of Christians who willingly choose to deny spiritual truths. Cox also identifies the laughing Jew as a symbol of the unknowable Other (2005, 53); although this expression is one of nineteenth-century existentialism, it is justifiable that it be used in this instance to explain Dante’s use of the laughing Jew. With Christianity attempting to secure its position as the dominant religion in Europe and beyond, any other religion which remained prominent and unwilling to be absorbed into Christendom was deemed a threat or, at the very least, a nuisance to be eliminated. Dante’s use of this obvious reference to otherness highlights his consciousness of the presence of different individuals – in culture, in religion, and overall, in their knowledge-base - amongst us, whose laughter is a knowing one, serving as a reminder that we should
attempt to understand, or at the very least, acknowledge such differences as opposed to silencing them.

3  Can the Jews be Saved? What Does This Say About Islam?

As seen through the aforementioned references to the Jews, Dante seldom refers to them directly, even though the Jewish population was part of the medieval reality; and when he does refer to Jewish figures, it is not their religion which he highlights, but rather the sins that they committed, which are not religiously-based sins. Catherine Cox argues that the fact that Dante is largely silent on the Jews is an indication that he shared a Christological view of the world with his contemporaries (2005, 35), and that it is also the poet’s way to deny the Jews an identity (2005, 44). However, within the same argument she acknowledges that Dante also mostly omits other major historical figures and ethnic groups of his time, such as Julius Caesar or the Ethiopian people for example, both of which, like the Jews, are only indirectly referred to.\textsuperscript{158} Rather than interpret Dante’s overall silence on the Jews and the validity of their faith as an effort for the poet to diminish their religious power, I would propose that this is Dante’s way to subtly communicate that his aim is not to determine the supremacy of Catholicism over other religions, but rather to identify specific malicious individuals and the acts which make them so in order to caution his readers against such behaviour. In a broader sense, the sinful actions of an individual can affect many, leading to both small and large-scale conflicts; as a poet who longed for a unified monarchy, peacefully held under the honourable rule of a universal monarch, Dante

\textsuperscript{158} Julius Caesar is indirectly referred to in the instance in which the pilgrim sees the men who plotted the emperor’s death, Cassius and Brutus, in the mouths of Lucifer (\textit{Inf.} XXXIV, 64-67). The Ethiopians are mentioned in canto XIX of \textit{Paradiso} (109-111), not so much for who these people were and the role which they played in medieval society, but rather to underscore that even non-Christians are more spiritually elevated than false Christians.
viewed individuals who instigated any form of division as a major hindrance to this ideal. By Dante underscoring the actions of certain people versus generalizing an entire ethnicity or religion as sinful, he shows that he views evil as stemming from individual choice to lead others astray, rather than from an inherent evil that lives within all people under a human-defined religious or ethnic category.

Furthermore, Dante does not rely on common stereotypes in the condemnation of those Jewish figures whom he places in Hell. For example, one of the most common stereotypes of the Jews was that they were avaricious in nature, which was supported by the fact that they were forced into usury due to laws which prohibited them from working in other trades. Images of the stereotypical avaricious Jew depicted them as bearded men with pointed hats, accompanied by striped cats – which were symbolic of heresy in the Middle Ages – and next to a pile of coins (Cox 2005, 19). However, should Dante have agreed with the denigrating depiction of the Jews, he would have likely prominently placed them in the circle of Inferno specifically devoted to those guilty of material crimes: the fourth circle of the Avaricious and the Prodigal in canto VII of the Inferno. Instead, the only souls mentioned amongst the Avaricious are the corrupt members of the Catholic clergy, including popes and cardinals: “Questi fuor cherci, che non han coperchio / piloso al capo, e papi e cardinali, / in cui usa avarizia il suo soperchio” (Inf. VII, 46-48). Dante’s deliberate choice to not feature any Jews in this portion of Hell, and instead place members of his own religion there indicates that he was not anti-Judaic, but rather, anti-corruption under the guise of religion, which in turn creates fragmentation within the religion itself.

Although the aforementioned references to the Jews in Dante’s Commedia do indicate that he was not anti-Judaic, they raise the question as to whether or not the Jews can be saved. In
the third chapter of this thesis, the possibility of salvation beyond Christianity is considered, and
through the veiled words of the imperial eagle (Par. XIX. 58-69), the poet explains the
impossibility of ever truly understanding God’s system of justice. Yet, as the eagle continues its
soliloquy, it speaks of those who were born before Christianity, or in places on earth in which
they have yet to learn of Christ, and suggests that such individuals cannot simply be considered
sinful (Par.XIX.70-78). The eagle’s words thus explain part of the reason why Dante permits
that the Old Testament figures be placed in Paradiso. Moses, Rachel, Sarah, Rebecca and
Judith159 not only have the honour of spending eternity in Paradise, but in its highest sphere and
the dwelling place of God Himself, the white rose of the Empyrean (Par. XXXII. 127-132;
XXXII. 9-10). Furthermore, the immense rose is divided into two equal parts: one for the
Christians and the other for the Jews from the Old Testament. What stands out about this
division is that there are in fact more Jews than there are Christians in this most blessed locale,
since in the section of the Jews there are no seats remaining, while in that of the Christians, there
are a few empty seats waiting to be filled:

E dal settimo grado in giù, sì come
infino ad esso, succedono Ebree,
dirimendo del fior tutte le chiome;
perché, secondo lo sguardo che fée
la fede in Cristo, queste sono il muro
a che si parton le sacre scalee.
Da questa parte onde 'l fiore è mature
di tutte le sue foglie, sono assisi
quei che credettero in Cristo venturo;
da l'altra parte onde sono intercisi
di vòti i semicirculi, si stanno
quei ch'a Cristo venuto ebber li visi. (Par. XXXII, 16-27)

159 Interestingly, Judith, a figure of the deuteron-canonical books whose name actually means Judaism or Jewish woman, is included amongst the ancestors of the Old Testament.
Interestingly, amongst the empty seats of the Christian saved, some are occupied by the pagans, indicating that there are even less Christians than Jews within the rose. While the Jewish-inhabited half of the rose being filled to capacity can be interpreted as Dante’s covert way of saying that there is no room left for any future Jews to be saved, it can also be dissected as a commentary on the fact that throughout human history, more Jews have merited salvation than Christians, almost qualifying them as the original people of faith. As Hollander and Hollander explain, Dante held that “more Jews believed in Christ without the authority of His presence, as certified by the witness provided by the New Testament, than did Christians even though they were given the answers before they took the exam” (2007, 25-27). Dante’s placement of the Jews within the rose not only demonstrates his recognition that these Old Testament figures contributed to the foundation of Christianity, but also that these Jews – born before Christianity – are worthy of salvation amongst the most honourable souls of Paradise through the testimonial role that they upheld. This further supports my position, as indicated in chapter three, that Dante does indeed believe that non-Christians can be saved, but that God’s decision as to whether or not to do so, is not one that human beings will ever be able to fully grasp.

In Inferno XXVII, through the mouthpiece of Guido da Montefeltro, Dante speaks out against his nemesis, Boniface VIII. In these lines, the poet reveals the true reason behind his disdain for Boniface and his overall frustration with the current state of the Church:

Lo principe d'i novi Farisei,
avendo guerra presso a Laterano,
e non con Saracini né con Giudei,
ché ciascun suo nimico era Cristiano,
e nessun era stato a vincere Acri
né mercatante in terra di Soldano,
né sommo officio né ordini sacri
guardò in sé, né in me quel capestro
che solea fare i suoi cinti più macri. (Inf. XXVII. 85-93)
Here, Boniface, who remains unnamed, is denigratingly referred to as the prince of the new Pharisees. The word Pharisees, which comes from the Latin term meaning “set apart”, identifies Boniface as the leader of the outsiders. Only, it is not his religion – Christianity – which makes him an outsider, but rather his willingness to cause turmoil within the Church, his own institution. Dante, through Guido, declares his strong disapproval of the fact that rather than Boniface focus on the crusade effort against the Muslims and the Jews, his actions led to internal conflict amongst his own Christian people, by whom he was entrusted to provide guidance and honourable leadership. Again, Dante makes his position clear on the destructive nature of religiously divisive people.

Moreover, Dante’s choice to name both the Muslims and the Jews in these lines proves telling. By doing so, he creates a parallel between these two religious groups, since both of them fall under the category of Otherness. Alan and Helen Cutler also recognize that Dante views the Jews and the Muslims as being intertwined in their otherness, and they interpret this as evidence that Dante viewed both groups as being allies in the mission to destroy Christianity. While I do agree that the poet associated the two with one another due to their religious differences in comparison to Christianity, his somewhat utopian beliefs regarding the ideal universal monarchy would not allow for a complete rejection of either of these religions. The threat that Christians first felt upon dealing with the Jews later became part of the same recipe of fear and desire to subdue that they felt when faced with prominent Muslim forces. Yet, Dante does not linger on these two religious groups as the aim of his attacks; instead, he identifies the Pope for his instigation of division, much like he singles out Mohammad and Ali, or Judas, as the specific Muslims and Jews who amplified the otherness of these two religious groups, positioning themselves as the enemies of Christendom. Hence, it is the individual’s actions – whether benevolent or otherwise - as opposed to his religious ascription alone which determine his fate,
thus opening up the possibility for non-Christians that they may be saved, based on the way in which they execute their free will, a gift bestowed by God upon all humanity, and not on Christians alone.

In the question of salvation beyond Christianity, a minor figure in Dante’s *Paradiso* must be considered. In canto XII, Dante briefly mentions Gioacchino da Fiore in the second circle of the sun, next to Saint Bonaventure: “il calavrese abate Giovacchino / di spirito profetico dotato” (*Par.* XII. 140-141). Although Gioacchino was not a Jew, and at times also spoke out against them, both he and Dante shared a hope for a utopian world. Dante was an admirer of Gioacchino and is believed to have been very familiar with his *Liber figurarum* amongst his other works (Stroppa 47), in which Gioacchino both drew images and wrote about the dawn of a new age, based on the Book of Revelations, during which the Jews were a necessary part of establishing peace and unity amongst all humanity. Although Gioacchino’s approach of forced conversion of the Jews does come across as much harsher than Dante’s, who does not speak of forced conversion of any non-Christians since this would be a false form of faith, they both believe that all mankind must unite under one religion in order for true peace to exist. Gioacchino takes this further, indicating that only once this peace is established, will the Church as an institution no longer be necessary. In order to illustrate this concept, he uses the image of an eagle (Tondelli, Reeves and Hirsch-Reich tav. V and VI), which is believed to have influenced Dante’s use of the imperial eagle in *Paradiso* XIX (Stroppa 47). In Gioacchino’s case, the eagle represents the universal church, rather than the institutionalized Catholic Church (Stroppa 49), suggesting why Dante, openly critical of the corruption within the Catholic Church, would have used this same symbol to refer to the universal monarch who he hoped would one day unite all faiths and ethnicities under his rule. Dante thus borrowed Gioacchino’s symbol, while also making it his own vehicle to express the importance of one just monarch who would rule over temporal
matters without the intrusion of religious institutions. Since both the Muslims and the Jews were a part of the medieval society known to Dante, they too had to be included under this monarch; hence, to suggest that Dante would have simply considered all non-Christians damned would be unlikely.

Gioacchino’s depiction of the Holy Trinity as three overlapping circles is also believed to have influenced Dante’s encounter with the Trinity in the final canto of *Paradiso* (Stroppa 47):

> Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza
de l’alto lume parvermi tre giri
di tre colori e d’una contenenza;
e l’un da l’altro come iri da iri
parea reflesso, e ’l terzo parea foco
che quinci e quindi igualmente si spiri. (*Par.* XXXIII, 116-120)

Here, the three transparent circles seem to be reflected in one another; separate yet at the same time one. Although this is a clear theological reference to the three intertwined components of the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it can also be interpreted on an allegorical level to refer to the three major religions. As discussed in the third chapter, Dante’s *Commedia* and *Monarchia* both contain several references indicating that Dante was longing for a united monarchy. While he calls for a distinct separation between Church and State, he also stresses that in order to establish secular and spiritual coequality and peace, one must turn to the visible and invisible manifestation of the Trinity (Hede 108). The Jews, although commonly associated with the visible due to the physical representations of God found throughout the Old Testament, are necessary to the foundation of Christianity. The Muslims, although perceived as a schismatic offshoot of Christianity, provided Dante with several philosophical and theological lessons that he would otherwise not have had access to. Through the description of these three distinct circles, equally reflected in one another, Dante may have been suggesting that the three religions are all equally valuable, since what unites them is God Himself. Dante understood that all three
religions were monotheistic, and ultimately believed in the same God. The transparency of the circles suggests that each of the three religions has taken something from the other, neither of which can be completely separated from the other as they have aspects in common, or inherited through one another.\(^{160}\)

As a man who valued the knowledge that came through the interaction between all three faiths, Dante’s image of the three circles can be interpreted as an allegorical representation for what he believed: that each of the three religions has its own value to the study of theology, and that in order to become as close to God as possible, peace must be achieved, which may only be done through their unity under one common leader. I must, however, clarify that nowhere in the *Monarchia* does Dante specifically speak of the righteousness of the Jews or the Muslims; yet, by tracing his references to the Jews, the Muslims, as well as the righteous pagan Ripheus, for example, this notion cannot be discounted either. As best summarized by Hede, “But if we take seriously Dante’s theory as aiming at universality, and not just a rhetorical act with a narrow objective, it does seem as if Dante would have to assign some form of righteousness to the Jews and the Muslims” (109). To extend this further, if Dante’s qualification for salvation was as narrow as merely being Christian, then the act of baptism would immediately qualify an individual to be saved; instead, Dante highlights more baptised Christians as sinners throughout his *Inferno* than non-Christians, indicating that it is the use of one’s free will – a gift granted to all human beings, not only Christians – that determines the fate of their soul. Additionally, the three circles also demonstrate the human impossibility to fully understand divine concepts beyond their human capabilities. Just as no one part of the Trinity can be identified as the most

\(^{160}\) This idea of the three religions being all equal in their own right, united through the commonality of the God that they share, is one which Giovanni Boccaccio delves into further in his *Decameron*, in the tale of the three rings (Day 1, Story 3).
superior of the three, so too is it impossible for one of the three religions to be identified as the only “correct” religion. The human desire to know that which lies beyond himself is one which Dante addresses throughout his works, as in the canto of Ulysses for example; Dante’s message about this desire is a clear one: that to attempt to define the undefinable will lead man astray.

Dante, the product of a Christian environment, expresses his own moral, philosophical and political thoughts through the language provided to him from the very religion to which he ascribes. Yet although he cannot be studied without considering his Christian roots, his references to Islam, Judaism and Paganism indicate his interest in and knowledge about these other religions. By considering non-Christians within his Commedia, as well as in passing in his other works, and not simply rejecting them for their otherness, Dante reveals that he is willing to, at the very least, ask the question about the possibility of salvation beyond Christian limits. However, Dante is also limited himself by the power of the Church which ruled over both religious and temporal affairs during his time, and as such, he must be covert in his choice of words. As best expressed by Raffaello Morghen, “Dante ha saputo trasfondere in una lingua di sapore e di struttura schiattamente medievali, il calore dei suoi ideali e delle sue passioni, la luce delle sue alte visuali politiche e religiose, l’ansia di redenzione, di giustizia e di pace, trepidante nel suo animo” (115). While Dante’s general ideas regarding the punishment of the sinful as a result of the misuse of their free will were “safe” and accepted by a Christian-dominated society, he was careful to express his openness to what lay beyond Christendom in carefully veiled words. Battistoni correctly points out that Dante uses the language of astronomy to be able to address more controversial issues about salvation, explaining that in order to blend imperial and universal thought together without going against the Christian dogma of the Trinity – the major splint between both Jews and Muslims against the Christians – Dante uses “l’armonia delle stelle” (12). Particularly in Paradiso, the realm of the afterlife that is completely void of the
physical, Dante speaks of the cosmos; their untouchable nature reminds the reader that God and His ideas of salvation are never to be fully grasped by mankind. With the opening line of *Paradiso*, the movement of the celestial spheres occurs seamlessly, harmonious through the glory of God: “La gloria di colui che tutto move / per l'universo penetra, e risplende / in una parte più e meno altrove” (*Par.* I, 1-3). Battistoni holds that this use of astronomical language allows Dante to address the mystery of the Trinity as something beyond human comprehension, and thus, one which cannot be limited by human qualifiers of salvation. To extend this further, Battistoni rightfully notes the reason why the *Commedia* has remained relevant throughout time and has penetrated beyond the boundaries of Christian interests, is because Dante expresses the belief in a God whose mercy and love “non conoscono confini geografici ed etnici” (115). Moreover, the salvation of the human soul requires that one believe in the immortality of the soul in the first place, and as Dante stresses in his *Convivio*, the Jews and the Muslims not only both believe in the immortality of the soul, but are also religious groups which live guided by reason (2, VIII, 9), and are deserving of consideration in the complex question of salvation.

Dante’s choice to include Jewish, Muslim and other non-Christian characters, as well as references to aspects of these religions, not in the denigrating approach expected by a medieval Christian, but rather with a level of openness, marks Dante as a forward thinker of his time. The poet separates himself from the rigidity of belief demonstrated by such figures as Aquinas, who stressed that it is better to never be exposed to things that will cause conflicts with what one’s already established beliefs are.161 Instead, Dante’s inclusion of non-Christians proves telling to the poet’s lack of rigidity in study and questioning of his own faith by comparing it to others. In turn, Dante challenges his readers to question the limits of their own faith, steering them towards

161 “est firmior quod nihil diversum audierunt ab eo quod credunt” (*Summa Theologica* II.II.10.7).
opening themselves up to the possibility of an undivided world, one in which all religions seek to collaborate theological and philosophical knowledge with one another, as opposed to claiming sole legitimacy of one religion over another.
Conclusion

The preceding chapters of this thesis have considered the individuals and texts that informed Dante’s perception of the Islamic Other, and more significantly, how Dante’s perception of the non-Christian Other does not fall in line with the denigrating accounts of the Muslims, the Jews and other non-Christians that prevailed throughout medieval Christendom. Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism provides the key to understanding how the Muslims were vilified within European Christendom, often through the misinterpretation – deliberate or otherwise – of Muslim texts, while Hans Robert Jauss’ Reception Theory sheds light as to how such misperceptions developed and were inherited by Dante’s generation through the literary and historical traditions, and how these become part of the horizon of expectations of an individual or an entire community. Although thirteenth-century Florence was deeply rooted with Orientalist sentiments and it is undeniable that Dante, a product of this environment would have been exposed to and affected by these sentiments, his references to Islam and other religions reveal that his views were removed from those of his contemporaries.

Rather than sharing the common preoccupation with religious otherness as a means of establishing the superiority of Catholicism over other religions, Dante was far more interested in determining the similarities between different belief-systems and understanding how to eliminate religious division between them, with the ultimate goal of establishing a united universal monarchy. Even though the information on Islam to which Dante was exposed was often littered with inaccuracies, as demonstrated through Mark of Toledo’s inclusion of disparaging legends about the Prophet Mohammad in his translation of the Qur’an or Brunetto Latini’s depiction of the Prophet as an impostor and heretic, his interest in or interaction with individuals who were
more tolerant towards Islam or at the very least facilitated Christian-Muslim interactions, such as Frederick II or Cangrande della Scala, indicate that Dante was open to learning about Islam as opposed to simply accepting polemic accounts or attacking Muslims for their refusal to adhere to Christian teachings. While Dante does harshly attack the leaders of Islam – Mohammad, for his role in establishing what Dante believed was a schism of Christianity, and Ali for creating further division within Islam itself – it is not their religious otherness which he condemns, but rather their divisive acts.

As a product of a Christian environment it is comprehensible why Dante would produce his poetic work in a Christian context; however, his choice to include and, in some cases, highlight non-Christians was not done with the aim of condemning them for their inherent otherness. Instead, from a theological standpoint, Dante spurs his readers to ask questions about the rigid Christian concepts and confines of salvation, while also from a terrestrial perspective, he draws attention to the divided state of his world. Dante’s ambivalent relationship with his patria and his views on the Crusades as being motivated by the selfish interests of the Church, contributed to his opposition to those who were sowers of division – both religious and political. As such, he used his Commedia as a militant poetic work, calling his fellow man to action – not under a religious banner and not against one another, but on a secular and almost utopian mission wherein all would unite under the leadership of one just monarch.

Dante’s references to the Judaic Other, although fewer and more in passing than those made to Islam, further reveal his openness to non-Christian teachings and force his Christian readers to consider how the Jews, who are at the same time necessary to and rejected by Christianity, configure into theological notions of salvation. Dante’s poetic dream for a universal monarchy, which would require the establishment of religious and political harmony,
must thus address the presence of the Jews within Christendom. Through the image of the imperial eagle in *Paradiso* XIX, Dante refers to the human impossibility to fully understand the divine, and within this category, the possibility of salvation beyond Christianity. Moreover, his use of the three overlapping circles in the final canto of *Paradiso* also compel the reader to consider the human incapability to access the divine, and by extension, that the presence of the three religions should be approached as a means of accessing various forms of knowledge, as opposed to determining the superiority of one over another. The poet is thus indirectly making a statement on the fruitlessness of Christians attempting to proclaim superiority over other religions, for even if such superiority were to exist, knowledge of it is beyond human capacity. Dante’s inclusion of Jews, Muslims, and even pagans within his *Commedia* is not done as a means of delegitimizing all non-Christians, and thus stands apart from the common sentiments expressed towards the religious Other during his time. Instead, Dante seems to suggest that human efforts are better spent pursuing the teachings of other faiths in order to identify what aspects they have in common, as a first step in establishing the peace and unity required for his dream of a universal monarchy.
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