

The Middle Ages Christian's antagonistic view of the Prophet of Islam.

**Reflections on Dante's Divine Comedy**

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**Abstract :**

The purpose of this research is to shed light on the fear, the hostility and prejudice that colored the Christian view of Islam, particularly of the Prophet Mohammed who was viewed in a negative light for over a millennium, and he was always used abusively in many works of Middle Ages like the *Divine Comedy* by the Italian poet Dante. Who refused to have any contact with the Islamic world, and he would prefer to have culture devoid of any Islamic influences.

الرؤية العدائية للعصر الوسيط المسيحي لرسول الإسلام:

إشارات للكوميديا الإلهية لدانتي

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الملخص:

يسلط البحث الضوء على الخوف، العداء، والحقد الذي لَوّن نظرة أوربا القرون الوسطى، للإسلام والرسول الكريم "ص" بصورة خاصة، إذ غالبا ما كان يوصف بطريقة سلبية عدة قرون. الكثير من الأعمال التي ظهرت في العصر الوسيط حاولت تشويه سيرة الرسول الكريم ع. ومثال ذلك الكوميديا الإلهية للشاعر الإيطالي دانتي أليجييري (Dante Alighieri) (1321-1265) الذي كره أي اتصال مع العالم الإسلامي، وفضل حضارة خالية من أي نفوذ أو تأثير إسلامي.

During the Middle Ages, the Christian world held a largely antagonistic view of Islam, partly because of their knowledge about the

Moslem Prophet, and partly for the fact that Islam and Christianity were secular and religious enemies throughout much of this era. The Muslim religion posed a serious threat to Christianity's existence, and it gave Christianity some unwelcome competition.

There are in fact many reasons behind the Christian highly negative view of Islam. One of these reason is that some of the Christian lands were taken by Moslem leaders when the Prophet of Islam was sent, which threatened Christianity to be vanished. Islam conquered the middle east which was preoccupied by the Byzantine empire, and it librated the Christians who greeted the Arabian conquest because they suffered great persecution from the Byzantine emperors. These Christian stood with the Muslims and fought with the prophet of Islam in most of the Muslim Wars. They also married into the families of the early caliphs , therefore, the European people thought that those individuals were "stolen from Christianity" and would have been part o the Christian religion if it were not for the Prophet of Islam who was thought to be responsible for the division in the Christian community.. From the mid-eighth century onward, Christian writers in Greek wrote about the religious challenge of Islam. Their works were addressed primarily to their fellow Christians, many of whom were under pressure to convert to Islam. So in addition to taking account of the Islamic challenges to Christian faith, Christian writers in the Islamic world were also called upon to provide a Christian evaluation of Mohammad, the Qur'an, and of Islam itself. Their purpose always was to defend Christianity as the true religion, and to give their readers reasons why they should not convert to Islam.

The western people did not hate the Prophet Mohammad for establishing of Islam, but also for having a profound impact on the christen world. Another reason for the Christian 's prejudice against Islam is the fact that Islam denies that Jesus was the : "Divine Son Incarnate " , and the story of his crucifixion and resurrection is hardly

to be accepted by Moslem people who respect Jesus as a prophet sent by the only God and he was not reigning at : " the Father's right hand " as it was mentioned in the Bible.

Moreover, Islam distinguishes itself by its denial of the Christian doctrine of Trinity because it is far from God to have a son. In the Qur'an's view the Christian doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation are wrong; and in propounding them the Christians go to an excess, or go beyond the bounds of the truth in their religious confession. From the Qur'an's perspective, the exaggeration consists in saying more about God and about Jesus than the truth in the scriptures warrants one to say about Him. The Qur'an goes on to suggest that the exaggeration comes more proximately from the tendency on the part of Christian teachers "to follow the whims of a people who had earlier gone into error"(V *The Table*, 77). These earlier people are the polytheists .According 'to the Qur'an, like the polytheists, who thought the one God had offspring, so too the Christians are liable to be branded as infidels "they have become infidels who say that God is one of three" (V *The Table*, 73). The "one of three" with whom, according to the Qur'an, the Christians wrongfully identify God is Jesus, the Messiah, the son of Mary. The Qur'an fully accepts Jesus' virgin birth from Mary, who became pregnant with him at the message of an angel (III *The Family of Imran*, 45-9). But to say that Jesus the Messiah is God's son is equivalent to saying that he is God, or an associate of God in divinity. The Qur'an also readily reveals its intention to offer a critique of the religious beliefs and practices of Christians, and to offer a program for their correction.

Most people in the west during the Middle Ages harbored antipathetic feelings for the Moslem world in which the religion and its progenitor were looked upon with such scorn and contempt. The Prophet of Islam was seen as an imposter and fraudulent prophet .The Prophet Mohammed is, for the Christian, in no way comparable to

Jesus because the first speaks with no divine authority, he brought no miracles, his coming was not being foretold and finally what he did could be done by anyone whereas what Jesus did was "super-human and super- historical". Also he was thought of as a devil's tools to end the progress and a advance of Christianity in the Muslim world And he was viewed as:

"A sexual, self –indulgent murderer whose book Ache Koran was a collection of pretended revelations and whose religion spread by deceit, violence and the lure of lascivious practices"

A similar attitude is taken by many writers and churchmen during the Middle Ages. Dr. Philip K. Hitti in his book, *Islam and the West*, writes that in the medieval literature "the prophet of Islam is generally displayed as imposter, a false prophet, the Koran as his pretentious fabrication and Islam as a solicitous way of life both here and the next world".

From the 9<sup>th</sup> century onward a highly negative biographies of the Prophet Mohammed was written in Latin, proclaiming him as an anti-Christ and viewing Islam as a Christian heresy.

Moreover, the Islamic stories and the biographies of Moslem leaders were all interpreted in the worst possible way : like the marriage of the prophet Mohammed to a rich woman, the fact that he ruled over human community and was therefore involved in several wars a against the heretics, also the fact that he died like any ordinary person in contrast to the Christian belief in the supernatural end of Christ 's early life. A verbal expression of Christian contempt for Islam and its progenitor was expressed in turning the Prophet's name from Mohammed to Mahound the devil incarnate".

The anti-Islamic attitude taken by the western medieval writers could be seen in the works o the Italian poet Dante ((1265 - 1321)) who distorted the Moslem world and presented a disgraceful and vile image of Islam in his *Divine Comedy*, which is a highly symbolic work

dealing with themes of sin, salvation and redemption. Certainly the *Divine Comedy* is a genuine Christian epic, written during the Middle Ages. Therefore, it should not come as a great surprise that the key Islamic leaders Mohammad, the last prophet and founder of Islam and Ali, the first of Muhammad's followers, inhabit hell. Dante's view of Hell is based on the Christian doctrine at the time of the Middle Ages.

In the *Divine Comedy*, The poet is the hero of the poem. He is accompanied by the Roman poet Virgil who conducts him on his imaginary journey through the nine circles of Hell. Each deeper level holds greater sinners and greater punishments. The poem is filled with haunting and freighting images through which Dante expresses his deep hatred to the Islamic world. His antagonism against Islam could be seen when he presents the image of the burning mosques and the holy places of Moslems in canto 28. To begin this canto, Dante talks of the many wars in Puglia (southeastern Italy) and across the peninsula which have been known as the bloodiest. He does this to show that this 9th bolgia is far bloodier than these, and beyond description. This image of the burning mosques suggests the destruction of the Moslem world and it indicates that Dante is looking upon Islam with nothing but scorn and disdain.

*"And I" Already I see its Mosques arise*

*Clear from the valley yonder – a red shell*

*As though drawn out of glowing furnaces"*

His faithfulness to Christianity blinded him from seeing Islam as a another religion and from seeing the Prophet Mohammed as a another prophet just like Jesus Christ, and he does not hesitate to call divine wrath upon his fiercest enemies.

Another image that fragment and distorted the image of Islam is the presentation of the father of the worldwide religion of Islam, the Prophet Mohammed and the figurehead of the Shia faith, Ali in the ninth ditch of the eighth circle of hell among hypocrites, dealers in

sorcery, and many more who did not use their reasoning skills to follow righteous action This place is dedicated for the sinners who are responsible for causing scandal and division in the Christian world .This is a sign that Dante did not see Mohammed only as a heretic but also he condemned him for the political and military conflicts which he had caused in the world . Giving Ali the same punishment suggests that Dante was against all the believers of Islam not only their Prophet. Clearly, he had the audacity to disrespect "Muslim sensitivities.

Dante's vision of Hell is a very ordered one. Hell is an enormous conical pit that leads down to the centre of the earth. Within the pit are nine circles of decreasing size, where those condemned to Hell are punished. Every kind of sin has its own allotted place, either an entire circle or, lower down, a subdivision of a circle. As he and Virgil travel through Hell, Dante speaks to many of the people he meets. Each circle is home to a multitude of sinners who are punished there.

When Dante first meets Mohammed in hell he gruesomely describes him :

Between his legs were hanging down his entrails;  
His heart was visible, and the dismal sack  
That maketh excrement of what is eaten.(Canto XXVIII, 4-6)

As the poem progresses , Dante gradually learns to a abandon his sympathy and adopt a more pitiless attitude towards the punishment of sinners ,which he viewed as a reflection of divine justice .Sinners receive punishments in perfect proportion to their sin.The most famous feature of the Inferno is its wide and imaginative variety of punishments. The description of the Moslem leaders suggests the extremely tormenting and agonizing punishment for eternity, and it illustrates Dante's deep aversion to the Arabic world. Dante warns that the punishment in this part of hell is bloody and grotesque .The sinners are doomed to walk track where they are cut open and slashed

, but their wounds heal only to be cut again. The prophet Mohammed tears open his split breast with his own hand and he points out that his follower Ali's punishment is the continuation of his own. Ali's face is split from his chin upwards to his forelock. From Dante's point of view, each sin's punishment in the inferno is a symbolic instance of poetic justice ,therefore the splitting of Mohammad chest and Ali's face represent the splitting of the Christian community.

Dante (wearing the cap, on the cliff edge): "Isn't that guy divided in half from head to butt Mohammed ?"

Virgil (on the far end):" yes , he is divided because he brought division to society"

Clearly Dante considers Mohammed and Ali to be evil and that their teaching lead to damnation .They are, after all ,near the very bottom of Hell. He does not hesitate to picture those he did not consider virtuous in hell, Surely, the visualization of punishment for Islamic leaders and the burning mosques offer a traditional condemnation of Islam, which was especially feared for its military expansion common in medieval Europe.

The cleaving of Mohammad's body from the chin downward, for Dante , is the universal punishment of the sinners who reject Jesus Christ as a savior.

So gaped as one I saw there , from the chin  
Down to the fart –hole split as by cleaver  
His trips hung by his heel , the pluck and the spleen  
Showed with the liver and the sordid sack  
That turns to dung the food it swallows in  
I stood and stared , he saw me and stared back ;  
Then with his hands wrenched upon his own breast,  
Crying "See how I rend myself! What rack

**Mangles Mohammad! Weeping without rest**

**Ali before me goes, his whole face slit**

**By one great stroke upward from chin to chest (canto XXV111, lines 23-33)**

After long time of extensive research , the most probable conclusion to be drawn is that most Christian writers in the Middle Ages had a largely antagonistic and negative view of Islam which I is portrayed as being greatly superior to paganism . In the west , The prophet Mohammed's religious success is seldom ascribed to his divine revelation, it is more to his approval of "licentious living".

Christian West had seen Islam through the eyes of Dante who lived in Europe for which the door between the Christian west and Islamic east is had been tightly shut .His personal ideas of Islam deeply influenced his works . The remarkable presence of Mohammed and Ale in Dante's Divine Comedy presents what at first appears to be the stumbling block in asserting Dante's ignorance of the existence of Islam . Dante lacked the cardinal Christian virtue of compassion, assuming the right to assign people he disliked to one of the various circles of Hell. He did not realize that giving Mohammed this treatment would become a major issue in modern times. As a relatively privileged European man of the late Middle Ages, Dante certainly had - despite his intellect and imagination - many views that we moderns might rightly consider unenlightened.

#### Notes

1-R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), P. 46.

2- Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), P. 76.

3-Hugh Goddard, *Muslim Perceptions of Christianity* (London: Grey Seal, 1996).



4- Sebastian P. Brock, "Christians in the Sasanid Empire; a Case of Divided Loyalties," in S. Mews (ed.), *Religion and National Identity (Studies in Church History)*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), PP. 19.

5- Ian Giliman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1999), P.23.

6. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians; an Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), P. 55.

7. Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus; Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), P. 12.

8. Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: a History in the Middle East* (London: Mowbray, 1992), PP. 34-35

9-Antonie Wessels, *Arab and Christian: Christians in the Middle East* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Pharos, 1979), P. 298.

10- David Thomas, *Syrian Christians under Islam-the First Thousand Years* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), P. 32.

11- Edward Grant. *God and Reason in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988), P. 97.

12-Dante Allighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Trans. Mark Musa. (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1996), P. 87.

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