

**THE REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM IN MEDIEVAL
LITERATURE: DANTE'S THE *INFERNO*, WILLIAM
LANGLAND'S *PIERS PLOWMAN*, AND CHAUCER'S THE
*MAN OF LAW'S TALE***

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ABSTRACT

THE REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE: DANTE'S THE *INFERNO*, WILLIAM LANGLAND'S *PIERS PLOWMAN*, AND CHAUCER'S THE *MAN OF LAW'S TALE*

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This study aims at analyzing the binary opposition of Islam and the West as depicted in medieval literature. The study takes three authors that represent the perception of Islam in their times. In particular, Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, particularly *The Inferno*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (B-Text), and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale* are selected as the primary texts of this study.

Dante, Langland, and Chaucer in their works, *The Inferno*, *Piers Plowman*, and *The Man of Law's Tale*, respectively, share a common purpose of defending Christianity. Dante, Langland, and Chaucer share the view of Islam as a threat to the Christian West, yet differ in their treatment to the Prophet and Muslims. To some extent, Chaucer is more enlightened than Dante and Langland.

The marginalization of Islam in opposition to the Christian West and the different treatment to the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims as represented in the selected works are just a few examples of the prevailing Western views of Islam in The Middle Ages. Therefore, this question deserves an interdisciplinary analysis of the socio-historical background of the authors' times. A cross-examination of the issues is also made by using Muslim authoritative sources to see how far Islam has been misrepresented. This approach helps explain why the binary opposition of Islam and the West has persisted up to now, despite the tremendous efforts to bridge the gap between the two.

INTRODUCTION

On March 4, 2003, the daily newspaper *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported that two lawmakers stepped off the House floor as a Muslim scholar led the opening prayer in the Washington State House of Representatives. One of the two lawmakers claimed that it was a personal decision not to participate because “the religion is the focal point of the hate-America sentiment in the world” and that her “god is not Mohammed.”¹ Earlier, on August 8, 2002, the *Washington Times* wrote about Rev. Franklin Graham who asserted that Islam is a religion of violence and Christians and Muslims do not worship the same God.² The above reactions to Islam display the deeply entrenched but patently false conception of Islam, viewing the Prophet Muhammad as the Muslim God and failing to recognize the historical relation of the Muslim God to the God of the other two monotheistic religions. These two negative attitudes toward Islam clearly reflect how some people in the West misunderstand the true teachings of Islam. These views are not

¹ Angela Galloway, “2 Lawmakers Spurns Muslim’s Prayer,” *Seattle PI* 4 Mar. 2003, 18 Mar. 2003
<http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/local/110881_prayer04.shtml>.

² “Graham Speaks Out on Islam,” *Washington Times* 8 Aug. 2002, 30 Apr. 2003 <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/national/20020808-13967463.html>>.

very different from the prevailing idea of Islam in the Middle Ages, during which period the penetration of Islam into parts of Europe was considered a threat to Christianity. Between the Middle Ages and the twenty-first century, not much has changed, despite the efforts to build bridges between the East and the West, between Islam and Christianity.

Learning about Islam through writings in European languages has never been an easy task. It has frequently been assumed that there is a hyperseparation between Islam and the West, ignoring the scripturally linked nature of the Middle Eastern religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Maurice Bucaille observes that Islam has frequently been subject in the West to a so-called "secular slander," apart from the newly adopted attitudes prevailing among the highest Catholic authorities. He also notes that anyone in the West with a deep knowledge of Islam knows just to what extent distortions of Islamic history, dogma and aims have occurred.³ Meanwhile, Karen Armstrong argues that the West has always reversed the stereotypes of Islam. In the time when Christian values repressed sexuality, Islam was considered as a sexually aggressive religion. Now the stereotype has been reversed, and the West points out to Islam as sexually repressive. "Not many people seem interested in the truth of the matter or wish to find out about Islam itself. They simply want to bolster their own needs against

³ Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science* (Paris: Seghers, 1986) 118.

their long established counter-image: Islam.”⁴ Counterposing Islam to the West in terms of simple categories is misleading.

The Texts at Hand

Medieval Western literature provide us with ample works that dealt with the influence of Islam or anything Islamic. However, most writings predominantly featured the cruel characteristics of Islam as attached to either its Prophet or the followers. Since Islam was frequently seen a threat to Christianity, medieval writers often were obliged to defend their faith. With this view in mind, this study takes three authors that represent the perception of Islam in their times. Dante Alighieri’s the *Divine Comedy*, particularly the *Inferno*, William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* (B-Text), and Geoffrey Chaucer’s the *Man of Law’s Tale* are selected as the primary texts of this study.

The three texts are deliberately chosen because of the similar historical contexts they share. They were written in the fourteenth century, in which inter-religious interactions took place in the form of exchange of goods, knowledge, and ideas. These historical contexts are assumed to have influenced the way the three authors depict Islam and Muslims in their works. Dante, Langland, and Chaucer in their works, the *Inferno*, *Piers Plowman*, and the *Man of Law’s Tale*, respectively, all differ in treating

⁴ Karen Armstrong, *Holy War : The Crusades and Their Impact on Today’s World* (New York: Anchor, 1992) 230.

Islam; nonetheless, they share a common purpose to defend their Christian faith. How their treatments vary in spite of their common ground is discussed separately in the chapters that follow.

A Brief Overview of Postcolonialism

A study that discusses the binary opposition of Islam and the West is usually placed in the domain of postcolonialism. Postcolonialism basically refers to a theory that discusses various experiences—“migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place”—and responses to the influential discourses of Europe.⁵

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is considered as the foundational text of Postcolonial Studies. Using the definition of Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient,”⁶ Said charts the Western world’s construction(s) of an inferior East by underscoring how the authorizing/authoritative Occident continues to produce an objectified and negatively stereotyped Orient, which today, of course, is the Middle East. The binary opposition of East/West, then, is planted in “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison

⁵ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995) 5.

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978) 3.

with all the non-European peoples and cultures.”⁷ Specifically, Said closely analyzes the erroneous ways in which the West, during colonialism, wrongly depicted the "Orient" as strange and exotic. He argues that European texts (literary, artistic, and non-fictional) negatively and non-objectively represented the Orient, its peoples and cultures as “other.” Consequently, the knowledge circulated in and internalized by the West brought about the dichotomy between the superiority of the West over non-Western peoples and cultures.

The binary-opposition paradigm is actually a reality because nature demands vertical hierarchy, such as up-down, tall-short, and strong-weak, as well as horizontal positioning, as in right-left, far-near, and east-west. The problem arises when one position makes the “other” inferior. From a colonial perspective, the colonialist is the subject, and therefore possesses full freedom to treat the object, the colonized nation, as the subordinate.⁸

Although postcolonial theory basically covers a historical period after colonialism, it has broadened its horizon to “any time or place where one social group dominates another.”⁹ Therefore, it makes sense to observe the

⁷ Said 7.

⁸ Budi Darma, “Ironi Kajian Budaya Sastra dalam Perspektif Kajian Budaya,” *Seminar Kajian Budaya dan Kajian Sastra* (Surabaya: Universitas Kristen Petra, 2000).

⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000) 3.

Middle Ages from a postcolonial perspective. The Middle Ages stretched roughly from the fifth century to the fifteenth century. “The Dark Ages” coincided with the rise of Islam in the seventh century up to the decline of Muslim Empire in the fifteenth century.

As a religion and a culture that has its roots in the Arabian Peninsula and a vast expansion in Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe, Islam becomes a symbol of the “other,” in comparison with European Christianity. No wonder its flourishing presence following the conquest of Spain, Sicily and parts of France in the eight and ninth centuries loomed large as a threat to the European control of the land. R.W. Southern asserts that “the existence of Islam was the most far-reaching problem in medieval Christendom.”¹⁰ Drawing from medieval writings, Said demonstrates that “the Orient and Islam are always represented as outsiders having a special role to play inside Europe.”¹¹

The misrepresentation of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad has been widely discussed. In general, most schools agree that the misrepresentation dates back to the Middle Ages. Some examples of misconception can be found in the reference to the word “Islam.” Before the term was eventually used

¹⁰ R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962) 3.

¹¹ Said 71.

correctly, Islam was once referred to as “Mohammedanism” or “Hagarism”¹² in western writings. The term “Mohammedanism” underscores incorrectly that the Prophet Muhammad founded the new religion and that Muslims worship him. The European West attempted to understand Islam on the basis of an analogy to Christianity, in the sense that Christ is the basis of Christian faith. Thus, the Prophet Muhammad is to Islam as Jesus Christ is to Christianity. When Islam is not treated on its own terms, misinformation is likely to follow. Many people still do not know that Muslims certainly do not worship the Prophet Muhammad, and that the Prophet Muhammad is only God’s messenger. Said discusses this misconception as a constraint, seeing Islam as an image “whose function was not to represent Islam in itself as to represent it for the medieval Christian.”¹³

Another term once used to refer to Islam is “Hagarism.” This refers to the genealogical fact of the Prophet Muhammad as the descendant of Ishmael, the son of Abraham from his second wife, Hagar. From the first wife, Abraham had another son, Isaac, who was the father of the Israelites. “Hagarism” implies that Islam is the “brother” of Judaism and Christianity, but at the same time poses a challenge to them.

¹² Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: the Making of the Islamic World* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1977).

¹³ Said 60.

Karen Armstrong does a marvelous job of documenting and analyzing Western attitudes toward the Prophet Muhammad. In general, she shows the evidence that the view prevailing in the Middle Ages was that the Prophet Muhammad was the anti-Christ, the great pretender, whose reign would herald the Last Days. The anti-Christ would establish his rule in the temple of Jerusalem and mislead many of the Christians with plausible doctrines.¹⁴ Similarly, Philip K. Hitti notes that, in medieval literature, the Prophet Muhammad is generally depicted as:

an imposter, a false prophet, the Koran as his pretentious fabrication and Islam as a licentious way of life, both here and the next world.

[. . .] It was therefore primarily fear, hostility and prejudice that colored the Western view of Islam and conditioned its attitude. Islamic belief was enemy's belief and, as such, suspect if not false.¹⁵

The hostile treatment and violent description of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in the Middle Ages actually grew out of curiosity about Islam. The learned men of this era were either eager or forced to find out what was behind the vast expansion of Islam outside the Arabian Peninsula. Yet, upon gaining greater understanding of Islam, the Western scholars were reluctant to accept the meaning of the Qur'an and other Islamic doctrines according to

¹⁴ Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: a Biography* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

¹⁵ Philip K. Hitti, *Islam and the West: a Historical Cultural Survey* (Princeton, NJ: Nostrand, 1962) 48-9.

what Muslims believe. Instead, they represented the Islamic doctrines in such a way that Christians would be convinced, for “Christian opinion was an erection which could not be demolished, even to be rebuilt.”¹⁶ Likewise, Bernard Lewis points out that the study of Islam was intended to serve the purpose of Christendom. The study of Islam in medieval Christendom had a double purpose, to protect Christians from Muslim blandishments and to convert Muslims to Christianity. Writings about Islam were “designed to protect and discourage rather than to inform.”¹⁷

It is in the context of the portrayal of Islam that we see the purpose of implementing postcolonial theory in the reading of medieval literature. Based on the assumption that mainly a misrepresentation of Islam is found in medieval literature, I see the need to revisit several of the works that represent a paradigmatic Orientalist perspective. To encourage the use of postcolonial theory, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen lists some suggestions given by medievalists. This study can at least be identified with the following purposes: to “destabilize hegemonic identities (racial, sexual, ethnic, religious, class, age) by detailing their historical contingency,” to “displace

¹⁶ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: the Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1960) 259-60.

¹⁷ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 85-6.

the domination of Christianity” by working more on Islamic culture and the relationship between the two, and to “decenter Europe.”¹⁸

Techniques of Presentation

The thesis is arranged in several chapters devoted to separate analyses of the texts. To provide a better outlook on the issue, the discussion starts with Chapter I that focuses on the historical background of the relationship between Islam and the West. Primary attention is given to the Middle Ages, with a brief explanation of the age of the rise of Islam, the era that provides a missing link in the span of 800 years between the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 and the Northern Renaissance in the fifteenth century. There is a strong reason to zero in on this important era. The inter-religious harmony and tension in the Middle Ages formed the backdrop of medieval writings and shaped the treatment of Islam in the texts under scrutiny.

The next three chapters are devoted to analyses of the selected texts. Chapter II discusses Dante’s the *Inferno*, with several subdivisions treating different issues. These cover the mixture of Dante’s hostile treatment of Islam, as exemplified in the description of the mosque in the city of Fire and the position of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali in Hell, and the sympathetic attitude given to Avicenna, Averroës, and Saladin in Limbo. A special section

¹⁸ Cohen 7.

is also provided to discuss the possibility of Islamic influence on the *Divine Comedy*.

Chapter III focuses on Langland's treatment of the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims in *Piers Plowman*. The issues discussed in this chapter are the characterization of the Prophet Muhammad as an expression of Langland's view of the Prophet Muhammad as a heretic and a false prophet, the myth of the dove, well-known in the Middle Ages, but unknown among Muslims, and the possibility of salvation offered to Muslims (but not to the Prophet Muhammad), and the Jews as well, on the basis of the common creeds shared by Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

Chapter IV takes Chaucer as the subject of analysis. The chapter treats Chaucer's enlightened knowledge of Islam that nevertheless shows his misconception of the religion. Behind the misunderstanding lies Chaucer's intentional fallacy to subvert Muslims in order to defend Christianity. Finally, as Langland does, Chaucer offers salvation by conversion.

Chapter V provides a summation of the ideas shared by the three authors and the different views they present. This chapter also discusses the Islamic point of view on the issues raised in the earlier chapters.

CHAPTER I

ISLAM AND THE WEST IN THE MIDDLE AGES

To talk about Islam and Muslims, we certainly cannot assume that if ‘you’ve seen one, you’ve seen all,’ because Muslims are as diverse as other religious groups. While Islamic teachings require that all Muslims follow the same practice taught by the Prophet Muhammad, in actuality, specific cultures greatly influence the way Muslims behave and think. Yet, many people are ignorant about this diversity, and assume that a Muslim Arab already represents the rest of the Muslim world. Nowadays in the western countries, many people cannot help but relate Islam to terrorism whenever the word Islam is mentioned. Islam is also seen as a religion that suppresses women, and the veil seems to perfectly symbolize this presumed oppression. John L. Esposito admits that the West tends to provide a single image of Islam, a uniformed community identical with “holy war and hatred, fanaticism and violence, intolerance and the oppression of women.”¹⁹

Aside from the fact that access to correct and reliable, as well as incorrect and unreliable, information has become much easier in the

¹⁹ John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) 5.

internet era, and that many sympathetic views of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad are found in western literature, misinformation still cannot be easily avoided. We cannot deny that hostility towards Islam has persisted up to the present. The most recent issue we can think of is the ban of *hijab* (veil) in public schools. We note current cases that happened in November 2003, when German state authorities agreed to ban the don of *hijab* in schools. Muslim teachers are now prohibited from wearing anything that is deemed political, and veil is seen a religious symbol that violates freedom of expression and religious neutrality.²⁰ The German states have joined the French government that already has banned veiling from public schools. In France, the prohibition is based on the fear that veil represents backwardness and oppression of women as well as threat to the secular ideology of the French government.²¹ We are still following the news about rallies that protest this prohibition in many parts of the world.

Media are largely responsible for presenting false images of Islam and Muslims to Western audience. To trace the false images of Islam in the media, Jack G. Shaheen has observed hundreds of films, cartoons,

²⁰ Lawrence Smallman, "Germany to Ban Teachers' Scarves," *AlJazeera.net* 11 Nov. 2003, 26 Nov. 2003
<<http://www.english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/8FF980B-320C-4FF7-A08F-AAD05394DD90.htm>>.

²¹ Elizabeth Bryant, "Secular France Struggles with Veil," *Washington Times* 14 Sept. 2003, 10 Nov. 2003
<<http://www.washingtontimes.com/world/20030913-112055-9770r.htm>>.

documentaries that depict Muslim Arabs in Hollywood products and concludes that Muslim Arabs are erroneously characterized. In general, Hollywood uses the stereotypical characterization of Muslim Arabs as uncivilized, ruthless, fanatical, anti-American and oppressive of women.²² Shaheen's observation confirms Said's theory of Orientalism that places Islam as the "other." Shaheen also analyses the impact of false image making on Arabs and Muslims and concludes that "stereotypes can lower self-esteem, injure innocents, impact policies, and encourage divisiveness by accentuating our differences at the expense of those human qualities that tie us together."²³

As horrifying as the September 11th World Trade Center bombing was, it has drawn people's attention to Islam. People's curiosity about Islam has led them to a tremendous attempt to understand Islam by tracing history. This effort brings us to the Middle Ages, which witnessed both inter-faith relations and conflicts. The existence of three monotheistic traditions, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam, has left significant historical marks on the struggle for hegemony and superiority since the expansion of Islam in the seventh century. While Christianity found its fertile ground in the West, Islam flourished in the East.

²² Jack G. Shaheen, "Hollywood's Muslim Arabs," *Muslim World* 90 (2000): 22-42.

²³ Shaheen 23.

The existence of Islam was perceived as a threat to the hegemony of Christianity in the West. This became especially true as Islam expanded its empire outside the Arabian Peninsula and took what was once Christian land. A major part of Spain and part of Italy, for instance, were Muslim regions and people can still trace the reminiscences of Muslim civilization. In the eighteenth century, Edward Gibbon describes the decline and fall of the Eastern Roman Empire as caused by the rise of Islam, which he misrepresents in a Muslim figure “with the sword in one hand and the Koran in the other.”²⁴ Let us assume that Gibbon had in his mind his Muslim subject holding the sword in the right hand and the Qur’an in the left hand. Of course this is unlikely the correct portrayal of Arabs, who are generally right-handed, and therefore would hold the sword in the right hand, and it would be impossible that the Qur’an would be held in the left hand, because Muslims are forbidden to do so. Even so, this violent depiction is planted in the minds of many westerners and confirms the image of Islam as a religion of terror.

Anyone familiar with the history of the rise of Islam acknowledges the influence Islamic civilization has exerted on Western civilization, and vice versa. It was the third caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634-644), who had brought Islam to vast areas outside the Arabian Peninsula with the great

²⁴ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1845) 171.

conquests in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Egypt, not to mention the fall of Jerusalem.²⁵ Meanwhile, the penetration of Islam into Europe started with the conquest of North Africa (670 AD) and Spain (711 AD) during the Umayyad dynasty (661-750 AD). Following the displacement of that dynasty by the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258 AD), the Umayyads strengthened their legacy in Spain and other parts of Europe such as Sicily and southern Italy.²⁶

The growing Muslim empire in the course of several dynasties pinpointed three places that served as bridges of economic, cultural, scientific, and religious inter-relations between the East and the West. They were Syria, Spain, and Sicily. Through these three places, new goods as well as ideas had been transferred from the East to the West, and vice versa, by crusaders, travelers, writers, and merchants. Spain and Syria provided important space for Western and Islamic civilizations to mingle, and at the same time also represented two poles. Culturally, Spain was the western station of the East, and Syria the eastern outpost of the West.²⁷ Meanwhile, Sicily was an Islamic city under the Fatimid caliphate and enjoyed its most flourishing era in around 948. Scholars have estimated that there were about

²⁵ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates* (London: Longman, 1986) 57-61.

²⁶ Anwar G. Chejne, *Muslim Spain: Its History and Culture* (Minneapolis: the U of Minnesota P, 1974) 3.

²⁷ Helen Adolf, "Christendom and Islam in the Middle Ages: New Light on 'Grail Stone' and 'Hidden Host.'" *Speculum* 32 (1957): 105-7.

3,000 mosques in Sicily during this time; Palermo itself had been under Muslim control for 240 years, from 831 until it fell into the hands of Norman conquerors in 1071.²⁸

In the fourteenth century, the period in which Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy*, Langland composed his *Piers Plowman*, and Chaucer created the *Canterbury Tales*, Islamic civilization had been writing a glorious chapter in Western and world history. The vicissitudes of Muslim empires decorated the course of medieval history. From the time when Tariq Ibn Ziyad conquered Spain in 711 to the time when the Arab and Muslim presence ended in Europe in 1492, we would argue that Andalusia was the most enlightened, civilized, racially and religiously tolerant place in the West. In terms of language and custom, Andalusians were united, since many Christians and Jews became fully arabized. Nevertheless, these Andalusians remained faithful to their ethno-religious affiliations.²⁹

Following Baghdad as the center of learning with its *Bayt al-Hikmah* (House of Wisdom) in the early ninth century during the Abbasid era, Cordova later became a metropolitan center of the civilization of al-Andalus. The city possessed an enormous public library with a collection of over 440,000 books. Under the rule of 'Abd al-Rahman III (r. 912-929), Cordova

²⁸ Hitti 71.

²⁹ Chejne 110.

grew to be a center of learning, with the numerous mosques as educational centers.³⁰

After the conquest of Cordova by the Christian sovereigns of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, the Arabs moved the capital to Grenada, which also soon became a new center of knowledge. In addition to Cordova and Grenada, Seville and Toledo also served as the great houses of Arab Andalusian knowledge. In fact, Toledo was the center of scientific translation from Arabic to Latin.³¹

Between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries, Muslim civilization achieved its zenith. Arabic was the international language of science and intellectuality. It is in this context that we can connect medieval literature and Muslim civilization. These were the eras in which great Muslim philosophers lived. Avicenna, whose works influenced the world of medicine and philosophy, excelled during the Abbasid's Baghdad era. There was also Averroës, the great commentator of Aristotle who came from Al-Andalus, and whose philosophy of "possible intellect" greatly influenced Western philosophers and theologians. These two names are mentioned in Dante's the *Inferno*, where they were granted a respectable place in Limbo.

³⁰ Chejne 163.

³¹ Chejne 164.

The Prophet Muhammad in the Eyes of the West

While the influence of Islamic civilization on the West was undeniable, the most prevailing effect resulting from the encounter of Islam and Christianity was hostility rather than tolerance. Islam is often considered synonymous with holy war and hatred, fanaticism and violence, intolerance and the oppression of women.³² In medieval Spain, there were a number of historical accounts that reflect the idea of the threat of Islam that Christian people felt. Kenneth Baxter Wolf's analysis of Christian views in early medieval Spain suggests that the challenge started from the position of Islam as a military and political force, rather than a religious one. Eventually, as Andalusian Christians, and Jews as well, were assimilated into and acquired higher position in the Muslim administration and became successful merchants up to an international scale, they found the assimilation favorable from a political, economic, or cultural point of view. As an increasing number of Christians converted to Islam from the eighth century on, Andalusian ecclesiastics began to see the existence of Islam as a religious threat.³³

The threat of Islam to Christendom resulted in the First Crusade in 1095, as a reaction to the vast expansion of Islam in Europe and the conquest of the Holy Land by Muslims. The Crusades produced a dreadful scene of

³² Esposito 5.

³³ Kenneth Baxter Wolf, "Christian Views of Islam in Early Medieval Spain," *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam*, ed. John Victor Nolan (New York: Routledge, 1996) 86-93.

bloodshed as Muslims and Jews were massacred.³⁴ With the conversion of Muslims to Christianity as the goal, the Crusaders later stimulated the idea of Islam and the East as the “other.” It was during these crusading periods, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the misconception of Islam flourished in the hands of medieval writers who depicted Islam through their tales, poems, or travel writings. Their works crystallized the anti-Muslim tradition and thus it became hard to erase the negative stereotypes of Islam.³⁵

The threat that Islam posed to Christianity, apart from the many similarities between them, led to the idea of Islam as a heresy. This view was one of the most prevailing themes in the Middle Ages. Heresy is defined as “a sect or body formed by division within the Church; a body which, either in Christendom generally or in some portion of it, maintains an ecclesiastical organization distinct from that of the Catholic Church.”³⁶ This definition suggests that Islam was considered to have been part of Christianity, and that Prophet Muhammad had been a Christian. This error had started long before the Crusade era.

It was St. John of Damascus (675-749) who placed the Prophet Muhammad as the ruler of the Saracens and a pseudo-prophet and saw Islam

³⁴ P.M. Holt, *The Age of the Crusades* (London: Longman, 1986) 22.

³⁵ Hitti 52.

³⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

as the last and the greatest of the Christian heresies.³⁷ St. John of Damascus (known in Arabic as Yahya al-Dimashqi) lived in the age not long after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632. In fact, St. John was an official of the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus, Syria, during the reign of caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705). During this time, Muslims, while holding the leadership, still constituted a small number of the population of the Middle East; nevertheless, Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians seem not to have rebelled against Muslim rule.³⁸ St. John was knowledgeable about the history of Islam, including the genealogical fact of the Prophet Muhammad as the descendant of Ishmael, the son of Abraham from his second wife, Hagar. While Muslims acknowledged the kinship between Islam and Judaism and Christianity, St. John was among those who considered Islam as an illegitimate religion, just as Ishmael was considered an illegitimate child. Based on this, St. John designated Islam the heresy of the Ishmaelites. This view set the tone for considering Islam as the forerunner of the Anti-Christ. Ironically, St. John was accused of being Saracen-minded, and was condemned at the iconoclastic synod of 754 for being too close to Islam.³⁹

³⁷ Hitti 50.

³⁸ Kennedy 117.

³⁹ Jane I. Smith, "Islam and Christendom: Historical, Cultural, and Religious Interactions from the Seventh to the Fifteenth Centuries," *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford UP, 1999) 322.

There was one man who actually made an effort to understand Islam. Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, was alarmed by the power of the Saracens that he witnessed during his visit to Spain in 1141.⁴⁰ He then commissioned translators to provide him with Islamic works, including the Qur'an. The task was carried out to give him a better understanding of Islam, but with a goal of combating Islam intelligently.⁴¹ Robert of Ketton, an English scholar, completed the translation of the Qur'an in 1143. Peter the Venerable's explanation of Islamic beliefs as he understood them suggests that he planted in European soil the accusation of Islam as heretical. In the Prologue to the *Book against the Sect or Heresy of Islam*, the question of whether Islam is a Christian heresy is raised and Peter states: "I cannot decide whether the Mohammedan error must be called a heresy and its followers heretics, or whether they are to be called pagans."⁴²

Peter the Venerable also accused the Prophet Muhammad of false prophethood. Peter's long argument concerning the false messages of the Qur'an insisted that the Qur'an was a corrupted scripture, for it confirms some parts of the Bible, yet rejects some others:

⁴⁰ Dana C. Munro, "The Western Attitude toward Islam during the Period of the Crusades," *Speculum* 6 (1931): 337.

⁴¹ Smith 323.

⁴² James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964) 143.

Thus Mohammed, instructed by the best Jewish and heretical doctors produced his Koran and wove together, in that barbarous fashion of his, a diabolical scripture, put together both from the Jewish fables and the trifling songs of heretics. [. . .] That wicked man did so plainly when, praising both the Christian and the Jewish law, asserting nevertheless that neither one was to be upheld, the reprobate, [although] taking it over, one was to be held, [at the same time] rejected it.⁴³

Peter sees that Islam actually shares many things with the Christian faith—for instance, the miraculous birth of Jesus—but it rejects many others. So he lets his readers decide, “Choose, therefore, whichever you prefer; either call [the Moslems] heretics [. . .], or call them pagans [. . .].” It is clear that Peter chose to label the Muslims heretics.⁴⁴

It was in the wake of these crusading periods that Dante, Langland, and Chaucer produced their masterpieces. In their works, they make a number of references to the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims. The ways they portray Islam suggest that the three authors were influenced by and responded to the social contexts in which they lived. In the next three chapters, we are going to examine how each of these three authors treats Islam.

⁴³ Kritzeck 132.

⁴⁴ Kritzeck 144.

CHAPTER II

THE *INFERNO*: DANTE'S MIXED FEELINGS TOWARDS ISLAM

The relationship between Dante and Islam is a mixture of hatred and sympathy. Christian tradition may be familiar with the harsh treatment of the Prophet Muhammad and his cousin and son in-law, Ali in the *Inferno*. Labeling them as leaders of schism, Dante reflects a general preconception of his time, when Islam was considered a heresy. Noting this hostility, Edward Said includes Dante as an Orientalist. Yet, Dante's milder treatment of such prominent Muslim scholars as Avicenna, Averroës and Saladin by placing them in the same level with other Western philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle shows that Dante admires their great virtues and accomplishments, and it was only because they were not Christians forces Dante to condemn them.⁴⁵

Paul A. Cantor uses Dante's the *Divine Comedy* to challenge the idea of the Western canon. He argues that a work of literature can be considered canonical in the way that it is a major work in the reading and teaching of literature. Yet, the same work can also be uncanonical in terms of the religious connotations it presents. With this in mind, Cantor discusses the

⁴⁵ Said 69.

possibility of distinguishing Dante as a canonical author in the Western literary tradition, yet uncanonical regarding his religious views that seem to encourage the hegemony of Western culture.⁴⁶

Islam as a Heresy

Our first encounter with Islam in the *Inferno* is the portrayal of the mosques in the City of Dis in Canto VIII. As Virgil and Dante are approaching the city in lower Hell, Virgil tells Dante of the city that is filled “with its grave citizens, its great battalions” (67-9). Dante quickly identifies the city by the eternally burning mosques as he looks down to the valley.

I said: “I can already see distinctly—
 master—the mosques that gleam within the valley,
 as crimson as if they had just been drawn
 out of the fire.” He told me: “The eternal
 flame burning there appears to make them red,
 as you can see, within this lower Hell.” (VIII.69-75)

More elaborate description is found in Canto IX, where Dante depicts the City of Dis as a city of fire, within its walls, with countless tombs, each a bed of fire, wherein, in coffins of red-hot iron, lie the arch-heretics crying aloud in anguish:

⁴⁶ Paul A. Cantor, “The Uncanonical Dante: The *Divine Comedy* and Islamic Philosophy,” *Philosophy and Literature* 20 (1996): 138.

for flames were scattered through the tombs, and these
 had kindled all of them to glowing heat;
 no artisan could ask for hotter iron.

The lid of every tomb was lifted up,
 and from each tomb such sorry cries arose
 as could come only from the sad and hurt.

And I: "Master, who can these people be
 Who, buried in great chests of stone like these,
 Must speak by way of sighs in agony?"

And he to me: "Here are the arch-heretics
 And those who followed them from every sect. (IX.118-28)

By depicting the city of Dis as a city filled with mosques, Dante apparently shows that the city is representative of a Muslim community. The main point we should note is that the mosques are in eternal burning and the citizens, "the arch-heretics," are in the graves crying in agony. For this sin, Dante decides to send the citizens of Dis to lower Hell, where Dante wants to burn Muslims following the destruction of their mosques. This depiction reveals Dante's deep disdain of Islam. This horrible description clearly shows that Dante sees Islam as a heresy. This attitude toward Islam as a heresy, a sect within Christianity, is certainly the product of the medieval ages, as the previous chapter already has discussed.

Thus, the mosques are in flames and the citizens lament in agony.

Dante now turns to the Prophet Muhammad and labels him as schismatic. In Canto XXVIII, Dante places the Prophet Muhammad and Ali in the eighth circle, where other schismatic figures are punished. Their level is not very far from Satan, who inhabits the tenth circle. The Prophet Muhammad and Ali are disemboweled, walking around the chasm to be slashed with a long sword, only to have the wounds healed and slashed again ceaselessly:

his bowels hung between his legs, one saw
his vitals and the miserable sack
that makes of what we swallow excrement

While I was all intent on watching him,
he looked at me, and with his hands he spread
his chest and said: "See how I split myself!

See now how maimed Mohammed is! And he
who walks and weeps before me is Ali,
whose face is opened wide from chin to forelock.

And all the others here whom you can see
were, when alive, the sowers of dissension
and scandal, and for this they now are split. (XXVIII.28-36)

The above horrible depiction is gruesome and very disturbing. Dante has made the punishment fit perfectly the sin of dissension. By tormenting

the two most influential figures of Islam in eternal punishment of body splitting and sealing, Dante fully reveals his hatred of Islam.

As explained earlier, schism is “a sect or body formed by division within the Church; a body which, either in Christendom generally or in some portion of it, maintains an ecclesiastical organization distinct from that of the Catholic Church.”⁴⁷ This definition suggests that Dante considers the Prophet Muhammad a schismatic Christian, and thus punishes him in a Christian order. Islam, then, is thought of as imitating the doctrines of Christianity. Based on this notion, Miguel Asin Palacios considers this punishment as a lenient one, for the Prophet Muhammad is punished for creating schism rather than founding a new religion. This leniency, Asin Palacios argues, reveal Dante’s sympathy for Arabic culture.⁴⁸ However, it is too difficult to accept Asin Palacios’s argument, since the depiction of the punishment is too horrible, especially when we consider the prophetic role of Muhammad and the position of Ali as one of the four rightly guided caliphs in the history of Islam. In fact, this is exactly what Said’s Orientalism would want readers to find in a Western canon, Islam as opposed to the West. Dante’s hostile treatment of the Prophet Muhammad reflects his insecurity in witnessing Islam as a challenge to Christianity.

⁴⁷ *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁴⁸ Miguel Asin Palacios, *Islam and The Divine Comedy* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1926) 259.

Dante's condemnation of the Prophet Muhammad as schismatic actually suggests that Dante recognizes the many similarities between Islam and Christianity. Dante may have been quite knowledgeable about Islam, as shown in his placing Ali in the same level of Hell as the Prophet Muhammad. Ali ibn Abi Talib was the fourth caliph (r. 656-661), whose term in office was filled with opposition from various sides of the Muslim community. From the Umayyad's perspective, Ali was accused of taking side with the murderer of the third caliph, Uthman ibn Affan, himself an Umayyad. Ali also lost support from some of his own people after his arbitration with the Umayyads, thereby adding even more power to the Umayyads. For being held responsible for not settling the matter of Uthman's assassination, Ali even had to face a battle with Aisha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad. In 661, a member of the Kharijites, a group that formerly supported Ali but then denied Ali's infallibility after the arbitration, assassinated him. This conflict divided the Muslim community into what later became the sects of the Sunni and the Shiite. The number of dynasties that existed during the expansion of Islam reflects the struggle for political and religious power between the Sunni and the Shiite. Thus, Dante blames Ali for causing the division of Islam between the Sunni and the Shiite, just as the Prophet Muhammad is considered causing the break-up between Islam and Christianity.

Dante's Sympathy with Muslim Exemplary Figures

While Dante puts the Prophet Muhammad and Ali in the lower circle of Hell, the mosques burning in flames, and the citizens of Dis lamenting, Dante places some prominent Muslim figures such as Avicenna and Averroës in Limbo, where other great philosophers such as Socrates and Plato are also placed. In Dante's eyes, the only fault of these philosophers is that they lived before Christianity, and thus were unable to achieve salvation.

they did not sin; and yet, though they have merits,
that's not enough, because they lacked baptism,
the portal of the faith that you embrace.

And they lived before Christianity,
they did not worship God in fitting ways;
and of such spirits I myself am one.

For these defects, and for no other evil,
we now are lost and punished just with this:
we have no hope and yet we live in longing."(IV.34-42)

Dante's different treatment of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali in contrast to the milder one given to, Avicenna, Averroës, and Saladin is a complicated one. By many standards Dante himself sets for placing some other names in his Limbo, Avicenna, Averroës, and Saladin certainly do not belong to Limbo. They were Muslims, and Dante's time faced Christian-Muslim conflicts resulting from the Crusades. By being Muslims, they clearly

lived after Christianity, and thus could not have been put in Limbo, if Dante simply intended to inherit the idea of Limbo as a place for virtuous people who lived prior to the advent of Christianity and children who were not baptized. In addition, these three Muslim figures were great defenders of Islam in their own ways.

According to Shawkat M. Toorawa, Dante's ambiguous view of Muslims may have expressed his time's anger that "Christians are put to shame by the unbaptized Muslims whose only punishable sin is that they have not been baptized" and that Dante may have meant the unbaptized Muslims to be an example to the incontinent Christians.⁴⁹ Toorawa's argument is quite correct, and this supports the point about Dante's knowledge of Islam, although, as Asin Palacios admits, this familiarity does not necessarily mean admiration.⁵⁰ According to Cantor, Dante not only was knowledgeable about Islam, but also was very much indebted to its philosophy. The placement of Averroës in Limbo proves the importance of a prominent Muslim philosopher to such a canonical author as Dante. Cantor even argues that the placement of Averroës in Limbo is appropriate, for Limbo allegorically represents Averroës's idea of "possible intellect," which

⁴⁹ Shawkat M. Toorawa, "Muhammad, Muslims, and Islamophiles in Dante's *Commedia*," *Muslim World* 82 (1992) 143.

⁵⁰ Asin Palacios 259.

Dante picked up from Averroës and referred to in his political treatise, *Monarchy*.⁵¹

Dante's admiration of these three Muslim figures is obvious. Let us start with Avicenna (Ibn Sina), who is mentioned in Canto IV.142, and is placed among other figures "seated in philosophic family" (IV.132). Avicenna's contribution to the world should be the factor of Dante's sympathy. Avicenna (980-1037) was a great physician from Persia whose influence in the world of medicine is undoubted. Avicenna was the most famous philosopher and scientist of Islam who lived in the Abbasid's Baghdad era. His contribution included *Kitab ash-Shifa'* (*The Book of Healing*), a vast encyclopaedia that covered the whole range of science, from logic to physics, psychology, metaphysics, and astronomy.⁵² Meanwhile, his other work, *al-Qanun fi at-Tibb* (*The Canon of Medicine*), served an excellent single book detailing the history of medicine in both East and West. *The Canon* was a major reference in the world of medicine for more than 500 years. Avicenna was also a great thinker in the Qur'anic science, and a commentator on Aristotle.

While Avicenna is the greatest philosopher of the Muslim East (Baghdad), Averroës (Ibn Rushd) is Avicenna's equal in the Muslim West. Averroës (1126-1198) was a scholar of the Qur'anic sciences and the natural

⁵¹ Cantor 146-48.

⁵² Majid Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology from the Eighth Century C.E to the Present," *The Oxford History of Islam* 275.

sciences. Averroës lived in the era of Andalusian excellence, and was considered the greatest philosopher in Islam. Although Averroës originated from a Muslim land, he was more prevalent in the West than in the East, possibly because he was the great commentator on the great Greek intellectual, Aristotle. Averroës's close and careful studies of Aristotle earned him the title of "the commentator" on Aristotle. It is actually this contribution that Dante acknowledges when he speaks of "Averroës, of the great Commentary" (IV. 144). His works were translated into Latin and they made Aristotelian philosophy and science more comprehensible to the West.

Like Avicenna, Averroës attempted to bring harmony between Aristotelian philosophy and the teaching of the Qur'an. In response to Al-Ghazali's idea of the limited capability of human beings to use reason in understanding religion, Averroës argued that the statements of the Qur'an, if properly interpreted, could be reconciled with philosophy. This philosophy was influential to the rise of Christian Scholasticism.⁵³ Averroës's thought is so important because he wrote so many works. Besides, his influence was obviously made possible by the reputation of Cordova as the center of intellectual world, where even Europeans came to study philosophy and sciences. We can argue that Dante's sympathy with Averroës and Avicenna is related to their merits as intellectuals and to their influence on the West. However, Averroës's position either as the greatest interpreter of Aristotle or

⁵³ Chejne 165.

as the great attacker to Christianity was widely debated.⁵⁴ As mentioned earlier, Averroism widely influenced Western scholars in the thirteenth century. The basic notion was that humanity shares a common intellect (monopsychism). It was generally accepted that the intellect (that is, the intellective soul) has both an active component, “the agent intellect,” which forms universal concepts on the basis of particular pieces of information provided by the senses, and a passive component, usually called “the possible intellect,” which is the initially blank wax tablet on which the active component leaves its imprints in the form of concepts and knowledge acquired.⁵⁵ Averroës eventually emerged as the “most condemned” thinker in the Christian Middle Ages; particularly with the condemnation of Averroism in 1277 at Paris.⁵⁶ Interestingly, Dante himself was accused of being an Averroist. Hence, Cantor questions the claim that Dante is the pillar of orthodoxy, because Dante himself is suspected of heresy in his religious views.⁵⁷

The accusation of Dante as an Averroist may have originated from his comment on Averroës’s possible intellect in his *Monarchy*. The line often used

⁵⁴, Charles E Butterworth, ed., *Averroës’ Three Short Commentaries on Aristotle’s “Topic,” “Rhetoric,” and “Poetic,”* (Albany: SUNY P, 1977) vii.

⁵⁵ “Averroism,” 20 Jan. 2004
<<http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ip/rep/B012.htm>>.

⁵⁶ Cantor 145.

⁵⁷ Cantor 138.

to prove Dante's Averroism is: "And Averroës is in agreement to his opinion in his commentary on the *De Anima*."⁵⁸ However, if this statement is correctly understood according to its context, it actually shows that Dante's view of intellect potentiality as being shared by humans refutes Averroës's view of it as being owned by a being. Etienne Gilson mentions this difference as a reason for defending Dante from the accusation of being an Averroist. Gilson rejects to label Dante as an Averroist, since the context of the quotation is that Dante showed the error that Averroës wrote in his commentary. Dante's reference to Averroës serves as a starting point to place his argument, but does not mean that he adopted it.⁵⁹

With Dante's mild treatment of Avicenna and Averroës in mind, we can argue that Dante may have rejected Islam as a faith. His rejection is represented by the placement of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali in the lower circle of Hell. On the other side, Dante attempts to place Muslim philosophers in a proper intellectual place, by ignoring the fact that they were the defenders of Islam.

We now turn to Dante's respect for Saladin, who was also placed in Limbo: "and, solitary, set apart, Saladin" (IV.129). While Avicenna and Averroës could have been admired by Dante in relation to their great

⁵⁸ Dante Alighieri, *Monarchy*, trans. and ed. Prue Shaw (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996) 7.

⁵⁹ Etienne Gilson, *Dante and Philosophy*, trans. David Moore (New York: Harper, 1949) 168-9.

contribution to Western thinking, Saladin was an opponent of the Crusader and the taker of Jerusalem.⁶⁰ Saladin (Salah ad-din Yusuf ibn Ayyub) was the sultan of Egypt from 1174-1193. His name is deeply engraved in Muslims' minds for his chivalry and his defense of Islam. In other words, he was an exemplary figure of external *jihad*. This position alone could have set Saladin in the low level of hell. What, then, made Dante sympathetic with Saladin? We are left with a big question of Dante's motive of placing the great warrior against Christianity in Limbo.

The fact that Dante holds such high respect for Saladin suggests that Saladin was much admired in the West. In spite of the fact that Saladin recaptured Jerusalem, his merciful conduct, tolerance, and generosity after the capture of Jerusalem were highly noted, and stood in marked contrasts to the inhumane behavior of the Christian Crusader in the First Crusade in 1099.⁶¹ Boccaccio has an elaborate description of Saladin's kindness and generosity in *Decameron*. In one part of *Decameron*, Saladin is described as a man who knows how to show his gratitude, disregarding the fact that he is indebted to an enemy. Saladin is not hesitant to raise his enemy to a more respectable position and sets him free.⁶² Boccaccio's praise of Saladin seems to ignore the fact that Saladin was a great defender of Islam. Dante lived in

⁶⁰ Holt 53-9.

⁶¹ Munro 338.

⁶² Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* X.9.

the same era as Boccaccio, and was likely to have similar respect for Saladin with Boccaccio.

Still, we are left with a significant question concerning Dante's motive of placing the great warrior against Christianity in Limbo. To put everything together, Dante reveals his sympathy to Islam, not as a faith, but as a culture that offered advanced intellectual development and exemplary nobility which was absent generally in Western culture in Dante's time.

The Influence of Islam on the *Divine Comedy*

To many Western readers, how far Dante was influenced by Muslim thought and theology seems not to be an important question, especially when we think of the *Divine Comedy* as belonging to the Western Christian canon. However, to Muslim readers, who are undoubtedly familiar with Muslim legends about the Prophet Muhammad's life, this remains an open question. In the following discussion, we see that Dante's secret sympathy with Islam can be traced in the influence of Islam on his works.

When we mention the *Divine Comedy*, a Christian audience may quickly think of hell, purgatory, and paradise. Meanwhile, today's general Muslim readers do not really know Dante, and most are not even aware of Dante's placement of the Prophet Muhammad in Hell, which would certainly invite anger or even the banning of the book. Muslims are acquainted with the description of hell, purgatory, and heaven mainly from the two most

authoritative sources—the Qur'an and the Hadith, which is a collection of Prophetic traditions. One account often cited concerning the description of hell and heaven is the *Isra'* and *Mi'raj*. The *Isra'* refers to the nocturnal journey of the Prophet Muhammad from Masjid al-Haram in Mecca to Masjid al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, while the *Mi'raj* is his Ascension to the Throne of God from Masjid al-Aqsa.

The account of the Prophet Muhammad's the *Isra'* and *Mi'raj* may have inspired Dante's description of heaven and hell in the *Divine Comedy*, as suggested by some modern scholars.⁶³ This is very reasonable, since there are so many striking resemblances between the *Divine Comedy* and the *Isra'* and *Mi'raj*, as well as the Qur'anic verses, that one could quickly question Dante's sources. The problem of originality of a canonical work is a serious matter, and a long study of comparative literature and history must be carried out to answer it.

Probably the most important work until now dealing with the issue of Dante's sources is Miguel Asin Palacios's *La Escatologia musulmana en la Divina Comedia* (1919), which inaugurated a controversy over Dante's originality. A Catholic priest, Asin Palacios spent twenty-five years digging sources before he finally stated that Dante was influenced by the Islamic tradition of the *Isra' Mi'raj*. He claims that the similarities between this

⁶³ Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, MI: Paragon, 1994) 82.

Muslim account and the *Divine Comedy* can be traced even in small details and episodes, which makes it difficult to call it a matter of coincidence.⁶⁴ There are numerous details of tortures of hell that Asin Palacios uses to prove his thesis that Dante borrows his details of the *Divine Comedy* from the episodes, description of places and tortures seen by the Prophet Muhammad in the *Isra' Mi'raj*.

While Asin Palacios has provided us with meticulous similarities between the *Divine Comedy* and the account of the *Isra' Mi'raj*, it is also possible to trace other Islamic references concerning the description of hell, both related and unrelated to the account of the *Isra' Mi'raj*, to provide more evidence in favor of Asin's findings. In the following section, I will focus mainly on the commonalities in terms of the description of hell in Dante's the *Inferno* and the Qur'an and the Hadith.⁶⁵

The account of *Isra'* is mentioned in the Qur'an, Chapter 17, called *al-Isra'*, which means the nocturnal journey:

Exalted is He who took His Servant [prophet Muhammad (pbuh)]
by night from al-Masjid al-Haram to al-Masjid al-Aqsa, whose

⁶⁴ Asin Palacios 37.

⁶⁵ The Hadith cited in this thesis are taken from the complete hadith database of the MSA-USC, unless stated otherwise. For further details, see *MSA-USC Hadith Database* <<http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/reference/searchhadith.html>>.

surroundings We Have blessed, to show him of Our Signs. Indeed,
He is the Hearing, the Seeing.⁶⁶

While this verse constitutes the only Qur'anic reference to the journey, the Hadith provide the details and elaborates that the Prophet Muhammad was accompanied by Gabriel. A long Hadith reported by al-Bukhari describes the Isra' Mi'raj, in which the Prophet Muhammad was awakened at night by Gabriel, who then set out on the journey on al-Buraq. Before the journey, Gabriel opened the Prophet Muhammad's chest, purified it with Zam-zam water, and filled it with wisdom and belief. Then Gabriel became the guide who took the Prophet Muhammad through Hell, where he saw various sinners, and then ascended to stages of Heaven, where he met some prophets. It was during this journey when the Prophet Muhammad received God's commandment of five prayers prescribed to Muslims.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, we know that during the full course of Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, Dante is accompanied by Virgil, who promises to lead him on the journey through Hell, so that Dante may be able to enter Paradise, in which Beatrice takes over Virgil's task. Dante agrees to the journey and follows Virgil through the gates of Hell.

The Muslim hell is described as a dark storm of wind, with which God torments such of the wicked that He chooses, as mentioned in the Holy

⁶⁶ QS 17:1.

⁶⁷ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 54, number 429.

Qur'an: "Then watch for the Day when the sky will bring a visible smoke. Covering the people; this is a painful torment."⁶⁸ In hell, all sinners will be heard moaning and sobbing.⁶⁹ A similar hellish storm is found in the *Inferno*, Canto V.89, where a wind of darkness with very few streaks of purple light blows furiously, sweeping the lustful in its whirl. Dante provides more details here, saying that adulterers are lamenting, moaning, shrieking, and the spirits are whirled and swept by a never-ending storm:

I reached a place where every light is muted,
which bellows like the sea beneath a tempest,
when it is battered by opposing winds.

The hellish hurricane, which never rests,
drives on the spirits with its violence:
wheeling and pounding, it harasses them.

When they come up against the ruined slope,
then there are cries and wailing and lament,
and there they curse the force of the divine.

I learned those who undergo this torment
are damned because they sinned within the flesh,
subjecting reason to the rule of lust. (V.25-39)

⁶⁸ QS 44:10-11.

⁶⁹ QS 11:106.

More striking similarities can be traced in the description of tortures of hell. In Canto XXIV, Griffolino of Arezzo and Capocchio of Sienna scratch their scales off their leprous sores. This punishment recurs as the skin is refreshed and then scratched off.

With currycomb, as they assailed themselves
 With clawing nails-their itching had such force
 And fury, and there was no other help.
 And so their nails kept scraping off the scabs,
 Just as a knife scrapes off the scales of carp
 Or of another fish with scales more large. (XXIV.79-87)

This torture resembles the one that the Prophet Muhammad sees in Hell, wherein people with copper nails scratch their faces and chests as a punishment for tarnishing their reputations. The *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* mentions this punishment as recorded in the following Hadith:

Anas said: "The Messenger of Allah said: When I was taken up to my Lord (during *Al-Mi'raj*), I passed by people who had nails of copper with which they were scratching their faces and chests. I asked, 'Who are these, O Jibril' He said, 'These are those who ate the flesh of the people [i.e., backbiting] and slandered their honor.'⁷⁰

⁷⁰ *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Sura 17:1. The commentary mentions the above Hadith, as reported by Ahmad, no. 3224 and Abu Dawud, no. 4878.

The *Isra'* and the *Inferno* also share similar tortures for the usurers. In both accounts, the usurers are submerged in a deep river of blood. Dante sees them striving to gain the shore, only to be forced back by the Centaur archers:

But fix your eyes below, upon the valley,
For now we near the stream of blood, where those
Who injure others violently, boil. (XII. 46-8)

Meanwhile, the Prophet Muhammad sees a usurer swimming in a river of blood and is being struck in his mouth with rocks.

Narrated Samura bin Jundab: [. . .] So we proceeded on till we reached a river of blood and a man was in it, and another man was standing at its bank with stones in front of him, facing the man standing in the river. Whenever the man in the river wanted to come out, the other one threw a stone in his mouth and caused him to retreat to his original position; and so whenever he wanted to come out the other would throw a stone in his mouth, and he would retreat to his original position. [. . .] And those you saw in the river of blood were those dealing in *Riba* (usury). [. . .]⁷¹

It is interesting to note that part of this torture, where rocks are thrown into the sinner's mouth, can be found in Canto VI. Here, the gluttons and thieves

⁷¹ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book. 23, no. 468.

(represented by Cerberus) are depicted as eating dirt and are transformed into demons:

My guide opened his hands to their full span,
Plucked up some earth, and with his fists filled full
He hurled it straight into those famished jaws.

Just as a dog that barks with greedy hunger
Will then fall quiet when he gnaws his food,
Intent and straining hard to cram it in

So were the filthy faces of the demon
Cerberus transformed—after he'd stunned
The spirits so, they wished that they were deaf. (VI.13-33)

In Canto XX, we learn that there is a procession of sinners whose necks are twisted, for their faces are turned toward their backs, their tears falling down from their backs as they walk backwards:

they had their faces twisted toward their haunches
and found it necessary to walk backward,
because they could not see ahead of them.

[.]

See how he's made a chest out of his shoulders;
and since he wanted so to see ahead,

He looks behind and walks a backward path. (XX.13-5, 37-9)

This resembles the torture described in the Qur'an as a punishment to those who have received the Scriptures and do not believe in what God has sent down to them:

O you who were given the Scripture, believe in what We have sent down [to Muhammad (pbuh)], confirming that which is with you, before We obliterate faces and turn them toward their backs or curse them as We curse the Sabbath-breakers. And ever is the matter of Allah accomplished.⁷²

The hypocrites in Canto XXIII are depicted as walking slowly along, groaning under the weight of leaden mantles, whose external gilt dazzles the eye.

Below that point we found a painted people,
who moved about with lagging steps, in circles,
weeping, with features tired and defeated.

And they were dressed in cloaks with cowls so low

[.....]

Outside, these cloaks were gilded and they dazzled;
but inside they were all of lead, so heavy
that Frederick's capes were straw compared to them.

A tiring mantle for eternity! (XXIII.58-60, 64-7)

⁷² QS 4:47.

Similarly, the Qur'an mentions this punishment: "And you will see the criminals that Day bound together in shackles. Their garments of liquid pitch and their faces covered by the Fire."⁷³

Dante also describes Hell as a place full of poisonous hydras as he enters the seventh pit of Malebolge where thieves expiate their crime. Here in Cantos XXIV-XXV, the hydras seize the sinners and then sting them until their flesh is consumed and reduced to ashes, the body only to reappear for the torture to be renewed. The Qur'an and the Hadith make frequent reference to the snakes and serpents in hell. The following is a Hadith that describes the punishment for those who do not pay *zakah* (alms):

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Anyone whom Allah has given wealth but he does not pay its *Zakah*, then, on the Day of Resurrection, his wealth will be presented to him in the shape of a bald-headed poisonous male snake with two poisonous glands in its mouth and it will encircle itself round his neck and bite him over his cheeks and say, "I am your wealth; I am your treasure." Then the Prophet recited this Divine Verse: "And let not those who covetously withhold of that which Allah has bestowed upon them of His Bounty." (QS 3:180)⁷⁴

⁷³ QS 14: 49-50.

⁷⁴ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 24, no. 486; Book 60, no. 88.

All the tortures described in the *Inferno* are renewed as the physical conditions of the sinners recover, such as fresh skin and complete parts of the body. The never-ending circle of tortures and renewal is also widely known in Islam. The Qur'an says:

Indeed, those who disbelieve in Our verses – We will drive them into a fire. Every time their skins are roasted through We will replace them with other skins so they may taste the punishment. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted in Might and Wise.⁷⁵

The above comparison shows only a few of the many similarities that could be traced in the *Purgatory* and the *Paradise* as well. These similarities will not be discussed here, but they deserve a deeper analysis. The major question here now focuses on Dante's sources of the Arabic tradition. Or, could the Christian tradition have provided him with detailed stories of the Hereafter? Asin Palacios argues that the majority of the Christian legends prior to the *Divine Comedy* did not appear until after the tenth century,⁷⁶ whereas we know that Muslim traditions as recorded in the Hadith date to as early a period as the eighth century. I would argue that it is unlikely that Dante could have gained a direct access to the account of the *Isra' Mi'raj* and other Islamic sources such as the Qur'an and Hadith. However, historical notes suggest that the account of the *Isra' Mi'raj* was very popular in Spain

⁷⁵ QS 4: 56.

⁷⁶ Asin Palacios 247.

and Sicily, two regions with which Dante had either direct or indirect contact, as he himself visited Sicily and was familiar with leading Muslim figures. Moreover, Dante's mentor, Brunetto Latini, was once at the court of Alfonso X in Toledo, Spain. Alfonso the Wise directed the work of translation, which included, among others, the *Mi'raj* in his *Cronica general*.⁷⁷ Considering that Brunetto Latini was exposed to Islamic culture at first hand, we can speculate that Dante, as one of Latini's disciples, may have heard about the depiction of hell from Islamic perspective.

Another possible explanation finds its roots in the works of the thirteenth century Andalusian Sufi master, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi. His works, *Futuhāt Al Makkiyah* (the *Meccan Revelations*) indeed illuminates a mystical journey. Asin Palacios argues that Ibn Arabi's *Futuhāt Al-Makkiyah*, which was written in the twelfth century, was reproduced by Dante a century later. This work pictures the realms beyond the grave and expresses the metaphysics of light by using the same symbols that can be traced in the *Divine Comedy*.⁷⁸ According to James Morris, Ibn 'Arabi describes his work as the result of inspiration he received from God while he was fulfilling his circumambulations of the Ka'bah or while he was contemplating it.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Asin Palacios 248-9; Chejne 405.

⁷⁸ Asin Palacios 264-66.

⁷⁹ James Morris, introduction, *The Meccan Revelations*, by Michel Chodkiewicz, William Chittick, and James Morris (New York: Pir, 2002), 13 Feb. 2003 <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/mr_introduction.html>.

Furthermore, Morris compares an approach to understanding the *Futuhāt* with a similar interpretation of Dante's the *Divine Comedy*, particularly the *Paradiso*.⁸⁰

The Futuhāt clearly demonstrates that Ibn 'Arabi employs the account of the Prophet Muhammad's ascension to Heaven as the basis of his work. The *Futuhāt* depicts Ibn Arabi's mystical journey, in which he encounters with some prophets in the stages of Heaven. Considering the close proximity between the *Futuhāt* and the *Divine Comedy* in terms of time and place, it is more likely that Dante could have been inspired by Ibn 'Arabi.

Without disregarding the fact that Asin Palacios's thesis has been opposed many times since its publication, we must bear in mind that there is always an open possibility of Muslim tradition as a direct or indirect source used by Dante. Vincente Cantarino has done a good job of tracing the controversy. He notes two separate works by Munoz Sendino of Spain and Enrico Cerrulli of Italy, who elaborated more evidence in favor of Asin Palacios's findings. In 1949, Munoz Sendino and Enrico Cerulli worked independently to publish the Latin and French versions of a Hispano-Arabic book that contained the account of the *Isra' Mi'raj*. The Hispano-Arabic book was translated into Latin at the order of Alphonso X. Cerulli's book, *Il 'Libro della Scala' e la Questione delle Fonti Arabo-Spagnole della Divina*

⁸⁰ Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabi and the Mi'raj Part I," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107 (1987): 630.

Commedia, illustrated that the Islamic eschatology was known and described in a number of western Latin texts and that there was ample evidence that various versions of the *Liber scalae Machometi* were circulating in the medieval period. Cerulli supports Asin Palacios's argument and concludes that Dante no doubt knew the text in some form or another.⁸¹

Nevertheless, *Libro della Scala* ignited the controversy. Cantarino argues that while Asin Palacios's evidence is quite convincing, it does not necessarily mean that the *Divine Comedy* takes Islamic tradition as its prototype.⁸² Yet, I would argue that the many striking similarities between the *Divine Comedy* and the Islamic sources cannot be considered a mere coincidence. What should be done now is to conduct a deeper analysis of the primary sources used by Asin Palacios eighty years ago, to see whether his thesis is proven true, or whether Cantarino's refutation is more plausible.

⁸¹ Vincente Cantarino, "Dante and Islam: History and Analysis of a Controversy," *A Dante Symposium in Commemoration of the 700th Anniversary of the Poet's Birth*, ed. William de Sua and Gino Rizzo (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1965) 185-6. Also see note 77.

⁸² Cantarino 191.

CHAPTER III

THE EMBODIMENT OF CHRISTIAN HERESY AND MORAL DESTRUCTION IN THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD

Piers Plowman is sometimes considered the greatest poem in the English language prior to Chaucer's the *Canterbury Tales* and is thought to be the work of a clerk named William Langland (1332-1400). *Piers Plowman* is an allegorical poem that conveys a dream vision of the simple Christian life. There are numerous dream visions; for example, one vision occurs when the Holy Church and Lady Meed are wooing the dreamer, another is as Piers leads a crowd of penitents in search of St. Truth, and also another is the vision of Do-well (the practice of the virtues), Do-bet (in which Piers becomes the Good Samaritan practicing charity), and Do-best (the simple plowman is identified with Christ himself).

Piers Plowman deeply investigates problems of political and religious thought. From this perspective, E. Talbot Donaldson cannot think of any other work that better reflects life in the Middle Ages. He considers *Piers Plowman* as an artifact that records the problems and strength of the period. In relation to the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, the poem became a rallying point

that the leaders of the Revolt used to describe the class struggles of Langland's time and express the expectations of the Revolt leaders.⁸³

Limited scholarship discussing Langland's treatment of Islam exists. One study worth mentioning is Galen Johnson's analysis of the shared ideology of medieval literature, including *Piers Plowman*. Galen Johnson traces the story of the Prophet Muhammad as presented in English literature to its beginning in the Middle Ages by examining popular Christian literary works of the medieval period and beyond, focusing on the *Song of Roland*, the *Divine Comedy*, *Piers Plowman*, the *Canterbury Tales* and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Johnson argues that the authors' harsh treatment of the Prophet Muhammad is based on "the authors' common ideological purposes, whereby they portrayed the Prophet Muhammad either as a false god or as the 'quintessential Christian heretic' to show that he was the model for unorthodox belief and schisms in their own time."⁸⁴ Furthermore, Johnson claims that the works he analyzes attempt to project the weaknesses of Christianity on to the Prophet Muhammad "in order to verify their own ideology which is based on Western superiority and Christian dogma." As a result, the Prophet Muhammad is addressed dishonestly, and this

⁸³ Elizabeth D. Kirk and Judith H. Anderson, introduction, *Piers Plowman*, by William Langland, trans. E. Talbot Donaldson (New York: Norton, 1990) xi.

⁸⁴ Galen Johnson, "Muhammad and Ideology in Medieval-Christian Literature," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 11 (2000): 333.

representation “has influenced stereotypes of the Muslim ‘others’ which persist to the present day and continue to impede Muslim-Christian relations.”⁸⁵

I support Johnson’s thesis in the way that William Langland shares similar ideology with Dante in viewing the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims. *Piers Plowman* places the Prophet Muhammad as a heretical figure that must be condemned. The difference is that Dante’s punishment takes place in the after-life, while Langland’s condemnation occurs in the present time. Langland, however, also demonstrates a softer attitude towards Muslims (and Jews as well), in that he opens the possibility for their repentance and conversion. With this offer, Langland joins Dante in enforcing his theological point that Christianity is superior to other religions.

In *Piers Plowman*, a layperson named Will has dream visions about finding Truth and hopes to serve Truth for the rest of his life. Truth and other characters’ names clearly represent morality. The main moral point in *Piers Plowman* comprises truth and love, with falsehood as the extreme opposite of truth. This perspective provides our starting point to discuss Langland’s references to Islam. Our first encounter with Islam takes place in Passus III, where *Anima* mentions the Prophet Muhammad and associates him with Lady Meed. In earlier Passus, we are introduced to Meed, who represents certain kinds of falsehood. Lady Meed is the root of bribery and

⁸⁵ Johnson 344.

simony, surrounded by governmental and ecclesiastical officials. She is known for her deceptiveness and avarice.

For she is favourable to Fals and fouleth Truthe ofte.
 By Jesus! With hire jeweles the justices she shendeth,
 And lith ayein the lawe and letteth hym the gate,
 That faith may noght have his forth, hire florins go so thikke.
 She ledeth the lawe as hire list and lovedaies maketh,
 And doth men lese thorough hire love that lawe myghte wyne—
 The maze for a mene man, though he mote evere! (III.154-60)

It is with such personality as that of Meed that the Prophet Muhammad's character is compared. In other words, the Prophet Muhammad is described as a man who breaks the law, and brings falsehood and corruption to religion. In this Passus, the Prophet Muhammad and Meed will be brought to justice, but his followers will be saved after their conversion to Christianity.

Non levabit gens contra gentem gladium. . .

'And er this fortune falle, fynde men shul the worste,
 By sixe sonnes and a ship and a half a shef of arwes;
 And the myddle of a moone shal make the Jewed torne,
 And Sarsynes for that sighte shul singe *Gloria in excelsis*—
 For Makometh and Mede myshappe shul that tyme;
 For *Melius est bonum quam divicie multe.*' (III.324-30)

Conscience informs Will that before the eschatological hope that “nation shall not lift up sword against nation” will be fulfilled, a middle phase of the moon will bring about the conversion of the Jews, while the Muslims, seeing this, will burst out singing, “Gloria in Excelsis.” The Prophet Muhammad and Meed will be brought low, for “a good [name] is better than great riches” (III.330).

Muslims and Jews are labeled as wrongdoers, and they should be invited to hear the call of Christ so as to achieve salvation. They are like people who suffer from thirst, and Christian creed would be the remedy.

Sarsens and scismatikes, and so dide the Jewes:

O vos omnes sicientes, venite . . .

And bad hem souke for synne save at his breste

And drynke boote for bale, brouke it whoso myghte. (XI.120-21)

Similarly to Dante, Langland depicts the Prophet Muhammad as a schismatic Christian. *Anima* tells Will that though Christians and Muslims both affirm monotheism, it was the Prophet Muhammad who led the Muslims of Syria into infidelity. The Prophet Muhammad is considered the prototypical lapsed Christian clergyman, who defected from the faith after he had failed to be named as pope.

For Sarsens han somewhat semyng to oure bileve,

For thei love and bileve in o [Lede] almighty,

And we, lered and lewed, [lileveth in oon God]—

Cristene and uncristene on oon God bileveth.
 Ac oon Makometh, a man in mysbileve
 Broughte Sarsen of Suree – and see in what manere
 This Makometh was Cristene man, and for he moste noght ben a pope,
 Into Surrie he soughte, and thorough hise sotle wittes
 Daunted a dowve, and day and nyght hire fedde.
 The corn that she croppede, he caste it in his ere;
 And if he among the peple preched, or in places come,
 Thanne wolde the colvere come to the clerkes ere
 Menyngge as after mete – thus Makometh hire enchauntede,
 And dide folk thane falle on knees, for he swoor in his prechyng
 That the colvere that com so com from God of hevene
 As messenger to Makometh, men for to teche.
 And thus through wiles of his wit and a whit dowve
 Makometh in mysbileve men and women broughte,
 That lered there and lewed yit leeven on hise lawes. (XV.393-410)

In the lines above mentioned, *Piers Plowman* employs a myth of the dove related to the revelation of God's messages to the Prophet Muhammad. The Prophet Muhammad is said to fool the Syrian by saying that the dove is actually the Angel Gabriel who sent God's messages. That is how the people of Syria fell into his false religion.

The myth of the dove was one of the widely disseminated tales relating to the Prophet Muhammad in the medieval era. The myth seemed to spread until the Renaissance era. Another reference is found in Shakespeare's *Henry VI*. Here, Shakespeare makes mention of the tale as Charles speaks to Joan of Arc: "Was Mahomet inspired by a dove ?/ Thou with an eagle art inspired, then."⁸⁶

While this myth was widely known in the Western world up to the Renaissance, it is not popular or even known among Muslims. For one thing, it has no reference in the Qur'an, the Hadith, and other Islamic traditions. We can even imagine that Muslims would likely laugh at it if they heard about the myth, which departs widely from truth. Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad received God's messages through the Angel Gabriel over the span of twenty-three years. The Qur'an refers to Gabriel as *Ruh al-Quddus* (the Holy Spirit), who also acted as the intermediary for God's casting his word to Maryam (Virgin Mary). "We sent to her Our Spirit [Gabriel], and he appeared to her in the image of a mortal without fault."⁸⁷ Gabriel as the Holy Spirit is mentioned several times in other parts of the Qur'an. The Quran also calls Gabriel *Ruuhanaa* (Our Spirit), *Ruuhul-'Amiin* (The Honest Spirit) and *Al-Ruh* (The Spirit).⁸⁸

⁸⁶ William Shakespeare, *Henry VI*, I.ii.140.

⁸⁷ QS 19:17.

⁸⁸ QS 2:253; QS 16:102; QS 26:193; QS 78:38.

Langland likely was knowledgeable about Islam when he mentions the dove that carries messages to the Prophet Muhammad in Passus XV. It is highly possible that Langland refers to Gabriel as the dove. Another explanation lies in the Christian belief itself. It is known that the dove is the paraclete, a Christian symbol of the Holy Ghost. The Bible mentions: "And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and a voice came from heaven which said, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased."⁸⁹

Langland's reference to the myth of the dove as the way the Prophet Muhammad claimed to have received the revelation from God confirms the medieval notion that the Prophet Muhammad was displayed as a false prophet. However, this negative view did change as Arabic sources became more accessible to English society. More writers recognized the falsification of the Prophet Muhammad's life and showed that the myth was a Christian invention. Now Western writers have abandoned the myth entirely.⁹⁰

The accusation of the Prophet Muhammad as a false mediator with false messages suggests that Langland considers the Qur'an as a false Scripture. Again, this accusation is another commonly known image in the Middle Ages. We can refer again to Peter the Venerable's explanation of

⁸⁹ Luke 3:22.

⁹⁰ Gibbon 378; Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (London: Wardlock, 1911) 59; Lewis 94; Hitti 54-55.

Islam based on his understanding of the Qur'an. He evaluated the Qur'an as a book that contained half-truth, since it confirmed some parts of the Bible, but rejected some others.⁹¹ The matter of the originality of the Qur'an has been the subject of controversy among non-Muslim scholars who doubt at the original quality and the miraculous nature of the Qur'an. From the Islamic point of view, the Prophet Muhammad did not write the Qur'an. Islam firmly believes that the Qur'an is *Kalām Allāhi* (the Speech of God) revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel. The Qur'an itself mentions that the Prophet Muhammad suffered from the accusation of falsifying the religion, and the following *ayah* (verse) was revealed.

And if you are in doubt about what We have sent down [the Qur'an] upon Our Servant [Prophet Muhammad], then produce a surah the like thereof and call upon your witnesses other than Allah, if you should be truthful. But if you do not—and you will never be able to—then fear the Fire, whose fuel is men and stones, prepared for the disbelievers.⁹²

Langland uses the figure of the Prophet Muhammad as an example of moral destruction. Moreover, Langland accuses Christian clergymen of adopting adopted the Prophet Muhammad's worldly way of living so that

⁹¹ Kritzeck 132.

⁹² QS 2:23-24.

they have no integrity anymore. In Passus XV, Langland illustrates that the Christian clergymen feed a dove called Covetousness.

‘And siththe Oure Saveour suffred the Sarsens so bigiled
 Thorough a Cristene clerk acorsed in his soule—
 Ac for drede of the deeth I dar noght telle truthe,
 How Englisshe clerkes a colvere fede that Coveitise highte,
 And ben manered after Makometh, that no man useth trouthe.

‘Ancres and heremytes, and monks and freres

Peeren to Apostles thorough hire parfit lyvyng. (XV.411-17)

We remember that earlier, the Prophet Muhammad is compared to Lady Meed. The description of the Prophet Muhammad as a false prophet who imposed on worldly life seems to match the depiction of Meed as a greedy, worldly woman.

‘Barons and burgeis she bryngeth in sorwe,
 And al the commune in care that coveiten in truthe,
 For clergie and coveitise she coupleth togidres
 That is the lif of that lady – now Lord yyve hire sorwe,
 And alle that meynteneth hire men, meschaunce hem bitide!
 (III.163-67)

Now *Anima* depicts the Prophet Muhammad as a person whose life was filled with worldly matters. His way of life corrupted the sanctity of clergy, for priests also adopted the Prophet Muhammad’s lifestyle.

Apparently, Langland's accusation of the Prophet Muhammad is a reflection of the medieval perception of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. Medieval society was familiar with the description of the Prophet Muhammad as a false religious leader who was thought to have lured men with worldly pleasure. Matthew Paris describes Islam as "luxuriosus" and "bellicosus."⁹³ This accusation is usually supported by the sensuality of Muslim paradise, the number of reference to sexual matters, the permissibility of polygamy as mentioned in the Qur'an (unfortunately, the part that says each wife must be treated with full equality in every aspect of the marital relationship is often disregarded). In addition, the existence of glamorous Muslim cities in the West like Cordova and Grenada in Spain seemed to confirm the accusation that Islam encouraged luxurious living.

These supposed encouragements of materialism in one's religious life must have disturbed Langland very much. To Langland, one must be holy and unworldly to be a religious leader. To put this into Christian historical context, we can refer to the three estates of medieval society: Knight, Parson, and Ploughman. This categorization required that priests were supposed to live in sobriety and not to be concerned with worldly matters. Their job was to preach and instruct. Thus, when some priests tended to live extravagantly, they were considered as deviating from the idealized social and religious normative standards. The corrupted life of clergymen could be best

⁹³ qtd. in Daniel, *Heroes and Saracens. An Interpretation of Chanson de Geste* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1984) 16.

represented by Chaucer's the Monk and the Friar. Chaucer touches on this issue of lavish lifestyle among priests. In the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales*, we have the Monk whose business is outdoor life rather than monastery. He loves hunting more than books. He "is likned til a fissh that is waterlees," like a fish that is out of water.⁹⁴ There is also the Friar whose life is resolutely immoral. He sells pardons from sin for a price, seduces women who come to him for pardons, and spends more time in bars than among the members of the congregation.⁹⁵ Jill Mann categorizes Chaucer's characterization of both the Monk and the Friar into an anti-clerical tradition.⁹⁶

The fourteenth century was a time of demonstrable clerical laxity and licentiousness. It was also a period when the faithful were highly aware and very critical of the need for Church reform. As we have noted, Langland lived in this era, particularly during the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. John Wycliff condemned the lavish lifestyle of the priests, and strongly demanded that the Church should be poor. Some verses of *Piers Plowman* were actually cited during the revolt,⁹⁷ because Langland seemed to encourage the important

⁹⁴ Chaucer, *General Prologue*, I.180.

⁹⁵ Chaucer, *GP*, I.208-69.

⁹⁶ Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estate Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973) 17.

⁹⁷ Kirk xi.

role of the lower class. *Piers Plowman* unquestionably protests the corruption within the Church. The commentary on *Piers Plowman* informs us that the enthusiasm for the satiric condemnation of social and clerical abuses really marked the popularity that *Piers Plowman* enjoyed. Langland was regarded as a disciple or a precursor of John Wycliff, and even as a forerunner of the religious changes that brought about the Reformation.⁹⁸

Ironically, Langland does not attempt to trace the problem within the church; instead, he needs a scapegoat, someone to blame for this chaos. To Langland, the Prophet Muhammad is the perfect target. It is interesting to note that while Langland blames the Prophet Muhammad for the corrupted system of the Church, Wycliff saw that the rise of Islam was caused by the worldliness of the Church and would not fade unless the Church changed its avaricious tendency. Wycliff insisted that Islam as “antireligion will grow until the clergy returns to the poverty of Jesus Christ, and to its original state.”⁹⁹

We have already been given a picture of Islam as “a religion of worldly power” as opposed to Christianity, “the religion of suffering and poverty.”¹⁰⁰ However, the image of Islam as projected in the Prophet Muhammad’s

⁹⁸ E. Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford, 1962) 12. This book provides us with the connection between Langland and Wycliff as made by R. Crowley.

⁹⁹ qtd. in Southern 80.

¹⁰⁰ Southern 80.

worldly life strays very far from truth. Thomas Carlyle totally rejects this falsification. As gross and material as the sensuality of paradise and hell could be in the Qur'an, they actually carry "an emblem of everlasting truth."¹⁰¹ Carlyle goes on further mentioning the frugal life of the Prophet Muhammad, whose "common diet (was) barley-bread and water: sometimes for months there was not a fire once lighted on his hearth."¹⁰²

Indeed, there are a number of Hadith, more than enough for us to cite, in order to show the humility of the Prophet Muhammad. The desire to enjoy status and power is usually associated with good food, fancy clothing, monumental palaces, colorful guards, and indisputable authority. None of these indicators apply to the Prophet Muhammad. A few glimpses of his life may help to answer this question. Despite his responsibilities as a Prophet, a teacher, a statesman, and a judge, the Prophet Muhammad used to milk his goat, mend his clothes, repair his shoes, help with the household work, and visit poor people when they got sick. His life was an amazing model of simplicity and humbleness. One hadith that is especially noteworthy here states:

'A'isha used to say to 'Urwa: Son of my sister, by Allah, I used to see the new moon, then the new moon, then the new moon, i. e. three moons in two months, and fire was not kindled in the house of Allah's

¹⁰¹ Carlyle 99.

¹⁰² Carlyle 93.

Messenger (may peace be upon him). I ('Urwa) said: Auntie, then what were your means of sustenance? She said: Dates and water. But it (so happened) that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) had some Ansar as his neighbours and they had milked animals and they used to send to Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) some milk of their (animals) and he served that to us.¹⁰³

More importantly, the Qur'an has prescribed that Muslims should stay away from worldly, luxurious life, for the love of the world, its delights and its adornments, will distract human beings from seeking and desiring the Hereafter.

Competition in [worldly] increase diverts you. Until you visit the graveyards. No! You are going to know. Then, no! You are going to know. No! If you only knew with knowledge of certainty. You will surely see the Hellfire. Then you will surely see it with the eye of certainty. Then you will surely be asked that Day about pleasure.¹⁰⁴

In addition, there is even a Qur'anic verse that mentions that some monks and priests are exemplary figures of humility.

Thou wilt find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe [to be] the Jews and the idolaters. And thou wilt find the

¹⁰³ *Sahih al-Muslim*, Book 42, Number 7092.

¹⁰⁴ QS 102:1-8. See *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* on this chapter, Surah *at-Takāthur*, for more detailed commentaries and references to the Hadith pertaining to the danger of worldly life.

nearest of them in affection to those who believe [to be] those who say:
 Lo! We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests
 and monks, and because they are not proud.¹⁰⁵

Let us return to *Piers Plowman*. Since the Prophet Muhammad is labeled as a false mediator, he is used as an example of the destructive moral influence of bad teachers. Bishops should teach and evangelize the heathen, because instruction is necessary to salvation. Langland expects that, if the Saracens convert to Christianity, they can tell the Prophet Muhammad of his false messages. Muslims would be welcomed into full fellowship after they have received missionaries who help uncover their eyes from the Prophet Muhammad's deceptions. It would be easy to convert Muslims and Jews, since they are monotheists, if anyone made a serious effort to teach them the doctrine of Trinity.

And sith that thise Sarsens, scribes and Jewes
 Han a lippe of oure bileve, the lightloker, me thynketh,
 Thei sholde turne; whoso travaile wolde and teche hem of the
 Trinite:
 For alle paynymene preieth and parfitly bileveth
 In the [grete holy] God, and his grace asken,
 And make hir mone to Makometh, hir message to shewe.
 Thus in a faith lyveth that folk, and in a fals mene,

¹⁰⁵ QS 5:82.

And that is routhe for the rightful men that in the reawme wonyen,
 And a peril to the Pope and prelates that he maketh,
 That bere bisshopes names of Bethleem and of Babiloigne.

‘Whan the hye kyng of hevene sente his sone to erthe,
 Many miracles he wroughte man for to turne,
 In ensauple that men sholde se be sadde reson
 Men myghte noght be saved but thorough mercy and grace,
 And thorough penaunce, and passion, and parfit byleve;
 (XV.501-515)

The above passage shows how Langland, like Dante, treats the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims differently from one another. The Prophet Muhammad is condemned, while Muslims are given the possibility to achieve salvation if they convert to Christianity. Langland shares Dante’s view that Muhammad had been a Christian, and his schism brought about a new religion that challenged the superiority of Christianity. To reconfirm hegemony, Langland employs his Christian theology that only Christians are saved, and thus conversion offers the answer.

Arn folk of oon faith – the fader God thei honouren.

‘And sithen that the Sarsens and also the Jewes.

Konne the firste clause of oure bileve, *Credo in Deum patrem
 omnipotentem,*

Prelates of Cristene provinces sholde preve, if thei myghte,

Lere hem litlum and litlum *Et in Jesum Christum filium,*
 Til thei kouthe speke and spelle *Et in Spiritum sanctum,*
 And rendren it and recorden it with *remissionem peccatorum,*
Carnis resurrectionem et vitam eternam. Amen.' (XV.605-10)

It is interesting to note that, in spite of his theological belief wherein Christianity is the true religion, Langland recognizes the fact that Judaism, Christianity and Islam are not very dissimilar. *Anima* says that Christ apparently intended the salvation of people such as the Muslims and the Jews. After all, they believe in the One God. This suggests that Langland, while marginalizing Islam and Judaism, also admits the theological resemblance of the three monotheistic religions, in that they believe in the existence of the One God. The Saracens and the Jews can also achieve salvation.

Compared to Dante, Langland shows more sympathetic attitudes with Islam. To some extent, Langland joined John Wycliff, Langland's contemporary fellow. Wycliff (1329-1384) believed that "man can be saved from any sect, even from among the Saracens, if he places no obstacles in the way of salvation. From Islam and other sects, those who at the moment of death believe in the Lord Jesus Christ will be judged to be faithful Christians."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ qtd. in Southern 82.

Wycliff's view that anyone who believes in Jesus can achieve salvation is called universal salvation. Nicholas Watson argues that Langland also offers universal salvation and states that Langland's optimistic agenda is to have Christ save all sinful Christians and the unbaptized people.¹⁰⁷ However, I would argue that Langland does not really intend to offer universal salvation, if it means that the unbaptized people can go to heaven without being Christians. Watson seems to miss Langland's intention to convert the Saracens and the Jews. To Langland, conversion is the prerequisite of salvation.

The close proximity of Islam to Christianity as a supposedly easy way to convert Muslims, and Jews as well, to Christianity can be traced in other important writings such as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. Describing that Saracens place high position to Jesus and Virgin Mary, Mandeville acknowledges Islam's closeness to Christianity and sees it as an opportunity for evangelization, "because [the Saracens] go so nigh our faith, they be lightly converted to Christian law when men preach them and shew them distinctly the law of Jesu Christ, and when they tell them of the prophecies."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Nicholas Watson, "Vision of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 160.

¹⁰⁸ For more detailed description of the Saracens by John Mandeville, see John Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, ed. A.W. Pollard (New York: Macmillan, 1900) 91.

Similarly, an eighteenth-century British writer, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, also acknowledges the closeness between Islam and Christianity. Her letters record her encounter with the customs of the Ottoman Empire, where she recognizes the commonalities between the creeds of the Church of England and Islam, for instance, in not worshipping the image of Mother Mary, as practiced by the Catholic Church. She sees this similarity as a possibility to convert Turkish people to Christianity. Lady Mary writes:

Upon comparing our creeds together, I am convinc'd that if our friend Dr. <Clarke> had free Liberty of preaching here, it would be very easy to perswade the Generality to Christianity, whose Notions are already little different from his.¹⁰⁹

We have seen that Langland treats the Prophet Muhammad and Muslims differently. Langland labels the Prophet Muhammad as a sort of magician who disillusioned the Saracens with the help of the dove and a cardinal who failed to rise into papal hierarchy. As Southern points out, these images were the typical characterizations of the Prophet Muhammad in the Medieval West.¹¹⁰ Moreover, Langland admits the moral quality of the Saracens, but blames the Prophet Muhammad for bringing destruction to the Saracens' religious life. The Prophet Muhammad was also the one to blame

¹⁰⁹ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, Vol. 1, 1708-1720, ed. Robert Halsband (London: Oxford UP, 1965) 317.

¹¹⁰ Southern 74.

for the corruption within the Church. Langland's attempt to evangelize both the Saracens and the Jews also reveals his view of the superiority of Christian faith.

CHAPTER IV

CHAUCEUR'S DEFENSE OF CHRISTIANITY

As previously discussed in the Introduction, the binary opposition of East/West is planted in “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures.”¹¹¹ In the case of Chaucer, Kathryn L. Lynch suggests that Chaucer’s works are excellent sources of medieval cultural studies. His role as a soldier, diplomat, and civil servant enabled him to travel widely and provided him with ample knowledge of various issues of different regions in the medieval world. Based on this perspective, Lynch identifies the *Man of Law’s Tale* (hereafter, *MLT*), and the *Prioress’s Tale* as well, as two of Chaucer’s works that represent his cultural geography.¹¹²

While Langland expects Muslims to convert in order to achieve salvation, Chaucer has in *MLT* the Christianization of Muslims. In *MLT*, Chaucer opposes the Saracens to the Christians. The tale portrays a Syrian Sultan who is willing to convert to Christianity so he can marry Custance, a daughter of the Roman Emperor. His mother, the Sultanness, is angered at

¹¹¹ Said 7.

¹¹² Kathryn L. Lynch, introduction, *Chaucer’s Cultural Geography*, ed. Kathryn L. Lynch (New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 6.

her son's conversion, and is ready to defend her faith. Pretending that she has converted to Christianity, she murders her son and his converted followers upon the couple's arrival at the feast in the palace. Custance is left alive, but is banished from Syria. Thus, there is no longer any Christian soul in the empire, and the Sultanness has made it impossible for the old law to be replaced by the new one.

MLT invites differing views on how Chaucer sees Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. While acknowledging the Prophet Muhammad as the Prophet of Allah and the Qur'an as the Law of God, Chaucer depicts the Sultanness as a stereotypical cruel Muslim who would do anything, including murder, to defend her faith. She is depicted as belonging to a "Barbre nacioun" (281) and being loyal to "the creance of Makomet."

Susan Schibanoff argues that Chaucer is hostile rather than sympathetic with Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. From the point of view of Orientalism, she also sees that *MLT* confirms the binary opposition—women/men, Islam/Christianity, and East/West.¹¹³ While agreeing that these binary oppositions exist, Kathleen Davis comments that Chaucer actually disrupts these oppositions. The West shapes its identity by relying on the

¹¹³ Susan Schibanoff, "Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale," *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 63.

image of Islam as an outsider.¹¹⁴ Some scholars, by contrast, choose to stay on the other side. Nicholas Birns considers Schibanoff's argument as a mistake, in that Chaucer is not part of the parade that exhibits hatred toward Islam. Chaucer has described Islam in knowledgeable and rich ways that present both the positive and negative sides.¹¹⁵ Similarly, Galen Johnson argues that Chaucer is more enlightened than other medieval writers such as Dante and William Langland. Unlike Dante and Langland who label the Prophet Muhammad as a heretic in the *Inferno* and *Piers Plowman*, respectively, Chaucer admits that the Prophet Muhammad is God's Apostle.¹¹⁶

Does Chaucer know a lot about Islam or is he only the product of his time, sharing both the virtues and the faults?¹¹⁷ In the following analysis, I argue that Chaucer seems to hold a sympathetic view of Muhammad, but not of Muslims. He attempts to give a fair treatment to both Christianity and Islam at some points, but often falls into a misunderstanding of Islam. Whether he speaks through the mouth of his Muslim characters or the

¹¹⁴ Kathleen Davis, "Time behind the Veil: The Media, The Middle Ages, and Orientalism Now," *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen (New York: St. Martin's, 2000) 113.

¹¹⁵ Nicholas Birns, "Christian-Islamic Relations in Dante and Chaucer: Reflections on Recent Criticism," *Proceedings: Northeast Regional Meeting of the Conference on Christianity and Literature*, ed. Jean F. Hallisey and Mary-Anne Vetterling (Regis College, Weston, MA: 1996) 19.

¹¹⁶ Johnson 342.

¹¹⁷ Larry Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton, 1987) 16.

narrator, the Sergeant of Law, Chaucer cannot help but showing his bias, through which his misconception of Islam is often seen. More importantly, Chaucer intentionally uses Islam as a tool to defend the superiority of his Christian faith by marginalizing Islam.

Our encounter with Islam in *MLT* begins with the description of Syria. This nation, now part of the modern Middle Eastern conflict, is known as a nation famous for its trade. This reputation lies in its trustworthy merchants and a variety of goods of excellent quality so that everybody is willing to trade with them.

In Surrye once dwelt a company
 Of chapmen riche, and therto sadde and trewe
 That wyde-where senten hir spicerye,
 Clothes of gold, and satyn riche of hewe.
 His chaffare was so thrifty and so newe
 That every wight hath deyntee to chaffare
 With hem, and eek to sellen hem hire ware. (134-40)

Chaucer's reference to the Syrian trade shows that he is quite well acquainted with the international relations and economy of his time. As far back as the pre-Islamic period, Syria had long been an important trade port. Syrian cities such as Palmyra and Edessa were significant trade posts that served as transits for goods moving from the East to Europe. In the sixth century, it was also the land of the Ghassanids, the Christian-Arab client

state that served to protect the interests of the Byzantines from the threat of the Persian Sassanian Empire.¹¹⁸ Syria had also been a bridge between the East and the West. In the medieval era, Syria— together with Spain and Sicily—was the place where multicultural and multi-religious people mingled to exchange goods and ideas.¹¹⁹

In *MLT*, Chaucer characterizes the Muslim merchants in a positive manner. They are rich, honest, and well acquainted with European culture, and are able to catch the good sides of another culture. They bring a good tidings of the beautiful Custance to their Sultan, who is immediately attracted to her, although the Sultan has never seen her.

Despite its fame as an international trade place, Syria is addressed as “the Barbre nacioun” by Custance. The word “barbre” gives the notion of Syrian people as “foreign, non-Christian, and uncivilized.” Hence, Chaucer places Christian tradition as being superior to other traditions. Custance represents the ideal, chastised Christian, who is the “mirour of alle curteisye,” whose heart is “verray chambre of hoolynesse”, and whose hands are generous “for almesse” (166-8).

The superiority of Custance’s morality makes the Sultan of Syria determined to marry Custance. This is where the problem starts, as the Sultan’s advisors realize the impossibility of inter-faith marriage.

¹¹⁸ Kennedy 16-7.

¹¹⁹ Adolf 105.

Thanne sawe they therinne swich difficultee
 By way of reson, for to speke al playn,
 Bitwene hir bothe lawes, that they sayn
 They trowe that no "Cristen prince wolde fayn
 Wedden his child under oure lawe sweete
 That us was taught by Mahoun, oure prophete." (218-24)

The above passage suggests that Chaucer recognizes the differences between Islam and Christianity. Chaucer also acknowledges, through his Muslim characters, that Islamic law is "sweete," (223) just like Christian law that is "deere." (237). Aside from the differences, both laws are treated fairly at this point.

Thus, the prohibition of inter-faith marriage, as the Sultan's advisors understand the Christian view, drives the Sultan to renounce his religion and convert to Christianity.

And he answerde, "Rather than I lese
 Custance, I wol be cristned, douteless.
 I moot been hires; I may noon oother chese. (225-27)

The Sultan's willingness to convert fits perfectly into the Roman Emperor's agenda. Endorsed by the pope, the Emperor agrees to the union between his daughter and the Sultan with a goal of evangelizing the Sultan, as well as destroying idolatry.

What nedeth gretter dilatacioun?
 I seye, by tretys and embassadrie,
 And by the popes mediacioun,
 And al the chirche, and al the chivalrie,
 That in destruccioun of mawmettrie,
 And in encrees of Cristes lawe deere,
 They been accorded, so as ye shall here: (232-38)

While the above lines address the Christian's view of inter-faith marriage, another section has the Islamic outlook on the marriage. The Sultanness expresses her disappointment at her son's intention to give up Islam in order to marry Custance. She also assumes that the Sultan's conversion means the Christianization of his people. Therefore, she is determined to defend her faith. It is interesting to note that the Sultanness, and the Sultan's council as well, uses her standards as a Muslim to judge the legitimacy of inter-faith marriage. She assumes that Christianity does not allow it, just as Islam does not.

"Lordes," quod she, "ye knowen everichon,
 How that my sone in point is for to lete
 The hooly lawes of our Alkaron,
 Yeven by Goddes message Makomete.
 But oon avow to grete God I heete,
 The lyf shal rather out of my body sterte

Or Makometes lawes out of myn herte!

“What sholde us tyden of this newel awe

But thralldom to oure bodies and penance,

And afterward in helle to be drawe,

For we reneyed Mahoun our creance? (330-340)

The above comparison suggests that Chaucer wants to be fair in treating both the Christian and Islamic views of marriage. He uses his Muslim characters to project his view that both religions prohibit inter-faith marriage. Chaucer's Christian mind assumes that a Muslim mother will not allow her son to marry someone from a different faith, just as the Roman Emperor will not allow his daughter to do so. Well, the Emperor does support the marriage, because he knows that the Sultan is going to convert. We should keep in mind that Chaucer speaks of Islam from the mouth of Muslim characters, i.e., the Sultan, his council, and the Sultanness. It is not surprising then to hear them talk about the problem of inter-faith marriage and conversion from Muslim's perspective. For example, the Sultanness fears that her son's conversion will lead him to Hell. This point may suggest that either Chaucer is acknowledgeable about Islam or he tries to understand it through his Christian perspective, in which conversion to another religion means that a soul cannot be granted salvation.

Thus, Chaucer's decision to convert the Sultan to Christianity not only suggests that conversion to Christianity is the best way to achieve salvation,

but also confirms the author's intention to preserve the hegemony of Christianity. We can speculate that the plot may have been different if Chaucer had intended to be objective or if he had known more about the Islamic view of inter-faith marriage. According to the Islamic law, a Muslim man is allowed to marry a woman of the *ahl-al-Kitab* (People of the Book). This term encompassed adherents of prior revealed religions who possessed a written scripture, a "book," and thus included Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians.

Chaucer's view of the impossibility of inter-faith marriage also proves that Chaucer was not really aware of the real social condition in the Muslim empire in the Middle Ages. For one thing, Damascus was the capital of the Umayyad dynasty from 661-750. It was during this dynasty that multicultural and multi-religious communities existed harmoniously. As Peoples of the Book, Christians, as well as Jews, were protected under the covenant of the "dhimmi," and thus, were guaranteed economic and religious freedom. In addition, inter-faith marriages were not uncommon. This tolerance continued as the Umayyad dynasty lost their power in Syria but shifted their sovereignty to Spain.¹²⁰

Inter-faith marriages in medieval Spain were common between the Mozarabs and Muslims, at least up to the eleventh century. The Mozarabs

¹²⁰ Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, (Boston: Little, 2002) 30.

were basically a substantial group of natives who remained Christians but were arabized by the influence of Arabic language and culture. It often happened that members of the same family were split in their religious beliefs, some embracing Islam and others Christianity. With their ability to speak both Arabic and Roman (Latin), the Mozarabs functioned as the best intermediaries between Muslim and Christians to the north, thus, helped the easy exchange of ideas between the East and the West.¹²¹

Reading the lines of *MLT* can give us mixed impression of how Chaucer treats Islam. Up to this point, Chaucer seems sympathetic towards his Muslim characters. His reference to the Prophet Muhammad also reveals his knowledge of Islam. Chaucer acknowledges the Prophet Muhammad as God's Apostle. We can argue that Chaucer seems to treat Islam on its own terms. Through the Muslim characters, we are told about the "lawe sweete," (223) and "The hooly lawes of our Alkaron, Yeven by Goddes message Makomete" (333). The Sultanness intends to stay firm and never to let "Makomete laws out of myn herte!" (336). To some extent, Chaucer's attitude to the Prophet Muhammad is far more enlightened than Dante and Langland, who obviously condemn the Prophet Muhammad as a heretical Christian.

Nicholas Birns uses the above lines to give Chaucer a credit for his acknowledgement of the position of Muhammad as the Prophet and the

¹²¹ Chejne 118-9.

Qur'an as the Scripture, and at the same time refutes Schibanoff's argument that Chaucer sees Islam as a heresy.¹²² However, as I see it, Birns fails to notice Chaucer's misunderstanding of Islam. We should not fail to see that the Muslim characters in the tale actually reveal Chaucer's Christian perspective of Islam. A Muslim will never say that the Qur'an is the law of the Prophet Muhammad. As discussed previously in Chapter III, Muslims firmly believe that the Qur'an is the Speech of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through Gabriel.

Chaucer may have acknowledged the Prophet Muhammad as the Prophet of God, at least through the mouth of his Muslim characters. However, he cannot help showing bias when using the name Makomete and Mahoun alternately. The name is mentioned three times, with twice the use of Mahoun (224, 340) and Makomete once (333). Basically, the word "Mahoun" is used as a reference either to the false prophet, a false god, or a false idol. Chaucer even emphasizes the need to get rid of the idolatry as the Sergeant of Law says of the "destruccion of mawmettrie" (236) to comment on the Sultan's conversion as a way of destroying idolatry. Chaucer's use of the term "mawmettrie" as referring to "idolatry" poses a question of Chaucer's sincerity. While addressing the right position of the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'an in Muslim perspective, Chaucer seems to be aware that the word "Mahoun" and "Mawmettrie" were a deviation of the

¹²² Birns 22.

Prophet Muhammad's name. Whatever Chaucer may mean, it shows that he sees Islam as challenge to Christianity.

While Chaucer tries to treat the Prophet Muhammad in the right way, he depicts the Muslims as having evil attributes. The Sergeant of Law's reference to the motive of the Sultan's conversion serves as a double purpose. He doubts at the Sultan's need for spiritual enlightenment. For sure, it is his desire to marry Custance that lays the motive of his conversion. It also implies the claim of the superiority of Christianity, which, throughout the tale, is embodied in Custance's steadfastness and perseverance in sufferings.

Meanwhile, the "barbre nacioun" projects the violence and wickedness of Islam as embodied by the Sultaness. The Sergeant of Law labels the Sultaness as the "welle of vices" (323), the "roote of iniquitee" (358), and "this wikked goost" (404). Her wickedness is shown when she pretends that she agrees to union between his son and Custance and is willing to convert to Christianity.

She rydesth to the Sowdan on a day,

And seyde hym that she wolde reneye hir lay,

And cristendom of preestes handes fonge,

Repentyng hire she hethen was so longe, [. . .] (375-77)

The Sultaness's wickedness comes in full form as she waits for everybody to be in the feast and then instructs her people to slay every Christian, including the Sultan.

For shortly for to tellen, at o word,
 The Sowdan and the Cristen everichone
 Been al tohewe and stiked at the bord
 But it were oonly dame Custance alone. (428-31)

The Sultanness's murder of all Christians, except Custance, means a big accomplishment, for she has succeeded in protecting her land from evangelization. Syria's sterility is emphasized with the banishment of Custance.

Ne ther was Surryen noon that was converted,
 That of the conseil of the Sowdan woot,
 That he nas al tohewe er he asterted.
 And Custance han they take anon, foot-hoot,
 And in a ship al steerelees, God woot,
 They han hir set, and bidde hire lerne saille
 Out of Surrye agaynward to Ytaille. (435-41)

Although the Sultanness is only a Muslim character who happens to be a wicked woman, it is obvious that *MLT* addresses the superiority of Christianity and men over Islam and women. She is condemned as "serpent under femynynytee, / Like the serpent depe in hele ybounde! (360-61). Through the character of the Sultanness, Chaucer places the stereotypes of Muslims (and women) as being deceitful and dangerous to humankind.

There is another problem posed in the body of the Sultanness. She is compared to “Satan in the form of the serpent,” yet she blames Satan for tempting Eve and therefore putting women into sufferings.

O Sathan, envious syn thilke day

That thou were chaced from our heritage,

Wel knowestow to women the olde way!

Thou madest Eva brynge us in servage; (365-68)

The view of women as dangerous beings can be traced in the Judeo-Christian perspective, in which Eve is to blame for the casting out of Adam and Eve to the Earth. The Bible says:

God prohibited both of them from eating the fruits of the forbidden tree. The serpent seduced Eve to eat from it and Eve, in turn, seduced Adam to eat with her. When God rebuked Adam for what he did, he put all the blame on Eve. “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it,” Then, God said to Eve: “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you.”¹²³

On the other hand, a Muslim would say that the casting out of Adam and Eve from Heaven was due to their inability of resisting the Satan’s

¹²³ Genesis 2:4-3:24.

temptation instead of Eve's weakness. The Islamic concept on the fall of mankind is shown in the following verses of the Qur'an.

So by deceit he brought them to their fall: when they tasted the tree their shame became manifest to them and they began to sew together the leaves of the Garden over their bodies. And the Lord called unto them: "Did I not forbid you that tree and tell you that Satan was your avowed enemy?" They said: "Our Lord we have wronged our own souls and if You forgive us not and bestow not upon us Your mercy, we shall be certainly lost."¹²⁴

The two accounts reveal some essential differences. The Islamic perspective places equal blame on both Adam and Eve for their mistake, while the Christian account places Eve as the temptress, and is punished with painful childbearing. This suffering forces the Sultaness to blame Eve. Again, a Muslim will not hold this opinion, for God, according to the Qur'an, does not punish anyone for another person's faults. Thus, Islam is wrongly placed in the Christian frame, in that the Sultaness considers Eve's inability to resist the temptation as the cause of women's sufferings. This perspective is overlooked in many criticisms on *MLT*, but it is obvious that Chaucer uses the Sultaness's mouth to speak out his Christian mind, which surely expresses a misunderstanding of Islam.

¹²⁴ QS 7:22-23.

Chaucer may have been ignorant about Islam, yet he talks about it by using the Christian analogy. This is what Edward Said calls Orientalism. Said argues that Christians choose to explain Islam on their Christian terms instead of treating it on its own terms. For example, the term “Mohammedanism” once used to refer to Islam was based on the wrong analogy of what “the Prophet Muhammad to Islam as Christ was to Christianity.”¹²⁵ Thus, the word “Mawmettrie” in the tale suggests that Muslims are considered to worship the Prophet Muhammad just as the Christians worship Jesus.

The Sultanness is given a short success to banish Custance and enjoys her power (surely, another wickedness), but the Roman emperor seeks revenge to Syria and gets a quick victory. Here we find an allusion to the Crusades.

For which this Emperour hath sent anon
 His senatour, with roial ordinance,
 And other lordes, God woot, many oon,
 On Surryens to taken heigh vengeange.
 They brennen, sleen, and brynge hem to mischance
 Ful many a day; but shortly – this is th’ ende— (960-65).

The defeat of Syria means the end of idolatry labeled to Islam, and the surviving Custance symbolizes the superiority of Christianity. Syria is

¹²⁵ Said 60.

defeated because the wicked Sultanness is an evil that has to be demolished. As for the Prophet Muhammad, Chaucer does not condemn him as a heretic as Dante and Langland do, and he is also knowledgeable about the Qur'an as the law of God followed by Muslims. This provides clear evidence that he holds a more favorable view of Islam than his two colleagues.

Both Langland and Chaucer offer conversion to achieve salvation, but it is clear that Langland's theological point is more obvious. Unlike Langland who sees the close proximity of Islam and Christianity as an easy way to convert Muslims, Chaucer recognizes the differences between both religions, and argues that conversion is the best way to unite them. Chaucer is subtler, in that the evangelization of the Sultan (as well as King Aella in the later part of *MLT*) highlights the superior morality of Christianity as exemplified by Custance. This is understandable since *MLT* does not sound like a preaching tale.

The Christianization offered in *MLT* reveals that, instead of giving respect to Islam as another monotheistic religion, Chaucer defends his Christian faith and upholds the view that his European Christian tradition surpasses any other religious traditions. In *MLT*, Chaucer exhibits a narrow view of humanity in which Christianity represents purity and all other religions are evil. Chaucer sees the need to use Islam as a tool to intensify this claim. The marginalization of Islam thereby is needed to assure the superiority of Chaucer's faith.

CHAPTER V

THE MUSLIM VIEW OF MEDIEVAL SENTIMENT TOWARDS ISLAM

In the previous three chapters we have seen the varying, yet similar, views of Islam. Whether it is a hostile attitude, a mixture of hatred and sympathy, or simply a misunderstanding, the view suggests that Dante, Langland and Chaucer defend their faith with the notion of Islam and/or the Prophet Muhammad as a threat. It is important, however, to find out whether we can call it “misinterpretation” of Islam. Therefore, we need to know how Islam itself perceives the image. Only by doing so can we see Islam treated on its own terms, far from the relative judgment of Christian tradition.

To respond to the issues posed by the three authors from an Islamic point of view, it is best to refer to the Qur'an. Let us begin with the idea of conversion and how it was practiced in the medieval context. We are familiar with the Islamic Conquest of Spain that marked the spread of Islam in Europe and the Crusades as responses to this expansion. The motives of these wars are different. Norman Daniel mentions that in the Crusades, the

ultimate aim was to convert people to Christianity,¹²⁶ which could be founded on the basis of the belief that salvation can only be attained through Christianity. By contrast, when the Arabs began the conquest of non-Muslim regions, they did demand that the citizens follow the *Shari'ah* law if they were Muslims, while the *dhimmah*, Jews and Christians, were allowed to keep their faith. The preceding chapter already provides the information of the basis for the *dhimmi* classification. This status was prescribed in the Qur'an.

They say, "Be Jews or Christians, [so] you will be guided. Say, "Rather, [we follow] the religion of Abraham, inclining toward truth, and he was not of the polytheists." Say [O believers], "We have believed in Allah and what has been revealed to us and what has been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob, and the descendants [al-Asbāt] and what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we are Muslims [in submission] to Him."¹²⁷

This verse suggests why conversion did not necessarily follow the conquest, for Muslims believed in the previously revealed Scriptures. This is not to deny that force and violence were absent during the expansion of the Muslim empire. In practice, there are surely many historical notes that

¹²⁶ Daniel, *Islam and the West* 116.

¹²⁷ QS 2:135-136.

mentioned forced conversion to Islam. However, forced conversion certainly does not have a place in the Islamic law. Based on the Muslim belief of the previously revealed Scriptures, nobody should be forced in matters of religion:

There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in *taghut* (false objects of worships) and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing.¹²⁸

The Qur'an also tells that human beings are given free will to choose and decide the right path. "For you is your religion, and for me is my religion."¹²⁹

Historically speaking, the above Qur'anic references became the foundation of the Muslims' treatment of the *dhimmah*. During the Prophet Muhammad's time, for instance, the Jews in Madina were tied to the Constitution of Madina, which stated that the Jews were given freedom to retain their religion and the tradition. This practice continued up to the time of the rightly guided caliphates and the later Muslim dynasties.

Dante and Langland consider the Prophet Muhammad as an anti-Christ. This term is defined as "the title of a great personal opponent of Christ and His kingdom, expected by the early church to appear before the

¹²⁸ QS 2:256.

¹²⁹ QS 109:6.

end of the world, and much referred to in the Middle Ages.”¹³⁰ In the medieval Christian mind, the Prophet Muhammad appeared to fit the prophecy perfectly.¹³¹ This notion runs contrary to Islamic teaching, because nowhere in the Qur’an does it state that the Prophet Muhammad rejects Jesus’s teachings. In fact, Islam places Jesus and the Virgin Mary on a high pedestal. The name ‘Isa (Jesus) is mentioned in fifteen chapters and ninety three verses in the Qur’an, while Mary (Maryam) is an exemplary female figure highly respected in the Qur’an. There is a chapter dedicated to Mary, and is called “the *Surah* Maryam.”¹³² The Qur’an also mentions that the Prophet Muhammad is only God’s messenger,¹³³ and he confirms the teachings of earlier prophets, including Jesus’s:

Indeed, We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], as We revealed to Noah and the prophets after him. And We revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the Descendants, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to David We gave the book [of Psalm].¹³⁴

¹³⁰ *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹³¹ Daniel, *Islam and the West* 281.

¹³² QS 19:1-98.

¹³³ QS 17: 93.

¹³⁴ QS 4:163.

In addition, Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (peace be upon them) are known as *Ulul Azmi*, the messengers with strong determination and patience with their people's rejection of their teachings.¹³⁵

We have seen that Chaucer's treatment of Islam is more favorable than Dante's and Langland's. However enlightened Chaucer was towards Islam, Chaucer is a product of his time, and he also illustrates the misunderstanding of Islam. Chaucer does not follow Langland in saying that the Qur'an are false, yet he refers to the Qur'an as "the law of Makomet," and assumes that Muslims follow the law of the Prophet Muhammad.

This is not to say that there were no writings that depict Islam in a more favorable manner. In the eighteenth century, more enlightened and objective viewpoints of Islam began to appear. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu writes about her first-hand experience while in Turkey, and describes the sophisticated culture she encounters, the liberty that Turkish women enjoy behind their veils, in contrast with the confinement of her own culture. She also attempts to correct the European notion of the Qur'an as a false Scripture. In one of her letters, she states that the Qur'an is "the purest morality deliver'd in the very best language."¹³⁶ This informs her about the

¹³⁵ QS 46:35. See *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* for more detailed commentaries on this verse.

¹³⁶ Montagu 318.

false notion of the Qur'an prevailing in her contemporary European view. She explains:

The Greek priests [. . .] have invented [. . .] a thousand ridiculous stories, in order to decry the Law of Mahomet; to run it down, I say, without any examination or as much as letting the people to read it, being afraid that if once they begun to sift the defects of the Alcoran they might not stop there but to proceed to make use of their judgment about their own legends and fictions. In effect, there's nothing so like as the fables of the Greeks and of the Mahometans.¹³⁷

Thomas Carlyle also displays an illuminated perspective. Contrary to his contemporaries, Carlyle depicts the Prophet Muhammad as an exemplary hero in the world. He addresses the Prophet Muhammad as a genius, a charismatic figure that the Christians of the Middle Ages failed to appreciate. While Carlyle praises the Qur'an as a work of originality and sincerity,¹³⁸ he, nonetheless, makes it clear that the reading of the Qur'an, from his perspective, seems to be an exhausting stupid job. He describes the Qur'an as:

a wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, longwindedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite;—insupportable

¹³⁷ Montagu 455.

¹³⁸ Carlyle 87-9.

stupidity, in short! Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Qur'an.¹³⁹

Of course, viewed objectively, the West is not solely responsible for the present sentiment towards Islam. Many medieval Islamic literary texts note the disinterested feeling towards the West. For example, in the eleventh century, an Arab judge from Toledo made a racist remark about the lack of civilization of the Europeans. He describes the Europeans as follows: "their bellies are big, their colour pale, their hair long and lank. They lack keenness of understanding and clarity of intelligence, and are overcome by ignorance and foolishness, blindness and stupidity."¹⁴⁰

As late as the fourteenth century, even such a prominent Muslim scholar as Ibn Khaldun had a negative image of the Europeans in his remark:

We have heard of late that in the lands of the Franks, that is, the country of Rome and its dependencies of the northern shore of the Mediterranean, the philosophic science flourish [. . .] and their students are plentiful. But God knows best what goes on in those parts.¹⁴¹

Muslims need to trace their history and understand that the superior civilization their predecessors enjoyed for centuries resulted in their

¹³⁹ Carlyle 86.

¹⁴⁰ Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 181.

¹⁴¹ Lewis 181.

unwillingness to look at and appreciate Western culture after 1500 AD. There were no political revolutions as had occurred in Europe. In Turkey's Ottoman Empire, no intellectually challenging or stimulating conflicts over ideas had arisen as between Catholics and Protestants in Europe. Muslim scholars remained intellectually conservative. They were convinced of the superiority of their Islamic civilization, of the way of doing things, as they believed was prescribed in the Qur'an. And few of them were aware of the significance of changes that had been taking place among the Europeans. Moreover, the Ottoman religious establishment was being infiltrated by the Sufi orders, which added to conservatism and increased an other-worldliness rather than a view toward modernization. Scientific learnings were considered blasphemous, often on the basis on such Hadith as "every innovation is heresy, every heresy is error, and every error leads to hell."¹⁴²

Muslims did not realize the decline of their own civilization from its peak until it was too late. Following the fall of Egypt to Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798, a number of Muslim states fell under the occupation of European countries. Practically speaking, not a single Muslim state in the world had been left unoccupied. Colonial take-over by a variety of Western states, notably Great Britain and France, largely resulted from the discouragement of scientific learning and the limitation of knowledge on religious matters

¹⁴² Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002) 117.

only, which generally characterizes a Muslim intellectuality from the sixteenth century forward.

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad addressed this issue in his thought-provoking speech in the Islamic Summit Conference in October 2003. Here is one punchline he makes in his long lists of Muslim problems:

But halfway through the building of the great Islamic civilization came new interpreters of Islam who taught that acquisition of knowledge by Muslims meant only the study of Islamic theology. [. . .] With intellectual regression the great Muslim civilization began to falter and wither. But for the emergence of the Ottoman warriors, Muslim civilization would have disappeared with the fall of Granada in 1492. The early successes of the Ottomans were not accompanied by an intellectual renaissance. Instead, they became more and more preoccupied with minor issues such as whether tight trousers and peak caps were Islamic, whether printing machines should be allowed or electricity used to light mosques. The Industrial Revolution was totally missed by the Muslims. And the regression continued until the British and French instigated rebellion against Turkish rule brought about the downfall of the Ottomans, the last Muslim world power and replaced it

with European colonies and not independent states as promised. It was only after World War II that these colonies became independent.¹⁴³

Mahathir Mohammad warns Muslims to wake up from their current inferiority complex as well as to remember their pride of the glory of the past to catch up technologically with the more advanced West. Only by doing so can Muslim nations defend themselves from the humiliation many of us are facing now.

Much has been done to bridge the gap between Islam and the West, and yet we still face a long journey ahead. The unstable relationship between Islam and the West is partly due to the fact that both followers of Islam and Christianity have misinterpreted the teachings of their Holy Books. In consequence, suspicion and hatred towards each other still exist. After all that has happened in recent years, a wide and deeply felt toleration of differences is urgent.

Apparently, it takes tremendous and never-ending efforts to open people's eyes about the imaginary borderlines and dichotomy of East/West, Superiority/Subordination and Modern/Traditional. The only way to build an understanding between Christianity and Islam, the West and the East, is to be more open to each other and learn to respect each other's beliefs and

¹⁴³ Mahathir Mohammad, Speech at the Opening of the Tenth Session of the Islamic Summit, 16 Oct. 2003, 2 Feb. 2004
<http://www.oicsummit2003.org.my/speech_03.php>.

tradition. Allah has created this world full of differences so that people will know each other. Allah said:

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another.

Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ QS 49:13.

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