

A disunited society:  
the disturbing  
depiction of  
muhammad in the  
divine comedy



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In 1312, Dante Alighieri wrote a treatise called *De Monarchia*, in which he expressed his belief that society would operate best under a single authority – that is, a secular monarch. Dante, in his characteristic rabble-rousing way, argued that peace should be mankind’s primary goal, and the only way to attain such a lofty goal is through unity. Two cantos of the poet’s *Divine Comedy* illustrate well his feelings regarding the need for unity and the danger of those who pose a threat to it. The first, canto 28 of *Inferno*, depicts historical characters like Prophet Muhammad who caused disunity, either religiously, politically or at a more personal level, such as among family members. Through both this canto and another in *Paradiso* – one that describes the way disunity wrecked Florence – Dante expresses his disdain for those who sow discord among populations.

Both cantos raise several important questions about Dante and the *Divine Comedy*. Is Dante’s real issue the discord itself, or the people who sow it? Is the way he depicts those who threaten unity indicative of his own racist, xenophobic and prejudiced values, or do they represent larger beliefs of medieval European society? Is Dante’s understanding of Muhammad really as harsh as it first appears? Drawing from the works of Dante historians and my own interpretation of the text, I will argue that Dante’s criticism of Muhammad is not tied to the prophet’s race or religion, but rather to the consequences of his actions. By doing so, I hope to also share insight into Dante’s perspective on a diverse and rapidly changing medieval Europe.

Canto 28 of *Inferno* describes the ninth bolgia of the eighth circle of hell, where the sowers of discord receive their eternal punishment. As

punishment for creating divisions among people, the souls are struck and

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dismembered by the sword of a devil. They must then march in a circle, and once they reach the devil again their wounds are healed, ready to be reopened once more. Muhammad, one of the bolgia's residents, explains to Dante and Virgil that the souls in the circle " were sowers of scandal and schism: / as they tore others apart, so are they torn" (Ciardi Inferno 28. 35-36). As retribution for lives spent disuniting peoples, their contrapasso (or specifically designed and ironic punishment) is to spend eternity sliced in half and chopped to bits.

The most prominent character in the ninth bolgia is Muhammad, who has one of the most gruesome injuries of all the sinners. He has been split from mouth to ass, revealing a mess of organs inside: " Between his legs all of his red guts hung / with the heart, the lungs, the liver, the gall bladder, / and the shriveled sac that passes shit to the bung" (Ciardi Inferno 28. 25-27). The description certainly is hard to read, but perhaps not particularly surprising if we consider the largely anti-Islamist climate in which Dante lived. The poet's depiction of Muhammad is aligned with most medieval European understandings of who the religious figure was and what misfortune he brought to the world.

Throughout the Middle Ages, European Christians considered Muslims a natural enemy and a threat to Christian land, culture and population size. Centuries of Crusades only solidified this mentality, and by the time of Dante's life, anti-Islamic sentiments had become inescapable. One popular medieval European legend portrays Muhammad as an apostate who, after being denied cardinalship by the Catholic Church, created his own competing religion in revenge. In fact, the first writers to add commentaries to the <https://assignbuster.com/a-disunited-society-the-disturbing-depiction-of-muhammad-in-the-divine-comedy/>

Divine Comedy, including Dante's son Jacopo Alighieri, suggested themselves that this popular legend inspired Dante's depiction of Muhammad (Frank 193).

In reality, Muhammad ibn ' Abdullāh had not intended to create his own religion, instead considering himself a prophet of al-Lāh, the same God Christians and Jews worship. Instead of being a competitor to other prophets from religious traditions – i. e. Jesus of Nazareth, Abraham, Moses – Muhammad and his followers saw him as a brother among the other men who had received word from God (Jones 6221). The Quran even states, in regard to Christians and Jews, “ say to them: We believe what you believe; your God and our God is one” (Ganeri 29: 46). Especially in its earliest stages of Islam, Muslims considered themselves to be united, at least to some extent, with the world's other People of the Book. The medieval European narratives that contradicted this reality, instead depicting Muslims as savage threats to Christianity, were simply ignorant of history.

Yet ' ignorant' is not a word commonly used to describe Dante Alighieri. Researchers have found evidence to suggest Dante did in fact have a full understanding of Muhammad and Islam's roots. By the end of the thirteenth century, Arabic works were being translating into Latin (Corti and Hall 57), and fourteenth-century Muslim and Christian societies were closely intertwined, particularly in Sicily and the Iberian Peninsula (Frank 200). For these reasons, it is likely Dante was well versed in Islamic scripture and literature. Because of this, he was less susceptible to the false narratives surrounding Islam. Historian Karla Mallette offers compelling evidence that Dante was familiar with the Quran, suggesting aspects of the Divine Comedy <https://assignbuster.com/a-disunited-society-the-disturbing-depiction-of-muhammad-in-the-divine-comedy/>

mirror traditional Islamic stories. She compares Dante's journey to Muhammad's mi'rāj, or his journey to heaven and hell. During this journey, Muhammad encounters God, who rips open Muhammad's chest so as to cleanse the prophet from the inside (Mallette 211). This is a striking parallel. As he marches in hell, Dante's Muhammad tears at the slice through his chest, ripping himself in two: "see how I rip myself!" he yells to Dante and Virgil (Ciardi Inferno 28. 30). By having Muhammad tear at himself, Dante flips the Islamic story on its head, dehumanizing Muhammad in a gruesome manner. Both parallels prove Dante had knowledge of Islam and Muhammad, although this knowledge does little to spare Muhammad of punishment.

Another interesting note: in Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders' modern translation of Inferno, Muhammad's warning about Fra Dolcino's future is called a "prophecy" (Birk and Sanders 28. 62). This purposeful use of words acknowledges Muhammad as a legitimate prophet (although, Birk and Sanders often take it upon themselves to add their own critique of the Divine Comedy. This word choice may just be a criticism of Dante's intentional negligence to call Muhammad a prophet). Regardless, both this wording and the allusion to the Quran can be interpreted as evidence that Dante was aware of the depth of Islamic tradition, and therefore had not fallen victim to the widespread fallacies about Muhammad's life.

If Dante were aware of the intricacies of Muhammad's life and legacy, this raises the question: why did he still choose to give the prophet's character such an appalling punishment? Why, if Muhammad worshipped the same God as the Christians, would Dante not award him some amount of leeway?

Why did he see it fit to put the prophet's soul in such a low level of hell?  
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The answer may be found in a different canto of the Divine Comedy, this one in Paradiso. Canto 16, set in the fifth sphere of Mars, describes a conversation between Dante and his Florentine great-grandfather, Cacciaguida. Cacciaguida laments about the turn Florence has taken; much like Dante, the soul grieves over the discord and corruption that have come to dominate the city. First, Cacciaguida explains how once, Florence was divided into large, powerful and noble families. Over time, however, as more interfamilial marriages took place, these families faded: “ It has always been a fact that confusion of blood / has been a source of evil to city-states” (Ciardi Paradiso 16. 67-8). This type of disunity connects canto 16 of Paradiso to canto 28 of Inferno: in hell, Bertran de Born appears alongside Muhammad, carrying his head in his hand like a lantern. De Born is said to have sown discord between the young Prince Henry and his father by “ instigating a quarrel” between the two (Ciardi Inferno 234). He was also a troubadour known for his writings celebrating violence like that he encouraged young Prince Henry to pursue (“ Dante’s Inferno - Circle 8”). Dante opposes all sorts of disunity, whether political or familial.

More importantly than the splitting and combining of Florentine families, Dante also alludes to the political discord that tore apart Florence.

Cacciaguida says during his life he “ saw Florence live and prosper in such peace / that she had, then, no reason to shed tears” (Ciardi Paradiso 16. 149-50). But now, he says, “ the red dye of division” has crippled the city (Ciardi Paradiso 16. 155). This line can be interpreted in different ways - perhaps the “ red dye” to which Cacciaguida refers is family bloodlines, or blood spilled through violence, both of which indeed can cause disunity.

While both theories are fitting, these lines refer more specifically to the political conflict between the Guelph and Ghibelline parties of Florence. “The ancient standard of Florence bore a white lily on a red field,” writes Ciardi (Ciardi *Inferno* 155). In 1251, the Guelphs inverted the colors on their own standard, or flag, to a red lily on a white field, and this red lily came to symbolize the division between the two parties.

Dante experienced firsthand the destruction that comes with a disunited community. As a member of the white faction of the Guelph party, a group that wished to limit the power of the papacy, Dante, among 600 other members of opposition factions, was sentenced to exile when the Black Guelphs took control of Florence (Browning). Dante never returned home. He also witnessed the economic and political corruption that infected Florence during his lifetime, after the families Cacciaguida describes petered out and conflict among Florentine political parties intensified. The treachery Dante condemns in both *Inferno* canto 28 and *Paradiso* canto 16 is the same: the destruction of community. Dante views community at the center of peace and unity. Consider, again, his 1312 treatise *De Monarchia*, in which he writes, “Every kingdom divided against itself shall be laid waste” (Alighieri). He watched his own homeland, through all manners of division, be laid to waste. Clearly this is the main impact on his belief that unity is the ultimate goal mankind must reach.

How might we connect these ideas to Dante’s depiction of Muhammad in hell? Perhaps Dante’s experience with divided community made the disunity Muhammad sowed a more personal issue to the poet. Any person or body who sows discord must be punished, since the consequences of doing so can <https://assignbuster.com/a-disunited-society-the-disturbing-depiction-of-muhammad-in-the-divine-comedy/>

be disastrous. Despite this, I believe Dante's understanding of Muhammad's legacy is less harsh than the *Inferno* might indicate. For one, upon first seeing the ninth bolgia, Dante begins an extended metaphor, comparing the carnage before him to the combined bloodshed of the Trojan and Punic wars. The sympathy he displays for these sinners is reminiscent of that he felt for the lustful in the second circle of hell, in which he swoons from the intensity of his sympathy (Ciardi *Inferno* 5. 139). As he enters the realm of the sowers of discord, Dante writes, " At grief so deep the tongue must wag in vain; / the language of our sense and memory / lacks the vocabulary of such pain" (Ciardi *Inferno* 28. 4-6). Muhammad and his fellow sinners' punishments are appalling enough to warrant Dante's sympathy.

Another intentional choice of Dante's is Muhammad's mention of Fra Dolcino. While speaking to the character Dante, Muhammad requests that he warn Docino – a Catholic reformist – of his imminent future should he continue to sow discord among his fellow Christians (Ciardi *Inferno* 28. 56-60). If Muhammad were the enemy of Christianity that medieval society portrayed him to be, why would his character show this care for a member of his enemy religion? What's more, Muhammad raises one foot while speaking to Dante and Virgil about Fra Dolcino: " Mohamet, one foot raised, had paused to say / these words to me. When he had finished speaking / he stretched it out and down, and moved away" (Ciardi *Inferno* 28. 61-3). Lifting his foot like this alludes to an aspect of Catholic Ignatian spirituality. "[L]iving with ' one foot raised,' this approach embodies a freedom from attachment to... programs and even people in order to... adapt, improve, shift and/or modify as needed" (Zelenka). This moment shows Muhammad attempting to atone



for the sins he committed, thereby humanizing him, even eliciting sympathy from readers.

Simplistic religious and racial prejudice is rooted in ignorance and blind hatred – if these were the motives of Dante’s interpretation of Muhammad, he would afford the prophet no sympathy, humanization or ties to Christianity. Dante’s wealth of knowledge about Islamic values and history allows him to see beyond the racial and religious barriers that divide Muhammad and him. As a result, it is reasonable to assume Dante criticizes Muhammad not for his religious beliefs or race, but rather for his actions.

In *De Monarchia*, Dante writes, “ Hence it is clear that universal peace is the most excellent means of securing our happiness” (Alighieri). Peace, however, is impossible to attain without unity. If peace is the ultimate goal of mankind, discord must be abolished – hence, Dante’s perfectly crafted hell places sowers of discord at nearly the lowest level of the realm. Dante’s disdain for those who disunite groups of people shows no discrimination. Just as the sword of the devil mangles the Muslims Muhammad and ‘ Ali, so too does it slice at Christian figures. Just as Dante critiques Muhammad, so too does he lament about the Florentine citizens who brought factions, corruption and disunity to the poet’s beloved home. If universal peace and happiness are to be attained, first must come unity, and no person, regardless of race or religion, is exempt from working toward this goal.

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