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Beheading the Son: Muhammad and Bertran de Born in *Inferno* 28[1]*

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Introduction

After the encounter in *Inferno* 27 with Guido da Montefeltro among the counselors of fraud, Dante and Virgil move on to the ninth *bolgia*, where they come upon the sowers of discord, sinners whose words and deeds caused divisions within their political or religious institutions. As a consequence, the sowers of discord are punished by a sword-wielding devil who attacks them, slashing their "bodies;" as the sinners roam through the *bolgia*, however, their injuries heal, thus perpetuating an eternal cycle of carnage.[2] The gruesome sight is such that, at the outset of *Inferno* 28, the poet professes his inability to adequately narrate the horror he witnesses in this *bolgia*, which more than any other *bolgia,* resembles a chaotic battlefield. Not even the litany of wars evoked in the opening tercets of the canto, Dante claims, would fully represent the number of wounds and mutilated limbs seen among these sinners:

> Chi poria mai pur con parole sciolte
> dicer del sangue e de le piaghe a pieno
> ch'i' ora vidi, per narrar più volte?
> Ogne lingua per certo verria meno
> per lo nostro sermone e per la mente
> c'hanno a tanto comprender poco seno.
> S'el s'aunasse ancor tutta la gente
> che già, in su la fortunata terra
> di Puglia, fu del suo sangue dolente
> per li Troiani e per la lunga guerra
> che de l'anella fé sì alte spoglie,
> come Livïo scrive che non erra,

[1]* I wish to thank Jon R. Snyder, Christiana Purdy Moudarres, and the two anonymous readers for their helpful comments. This research was assisted by a New Faculty Fellows award from the American Council of Learned Societies, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

[2] Dante, *Inferno*, 28.37-42:

> Un diavolo è qua dietro che n'accisma
> sì crudelmente, al taglio de la spada
> rimettendo ciascun di questa risma,
> quand'avem volta la dolente strada;
> però che le ferite son richiuse
> prima ch'altri dinanzi li rivada
>
> There is a devil back there who carves us so cruelly, putting the edge of his sword to each of this ream once we have circled through the suffering road, for the wounds have closed before any confronts him again.

All quotations from the *Comedy* are taken from Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols. (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994). The translations are from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, ed. and trans. Robert Durling, 3 vols. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996-2011). All further parenthetical in-text citations indicate book, canto and verse.

con quella che sentio di colpi doglie
per contrastare a Ruberto Guiscardo;
e l'altra il cui ossame ancor s'accoglie
a Ceperan, là dove fu bugiardo
ciascun Pugliese, e là da Tagliacozzo,
dove sanz'arme vinse il vecchio Alardo;
e qual forato suo membro e qual mozzo
mostrasse, d'aequar sarebbe nulla
il modo de la nona bolgia sozzo. (*Inferno* 28.1-21)

Who could ever, even with unbound words, tell in full of the blood and wounds that I now saw, though he should narrate them many times? Every tongue would surely fail, because our language and our memory have little capacity to comprehend so much. If one gathered together all the people who ever, on the travailed earth of Apulia, groaning poured forth their blood on account of the Trojans, and in the long war that took such heaped spoils of rings, as Livy writes, who does not err, and the people who suffered wounds when resisting Robert Guiscard, and the others whose bones are still being collected at Ceperano, where every Apulian was a liar, and at Tagliacozzo where old Elard won without arms; and this one showed his perforated, this one his truncated member, it would be nothing to equal the wretched mode of the ninth pocket.

In order to reinforce the assertion that no writer could succeed in describing with words the violence of the ninth ditch, Dante's initial disclaimer is filled with literary allusions. The accumulation of battles and body parts that characterizes the whole canto is reflected in the buildup of textual fragments from classical and medieval sources that include Ovid's *Tristia*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Livy's *Ab urbe condita*, Dante's own *Convivio*, and, most significantly, in light of the canto's conclusion, Bertran de Born's poem "Si tuit li dol."[3] Dante's dialogue with Bertran de Born draws to a close the series of encounters with the sowers of discord. The fact that *Inferno* 28 is not centered around one single protagonist but rather depicts a sequence of figures of varied fame with whom Virgil and the pilgrim interact has led most scholars to neglect the overall structure of this canto and to focus instead on its individual characters.

In recent years—because of the current political resonance of the relationship between Islam and the West, and as evidenced by the 2007 issue of *Dante Studies*, entirely dedicated to the question of Dante and Islam—greater attention has been paid to the disturbing portrait of the prophet Muhammad in *Inferno* 28. Two articles in that issue of *Dante Studies*, those by Maria

[3] On Dante's sources for the first section of the canto, see Mario Fubini, "Canto XXVIII," in *Lectura Dantis Scaligera: Inferno*, ed. Centro scaligero di studi danteschi (Florence: Le Monnier, 1967), 997-1021; Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 75-95, especially 89-90; Paola Allegretti, "Canto XXVIII," in *Inferno: lectura Dantis Turicensis*, ed. Georges Güntert and Michelangelo Picone (Florence: Franco Cesati Editore, 2000), 393-406; and Piero Beltrami, "L'epica di Malebolge," *Studi danteschi* 65 (2000): 119-52. Although *Inferno* 28 is certainly the canto in which Dante most vividly deploys the jargon of war, it is not a unique case in the *Comedy*. A clear example is the beginning of *Inferno* 22, where Dante describes the devils who escort the pilgrim and Virgil through the ditch dedicated to the barrators. On Dante's use of martial language in *Inferno* 22, see Zygmunt G. Barański, "'E cominciare stormo': Notes on Dante's Sieges," in *"Legato con amore in un volume": Essays in Honour of John A. Scott*, ed. John Kinder and Diana Glenn (Florence: Olschki, 2013), 175-203.

Esposito Frank and Karla Mallette,[4] have highlighted important aspects of Dante's representation of Muhammad and examined some of the sources that Dante might have considered in crafting this episode. More specifically, Esposito Frank has emphasized the significance of the Arian heresy in medieval European polemics against Islam, whereas Mallette has explored Dante's possible use of a passage from the Qur'an itself in his depiction of Muhammad. While I hope to address what I view as the structural coherence of *Inferno* 28 in a future study, in this essay I intend to build on Esposito Frank's and Mallette's contributions in order to discuss Dante's scatological description of Muhammad in relation to its theological background, devoting particular attention to Peter the Venerable and Riccoldo da Montecroce, two of the leading anti-Islamic polemicists of the Middle Ages, both of whom adopted excremental formulas to describe Islam as a collection of ancient heresies. Furthermore, I will show that the Muslims' rejection of the dogma of the Trinity, which traditionally constituted the central source of doctrinal dissent between Islam and Christianity throughout the Middle Ages, allows us to establish a link between Muhammad and Bertran de Born. As the former breached the principle upon which the unity of the Church is founded and the latter violated the norm that undergirds the dynastic legitimacy of a kingdom, both sinners severed the ties between father and son.

Bertran de Born

In the case of Bertran de Born, Dante makes the violation of the bond that joins father to son explicit by retrieving the commonplace that Bertran had encouraged prince Henry, also known as the Young King, to rebel against his father, the King Henry II of England ("Io feci il padre e 'l figlio in sé ribelli" ["I made father and son revolt against each other"], *Inferno* 28.136).[5] The

[4] Maria Esposito Frank, "Dante's Muhammad: Parallels between Islam and Arianism," *Dante Studies* 125 (2007): 185–206; and, in the same issue, Karla Mallette, "Muhammad in Hell," 207–24. On Dante and Islam, and on the portrait of Muhammad in *Inferno* 28, see also Miguel Asìn Palacios, *Islam and the Divine Comedy*, trans. Harold Sutherland (New York: Dutton, 1926); Bruno Nardi, *Saggi di filosofia dantesca* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1967); Enrico Cerulli, *Nuove ricerche sul Libro della Scala e la conoscenza dell'Islam in Occidente* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1972); Rasha Al-Sabah, "*Inferno* XXVIII: The Figure of Muhammad," *Yale Italian Studies* 1 (Winter 1977): 147-61; Maria Corti, "'La *Commedia* di Dante e l'oltretomba islamico," *Belfagor* 50 (1995): 301-14; Brenda Schildgen, *Dante and the Orient* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 45-91; Daniela Boccassini, *Il volo della mente— falconeria e sofia nel mondo mediterraneo: Islam, Federico II, Dante* (Ravenna: Longo, 2003); Gregory Stone, *Dante's Pluralism and the Islamic Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), especially 53-56 on Muhammad's presence in *Inferno* 28; Andrea Celli, "'Cor per medium fidit': il canto XXVIII dell'*Inferno* alla luce di alcune fonti arabo-spagnole," *Lettere italiane* 65, no. 2 (2013): 171-92; and the other articles in the 2007 issue of *Dante Studies*. See also Elizabeth Coggeshall, "Dante, Islam, and Edward Said," *Telos* 139 (Summer 2007): 133-51, and Karla Mallette, "Dante e l'Islam: sul canto III del *Purgatorio*," *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 41 (2005): 39-62, both of whom persuasively reject Edward Said's claim in *Orientalism* about the radical otherness of Islam in Dante's *Comedy*. Cf. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 69-70.

[5] See the *Vida* I in *L'Amour et la guerre: l'œuvre de Bertran de Born*, ed. Gérard Gourain (Aix en Provence: Université de Provence, 1985), 1: "He was master whenever he so desired of King Henry of England and of his son. But he always wanted a state of war to reign between father, son and brothers, turning each of them against the others. And if they were at peace or truce, he at once strived and sought to break the peace by means of his *sirventes*, and to demonstrate how peace strips honor from everyone." On Bertran de Born, see Michelangelo Picone, "I trovatori di Dante: Bertran de Born," *Studi e problemi di critica testuale* 19 (1979): 71-94, especially 80-84, and Claire Honess, "Dante and the Political Poetry in the Vernacular," in *Dante and His Literary Precursors*, ed. John Barnes and Jennifer Petrie (Dublin: Four Court Press, 2007), 116-51, especially 146-149. See also the chapter entitled "The Poetry of Politics: Bertran and Sordello" in Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the* Comedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 153-73. On the relationship between poetry and ethics

appearance of the Provençal poet toward the end of *Inferno* 28 is notoriously grisly. After cursing Mosca dei Lamberti for his role in fomenting Florence's civil conflicts ("E io li aggiunsi: 'E morte di tua schiatta'" ["And I added: 'And the death of your clan'"], *Inferno* 28.109), Dante witnesses a scene that only the "asbergo" ("hauberk," *Inferno* 28.117) of his conscience allows him to retell. With a caustic reversal of Mosca's assertion that a thing done has a head ("Capo ha cosa fatta" ["A thing done is done*"], Inferno* 28.107), the pilgrim sees a trunk without its head walking among the other schismatics. It has persuasively been argued that one of the possible sources for Bertran de Born's punishment in *Inferno* 28 is a passage from Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*.[6] In this allegorical epic, Discord is described as thirsty for war and more eager than any other vice to engage battle against the virtues. After the New Man kills Discord, he beheads her "with the sword, he unhooks her head from the trunk. It is but right that the head should not be united with the trunk in one through whom the first contention, hatred, madness, dissension, strife, the first conflict and rage, the first fears and the first desire for war arose."[7] This iconography complements Bertran de Born's assertion in *Inferno* 28 that his punishment illustrates the breach caused by him in the continuity of kingship from father to son. As Ernst Kantorowicz showed in his classic study *The King's Two Bodies*, the law of inheritance in Justinian's *Institutiones* and the gloss to it by the thirteenth-century jurist Accursius established a figure of indivisibility between the ruler and his successor, which conferred a perpetual value to the crown as symbol of the realm. With legalistic concision, these texts affirm that a king and his son are one "according to the fiction of the Law."[8] Because he sowed discord between Henry II and his son, Bertran de Born is condemned to carry his head like a lantern (*Inferno* 28.124) and he is therefore "due in uno e uno in due" ("two in one and one in two," *Inferno* 28.125).[9] Bertran's punishment therefore literalizes the crime of *lèse-majesté*—literally, "wounded majesty"—that he instigated through his counsel to the young Henry. The last lines of the canto capture the logic of Bertran's peculiar punishment, whose importance for the entire *cantica* is underlined by the appearance of the key term "contrapasso" for the first and only time to describe the treatment of the damned in Hell:

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in *Inferno* 28, see Mazzotta, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge*, 75-95. On the issue of poetry and violence within the larger question of Dante and medieval law, see Justin Steinberg, *Dante and the Limits of the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), especially 40-49 on Muhammad and Bertran de Born.

[6] Danuta Shanzer, "The Punishment of Bertran de Born," *Yearbook of Italian Studies* 8 (1989): 95-97, and Jane Chance, "Monstra-naturalità distorte: Bertram dal Bornio, Ecuba," in *I* monstra *nell'Inferno dantesco: tradizione e simbologie* (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, 1997), 250-54.

[7] Alan of Lille, *Anticlaudianus: Or The Good and Perfect Man*, trans. James Sheridan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1973), 197 (for the depiction of Discord as "thirsty for the arms of war") and 204 (for the description of Discord's decapitation). The Latin text of the *Anticlaudianus* is available at https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost12/Alanus/ala_ac00.html (accessed March 1, 2015).

[8] See the Accursian Gloss to Justinian, *Institutes* , book 3, chapter 1 ("De hereditatibus"), as cited in Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 338: "pater et filius unum fictione iuris sunt." See also Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 336-83 (for the crown as fiction and Accursius's gloss to Justinian's *Institutes*), 386 (on Bernard Botone's gloss to the *Decretales* of Gregory IX), and 391-92 (on Frederick II's interpretation of the sameness between father and son). On the nature of kingship and Dante's knowledge of medieval law, see ibid., 451-54; Alessandro Passerin d'Entrèves, *Dante as a Political Thinker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 27-28; Bruno Nardi, *Dante e la cultura medievale* (Bari: Laterza, 1983), 176-78; and Richard Kay, *Dante's Swift and Strong* (Lawrence: Regent Press of Kansas, 1978), 29-66; Lorenzo Valterza, "Dante's Justinian, Cino's Corpus," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 37 (2011): 89-110; Steinberg, *Limits of the Law*.

[9] *Inferno* 28.125.

> Io feci il padre e 'l figlio in sé ribelli;
> Achitofèl non fé più d'Absalone
> e di Davìd coi malvagi punzelli.
> Perch'io parti' così giunte persone,
> partito porto il mio cerebro, lasso!,
> dal suo principio ch'è in questo troncone.
> Così s'osserva in me lo contrapasso.
> (*Inferno* 28.136-142)
>
> I made father and son revolt against each other. Achitophel did no worse to Absalom and David with his evil proddings. Because I divided persons so joined, I carry my brain divided, alas, from its origin, which is in this trunk. Thus you observe in me the counter-suffering.

By using the phrases "così giunte persone" and "in sé ribelli," Dante reinforces the idea of unity between father and son, suggesting the reflexive quality of the hostility between Henry II and the Young King. It is also worth noting that when Bertran de Born describes his own decapitation, indicating that the "principio" of his "cerebro" is in the trunk, he seems to invert the traditional order of power relations exemplified by the political body and grounded in the notion of the king as head of state. If, as would appear logical, the "principio" coincides with the father, the "cerebro" presumably corresponds to the son. By means of this inversion, Dante might be either following an alternative physiological metaphor of sovereignty, or—as I think more likely—implying that Bertran's reversal of the legitimate political hierarchy between king and prince is in fact part of the reason why he is damned and hurled into the depths of the ninth *bolgia*.

At any rate, while Dante makes Bertran de Born's role as divider of father and son clear, and indeed exemplary of the desecration of the body politic, Muhammad's responsibility for harming the cohesion of the Church is apparently less precise, as it appears to arise from the centuries-long conflicts that resulted in the expansion of Islamic rule in Asia, North Africa, and the Iberian peninsula at the expense of Christendom. However, this assessment of Dante's condemnation of Muhammad as a schismatic is, in my view, incomplete, since it does not adequately take into account the ways in which Dante reworks, in *Inferno* 28, the commonplaces about Islam and its founder that spread in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. A brief clarification of the nature of Muhammad's sin, a close reading of his encounter with Dante and Virgil, and a summary of medieval European critiques of Islam as a heretical sect that rejected the doctrine of the Trinity are therefore in order to highlight how Muhammad, like Bertran de Born, divided father and son.

Muhammad's schism

As I have discussed elsewhere,[10] Church Fathers such as Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine, as well as medieval encyclopedists such as Isidore of Seville, indicated that there is only a subtle difference between heresy and schism. While the former is traditionally described as a sin against faith that perverts dogma, the latter is defined as a sin against love (*charitas*) that indicates a rebellion against the Church. Similarly, the origins of the words "sect" and "heresy"

[10] Cf. Andrea Moudarres, "Crusade and Conversion: Islam as Schism in Pius II and Nicholas of Cusa," *MLN* 128.1 (2013): 40-52.

were related to the Latin and Greek verbs *secare* and *harein*, respectively, which can both be translated as "to cut off."[11]

The affinity between heresy and sect is such that, in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas does not draw a distinction between the two.[12] In a subsequent section of the *Summa*, Aquinas identifies a nucleus of "sins contrary to peace" (*S.T.* II-II, q. 37). Among these, discord is opposed to concord and charity in the broadest terms ("concord results from charity, in as much as charity directs many hearts together to one thing, which is chiefly the Divine good, secondarily, the good of our neighbor. Wherefore discord is a sin, in so far as it is opposed to this concord": *S.T.* II-II, q. 37, a. 1). With respect to deeds, Aquinas indicates four vices against peace: schism, war, strife, and sedition, which correspond to different forms of conflict. More specifically, schism represents a fracture of spiritual and ecclesiastical unity ("the sin of schism is, properly speaking, a special sin, for the reason that the schismatic intends to sever himself from that unity which is the effect of charity: because charity unites not only one person to another with the bond of spiritual love, but also the whole Church in unity of spirit": *S.T.* II-II, q. 39, a. 1). It is worth pointing out that Dante differs from Aquinas in regard to the relative gravity of heresy and schism. Whereas for the Dominican theologian heresy, a sin against faith, is more grievous than schism (*S.T.* II-II, q. 39, aa. 1-2), for Dante the opposite is true. If charity is the "root and foundation" of all virtues, as Aquinas argues in *S.T.* II-II, q. 23, a. 8, Dante draws the conclusion that sins against charity should be considered more severe than those against other virtues.[13] In this regard, Dante might have also considered two well-known chapters of the first letter to the Corinthians in which Saint Paul describes the Church as the body of Christ while stressing the preeminence of charity over the other virtues.[14]

This doctrinal framework, which underscores the institutional quality of the divisions caused by the schismatics within the Church, explains why in the *Comedy* Muhammad is placed among the sowers of discord and not among the heretics, whom Dante describes as "eresïarche" (*Inferno* 9.127) and whose punishment is depicted in Cantos 9-11 of *Inferno*. As I will discuss shortly, Dante's categorization incorporates and, at the same time, diverges from a long tradition according to which the prophet of Islam was regarded as a heretic. Such a label, which

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[11] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, 8.3. All translations of Isidore's work are from *The Etymologies of/by Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[12] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 11, a. 1. All translations of Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* are from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros, 1948). Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text. The Latin text is available at http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/iopera.html. In his discussion of apostasy, Aquinas quotes a passage from the book of Proverbs 6:12-21, which include the following verse: "[the apostate] who plots evil with deceit in his heart—he always stirs up [*seminat*] dissension" (6:14). For an analysis of this biblical passage and its medieval commentaries with reference to *Inferno* 28, see Al-Sabah, "*Inferno* XXVIII: The Figure of Muhammad," 151-57.

[13] Aquinas also employs a maternal metaphor to describe charity's relation to other virtues: "And since a mother is one who conceives within herself and by another, charity is called mother of other virtues, because, by commanding them, it conceives the acts of the other virtues, by the desire of the last end" (*S.T.* II-II, q. 23, a. 8). See also Isidore's definition of charity as "love (*dilectio*), because it binds (*ligare*) two (*duo*) in itself. Indeed, love begins from two things because it is the love of God and the neighbor" (*Etymologies*, 8.2). On the distinction between sins against faith and sins against charity in relation to Dante's decision to place Muhammad among the schismatics, see Jacopo della Lana's introductory note to *Inferno* 28 and Francesco da Buti's commentary to *Inferno* 28.22-27. For della Lana's and da Buti's commentaries, https://dante.dartmouth.edu/biblio.php?comm_id=13247 and https://dante.dartmouth.edu/biblio.php?comm_id=13855 (both accessed March 13, 2015).

[14] 1 Cor. 12:27 and 1 Cor. 13:13 ("And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love"), respectively. 1 Cor. 13:13 is cited in the New International Version from https://www.biblegateway.com/%20passage/?search=1+Corinthians+13 (accessed March 13, 2015).

commonly defined Muhammad through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, originated from several legends that portrayed the founder of Islam as a renegade Christian clergyman who turned against the Church.[15]

Peter the Venerable, the twelfth-century abbot of Cluny and one of the key figures in the dissemination of knowledge of the Qur'an in Europe, significantly contributed to the notion that Islam was a heretical sect. In a letter to Peter of Poitiers, one of the members of the team involved in the translation of the Qur'an, he describes Muslims as "those enemies of the cross of Christ" ("illos vere inimicos crucis Christi"), since they deny that Christ died on the cross.[16] Furthermore, in an epistle to Bernard of Clairvaux, who in the same years was advocating for the rekindling of the Crusades, Peter the Venerable defines Islam as an "impious sect" ("impiam sectam").[17] Another passage from this letter deserves particular attention vis-à-vis Dante's graphic portrayal of Muhammad. In it, Peter the Venerable outlines the reasons that led him to commission the translation of the Qur'an by describing the Muslim faith as a collection of heresies or, more bluntly, as "this sludge of all heresies" ("hac fece universarum heresum").[18] Peter uses a similar coprological image—focused, though, on the chronological range of the heresies assimilated by Islam, rather than on their geographical scope—in his *Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum*, where he writes that the Qur'an "spews almost all the sludge (*feces*) of the ancient heresies that he [Muhammad] had drunk among those which the devil has imparted" ("omnes pene antiquarum heresum feces, quas diabolo imbuente sorbuerat, reuomens").[19]

Such an unflattering definition seemed to still resonate a century and a half later in another work destined to significantly inform European views of Islam through the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. In his *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, the Dominican friar Riccoldo da Montecroce, a contemporary and fellow citizen of Dante, uses an image that is nearly identical to the one used by Peter the Venerable: "You must know that the devil spewed into Muhammad the sludge of all ancient heretics that he [the devil] had previously sown hither and thither" ("Et

[15] In an early fourteenth century Italian translation of Brunetto's *Trésor*, Muhammad is a cardinal; see Alessandro d'Ancona, *Il Tesoro di Brunetto Latini* (Rome: Accademia della Crusca, 1888), especially 211. This version of the legend must have become quite popular if the author of the *Ottimo Commento* to the *Comedy* feels that he needs to dismiss it in favor of the tale according to which Muhammad was simply instructed by a monk named Sergio. Among the many studies on Islam in Western Europe during the Middle Ages, see Alessandro D'Ancona, *Studi di critica e storia letteraria* (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli, 1912); Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1960; Oxford: One World, 1993); R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 229-55; Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); Stefano Mula, "Muhammad and the Saints: The History of the Prophet in the *Golden Legend*," *Modern Philology* 101, no. 2 (2003): 175-88; Thomas Burman, *Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); John Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); idem, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims through European Eyes in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008).

[16] In James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 215. The translations of the passages from Peter the Venerable's works are mine. In addition to Kritzeck's extensive introduction in *Peter the Venerable and Islam* on the crucial role of Peter the Venerable in the development of Western European views of Islam, see Tim Rayborn, *The Violent Pilgrimage: Christians, Muslims and Holy Conflicts, 850-1150* (Jefferson and London: MacFarland & Company, 2012), 97-111; Tolan, *Sons of Ishamel*, 46-63; and Esposito Frank, "Dante's Muhammad," 189-90.

[17] In Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 212.

[18] Ibid., 213.

[19] Ibid., 207.

sciendum quod omnium antiquorum hereticorum feces, quas diabolus in aliis sparsim seminauerat, simul in Machometum reuomuit").[20] Riccoldo's description of Islam appears especially intriguing because, after spending over ten years as a missionary in the Near East—including an extensive stay in Baghdad, where he learned Arabic and studied Islam—he returned to his native city to work at Santa Maria Novella around the year 1300, certainly before Dante left Florence for the diplomatic mission to Rome in September or October 1301 which preceded his exile.[21] Although to my knowledge there is no indisputable evidence to ascertain that Dante ever met Riccoldo in Florence or that, while in exile, he read Riccoldo's or Peter the Venerable's works, neither eventuality seems beyond the realm of possibility, given Dante's remarkably wide intellectual interests and reading. But what matters here, in my view, is whether or not an echo—be it direct or mediated—of their excremental definitions of Islam can conceivably be identified in Dante's poem.

Dante's Muhammad

The possible relevance of the graphic and, by modern standards, utterly offensive caricatures of Islam presented by Peter and Riccoldo becomes particularly suggestive as soon as the reader is faced with the horribly disfigured image of Muhammad in *Inferno* 28. After the long introduction with which Dante opens this canto, the pilgrim sees Muhammad with his trunk slashed and his entrails hanging between his legs:

> Già veggia, per mezzul perdere o lulla,
> com'io vidi un, così non si pertugia,
> rotto dal mento infin dove si trulla.
> Tra le gambe pendevan le minugia;
> la corata pareva e 'l tristo sacco
> che merda fa di quel che si trangugia.
> Mentre che tutto in lui veder m'attacco,
> guardommi e con le man s'aperse il petto,
> dicendo: "Or vedi com'io mi dilacco!
> vedi come storpiato è Mäometto!
> Dinanzi a me sen va piangendo Alì,

[20] The Latin text is taken from Riccoldo da Montecroce, *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, in *Fede e controversia nel '300 e '500*, ed. Jean-Marie Mérigoux, Memorie domenicane 17 (Pistoia: Centro riviste della provincia romana, 1986), 60-144, especially 63; all English translations of the *Contra legem Sarracenorum* are mine. An Italian translation is available in Riccoldo da Montecroce, *I Saraceni: contra legem Sarracenorum*, ed. and trans. Giuseppe Rizzardi (Florence: Nardini Editore, 1992). The Latin texts of Riccoldo da Montecroce's works can also be consulted at http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/riccoldo/index.htm.

[21] Riccoldo narrates his journey to the Near East and his stay in Baghdad in the *Liber peregrinationis*, available in Latin with French translation in *Riccold de Monte Croce: pérégrination en Terre Sainte et au Proche-Orient et lettres sur la chute de Saint-Jean d'Acre*, ed. and trans. René Kappler (Paris: Champion, 1997), 36-205; and in English translation in Rita George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq: Riccoldo da Montecroce's Encounter with Islam* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 175-227. George-Tvrtković's book includes her English translation of Riccoldo's *Epistole ad Ecclesiam triumphantem* as well. On Riccoldo da Montecroce, see Ugo Monneret de Villard, *Il libro della peregrinazione nelle parti d'Oriente di Frate Ricoldo da Montecroce* (Rome: Institutum historicum fratrum predicatorum, 1948); Thomas Burman, "How an Italian Friar Read His Arabic Qur'an," *Dante Studies* 125 (2007): 93-109; Mallette, "Muhammad in Hell," 214-19; and George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*, 1-133.

fesso nel volto dal mento al ciuffetto."
(*Inferno* 28.22-36)

> Surely a barrel, losing centerpiece or half-moon, is not so broken as one I saw torn open from the chin to the farting-place. Between his legs dangled his intestines; the pluck was visible, and the wretched bag that makes shit of what is swallowed. While I was all absorbed in the sight of him, he, gazing back at me, with his hands opened up his breast, saying: "Now see how I spread myself! See how Mohammed is torn open! Ahead of me Ali goes weeping, his face cloven from chin to forelock."

Even in a literary work such as the *Comedy*, whose linguistic arsenal is formidably rich, the terminology used in the arresting portrait of Muhammad is quite peculiar, given that "mezzul," "lulla," "pertugia," "trulla," "minugia," "corata," "trangugia," "dilacco," and "ciuffetto" are all words that never appear elsewhere in the poem. But while the pilgrim is indeed transfixed at the gory sight of Muhammad's organs, Dante's insistence on the prophet's body parts is consistent with the macabre spectacle of war introduced at the beginning of the canto and accentuates the impression of physicality that powerfully characterizes his punishment and that of all the other sowers of discord. Among the terms that convey this impression, "merda" is perhaps the most conspicuous, although Dante employs similar scatological language in other passages of *Inferno*, especially in canto 18 (*Inferno* 18.116 and 18.131).[22] In examining Dante's use of this word in *Inferno* 28, most commentators of the *Comedy* have vaguely referred to the allegedly realistic style of the cantos dedicated to lower Hell, or to a generally derogatory attitude toward Muhammad.[23] It seems to me, however, that this ghastly scene, which reaches its nadir in the excremental details of lines 26-27 and possibly evokes Peter the Venerable's and Riccoldo's descriptions of Islam in digestive terms, alludes to something quite specific. My contention is that Dante is here suggesting that just as all the heresies that disrupted the unity of the Church were expelled in the form of Islamic doctrine, so Muhammad transformed into feces the errors that he had been fed by his dubious masters. Furthermore, by portraying the digestion of these teachings in crudely materialistic terms, Dante might well be dramatizing another common medieval assumption about Islam, namely its emphasis on earthly and corporeal pleasures, as

[22] On Dante's use of scatological language and, more broadly, on the issues of style and genre in his works, see Zygmunt G. Barański, "Scatology and Obscenity in Dante," in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. Teodolinda Barolini and H. Wayne Storey (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 259-73; idem, "'Tres enim sunt manerie dicendi…': Some Observations on Medieval Literature, Dante, and 'Genre'," in *"Libri poetarum in quattuor species dividuntur." Essays on Dante and "Genre"*, ed. Zygmunt G. Barański, supplement, *The Italianist* 15, no. S2 (1995): S9-S60.

[23] Two exceptions to this rather widespread reading of this passage can be found in Benvenuto da Imola's and Cristoforo Landino's commentaries, both of which interpret the phrase "quel che si trangugia" as the doctrines that Muhammad corrupted by founding Islam. For Benvenuto's and Landino's commentaries, see https://dante.dartmouth.edu/biblio.php?comm_id=13755 and https://dante.dartmouth.edu/biblio.php?comm_id=14815 (both accessed March 13, 2015). On Dante's depiction of Muhammad's wound, see also Mallette, who suggests that a passage of the Qur'an itself, which had been translated by the team put together by Peter the Venerable in the twelfth century and Mark of Toledo in the early thirteenth century, might be a possible source that Dante used in his description of Muhammad's punishment ("Muhammad in Hell," 210-13); Al-Sabah, "*Inferno* XXVIII: The Figure of Muhammad," especially 147-51; Elizabeth Mozzillo-Howell, "*Divina Anatomia*: Laying Bare Body and Soul in the *Commedia*," in *Dante and the Human Body*, ed. John C. Barnes and Jennifer Petrie (Dublin: Four Court Press, 2007), 139-57, especially 144-48.

well as the Muslims' rejection of the spiritual nourishment offered by the body of Christ through the sacrament of the Eucharist.[24]

While exhibiting his wounds to the pilgrim, Muhammad explains which category of sinners is punished in the ninth ditch, pointing to his cousin and son-in-law Alì, whose wound from forehead to chin complements the slash in Muhammad's trunk. The reference to Alì could be either interpreted as an indication of Dante's knowledge, however limited it may have been, of the rift between Shia and Sunni versions of Islam or, more simply, as an acknowledgment that Alì was a follower of Muhammad.[25] Although it is unclear what, if anything, Dante knew about the conflict within Islam, it is well known that he places three Muslims—Avicenna, Averroës, and the Saladin—in Limbo (*Inferno* 4.143-144 and 4?.129), sheltered from the intense corporeal suffering of the damned who are beyond the First Circle. This choice is an acknowledgment of the extraordinary scientific and philosophical achievements in the Muslim world during the Middle Ages and of the magnanimity of the Sultan of Egypt and Syria, who conquered Jerusalem in 1187. This homage notwithstanding, from a Christian perspective, Muhammad embodied the perfect enemy of the Catholic Church, so much so that during the Middle Ages he was often branded a satanic individual and a forerunner of the Antichrist—a characterization that also plays on the etymological meaning of Satan, which is "adversary," as Isidore of Seville explains in *Etymologies*, 8.11.[26] In the eyes of medieval Christianity, Muhammad was guilty of tearing apart the *corpus mysticum* of the Church,[27] whose head is Christ, according to several passages in Paul's letters, especially in 1 Cor. 12:27 ("Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it") and in 1 Cor. 12:13-14 ("For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many").

Because of the divisions Muhammad forced upon the Church, no ditch fit him better than that of the schismatics in the moral economy of Dante's *Inferno*. Indeed, the conflation of heresies that Muhammad embodied and his role in hindering religious unity made him the very "prince of the schismatics," according to the definition of the *Ottimo Commento*: "in particulare tratta della qualità della pena d'uno principe di questi scismatici, cioè di Maumetto, il quale con la sua scisma hae più danno dato alla Chiesa di Dio, e alla fede cristiana, che nullo, o tra tutti gli altri incomparabilmente" ("It deals especially with the prince of these schismatics, Muhammad, who

[24] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Reasons for the Faith against Muslim Objections (and One Objection of the Greeks and Armenians) to the Cantor of Antioch*, trans. Joseph Kenny, *Islamochristiana* 22 (1996): 31-52, especially 32: "They also hold against Christians their claim to eat God on the altar." Hereafter cited as *Reasons for the Faith against Muslim Objections*. The Latin text of the *De rationibus fidei* is available at http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ocg.html. See also Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, book 1, chapter 6, available at http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/scg1001.html (accessed March 13, 2015); and Riccoldo da Montecroce, *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ed. Jean-Marie Mérigoux, 96-99.

[25] It is worth noting that Riccoldo mentions the schism caused by Alì within Islam in both the *Liber peregrinationis* (in George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*, 204-05) and the *Contra legem Sarracenorum* (ed. Jean-Marie. Mérigoux, 121).

[26] Besides the passage cited below from John of Damascus' *De Haeresibus*, see chapter VII of Pierre Jean of Olivi's *Lectura super Apocalipsim*, available in Italian translation in *Scritti scelti*, ed. and trans. Paolo Vian (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1989), 122; there the Franciscan theologian defines Islam as a sect of the Antichrist, while advocating for a missionary, peaceful effort to convert the Muslims. See also the third epistle of Riccoldo di Montecroce, where Muhammad is labeled a precursor of the Antichrist: George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*, 156.

[27] On the notion of the *corpus mysticum*, see Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds, Richard Price, and Christopher Stephens (Paris: Aubier, 1944; London: SCM Press, 2006).

has damaged the Church of God with his schism incomparably more than any other sinner of this ditch").[28] As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, however, while all sowers of discord caused religious or political divisions during their lifetime, one characteristic establishes a more direct correlation between Muhammad and Bertran de Born. This correlation emerges from the analysis of the chief source of doctrinal contention between Christianity and Islam through the Middle Ages; that is, the Muslims' refusal to believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father.

Islam and the Trinity

Beginning as early as the eighth century a vast number of Christian theologians addressed the threat, both doctrinal and political, posed by Islam. John of Damascus, who lived in Syria under the Omayyad dynasty (C.E. 661-750), wrote a book titled *De Haeresibus* whose chapters 100 and 101 tackle the so-called "superstition of the Ishmaelites, the fore-runner of the Antichrist."[29] "Ishamelites" was one of the epithets used to identify the Muslims, along with "Saracens" (from Abraham's wife Sarah, mother of Isaac) and "Hagarenes" (from Hagar, Abraham's slave and mother of Ishmael). All these epithets arise from the episodes narrated in Genesis 16 and 21 suggesting the fractured kinship between Islam and the two other monotheistic religions whose authority derives from the Bible, Christianity and Judaism. John's main accusation against the "Ishmaelites" involves the fundamental question of the Trinity in contrast to what might be described as Islam's belief in the absolute unity of God:

> Since you [Ishmaelite] say that Christ is Word and Spirit of God, how do you scold us as Associators? For the Word and the Spirit is inseparable each from the one in whom this has the origin; if, therefore, the Word is in God it is obvious that he is God as well. If, on the other hand, this is outside of God, then God, according to you, is without word and without spirit. Thus, trying to avoid making associates to God you have mutilated Him. For it would be better if you were saying that he has an associate than to mutilate him. […] *Therefore, by accusing us falsely, you call us Associators; we, however, call you Mutilators of God*.[30]

In short, John's use of the word "Mutilators" in reference to Muhammad's followers results from their denial of the unity between God the Father and Christ. A similar line of attack would continue to characterize anti-Islamic polemics for centuries to come. Influential authors such as Peter the Venerable, Thomas Aquinas, and Riccoldo da Montecroce underscored that the main theological bone of contention between Islam and Christianity consisted in the Muslims' refusal to accept the doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Trinity, both of which had been highly controversial in the early phases of Christianity. In the *Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum*, for instance, Peter the Venerable narrates the often-rehashed legend of Muhammad's religious education with the monk Sergius, a follower of Nestorianism and Arianism, heresies that called

[28] https://dante.dartmouth.edu/biblio.php?comm_id=13335 (accessed March 13, 2015) for *L'Ottimo Commento* (my translation).
[29] John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, 100-01, in *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites,"* ed. and trans. Daniel Sahas (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 133. The works of John of Damascus, whom Dante mentions as an example of authors that should be studied in *Epistle* 11 to the Italian cardinals, were translated from Greek into Latin by Robert Grosseteste during the thirteenth century.
[30] Ibid., 137 (emphasis mine).

into question the divine nature of Christ.[31] Aquinas, who does not substantively address the question of Islam in the *Summa contra gentiles*, dedicates the first chapters of his short treatise *De rationibus fidei* to a rather detailed response against the Islamic objections to the doctrines of the Incarnation and of the Trinity, both of which, he points out, constitute the foundation of the Christian faith.[32] Likewise, at the outset of his *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, Riccoldo begins his critique of the Qur'an by outlining Islam's debt to heresies that denied the consubstantiality of Christ with the Father.[33] Furthermore, in the first and second letters of his *Epistole ad Ecclesiam triumphantem*, Riccoldo states that by denying the divine nature of Christ, Muhammad sought to "remove" ("tollere") the Father from the Son.[34] Both in another passage of the *Epistole* (letter 3) and in the *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, Riccoldo expresses the same concept, using the word "scisma" to relate how the Qur'an (Sura 23, verse 91) describes the risk that would exist if God had a son: "in the chapter titled *Elmuminim*, Muhammad says that, if God had a son, the whole world would be in danger, as there would be a schism between them" ("dicit Mahometus de deo in capitulo *Elmuminim* quod si haberet filium, quod totius mundus esset in periculo, esset enim inter eos scisma").[35]

Regardless of whether Dante had direct knowledge of these works, it is clear from the sources to which the Florentine poet might have had access that during the Middle Ages that no tenet was a greater source of division between Islam and Christianity than the doctrine of the Trinity, with its affirmation of the divinity of Christ. Moreover, as noted above, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul describes Christ as the head of the *corpus mysticum* of the Church. Another verse from the same epistle further elucidates the terms in which we can frame Muhammad's role as divider of father and son: "But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God" (1 Cor. 11:3).[36] If, in the footsteps of Saint Paul, we assume that "the head of Christ is God," by denying the Trinity, Muhammad and his followers—much like Bertran de Born with respect to King Henry II and the Young King—figuratively beheaded the Son. It is in this context extremely significant that "scisma" is a *hapax* in the *Comedy* and that the character who pronounces this term is Muhammad ("tutti li altri che tu vedi qui, / seminator di scandalo e di scisma / fuor vivi e però son fessi così" ["All the others you see here were sowers of scandal and schism while they were alive, and therefore are they cloven in this way"] *Inferno* 28.34-36); he thus serves as spokesman for the sowers of discord in a way that singularly mirrors that of Bertran de Born, who utters one of the other *hapax prolegomena* of this canto, "contrapasso," the final word of *Inferno* 28. Further, in a passage of the gospel of John that strikingly foreshadows the above-mentioned

[31] In Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable and Islam*, 206 and 208-09, with a specific analogy between Arius and Muhammad. Cf. Riccoldo da Montecroce, *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ed. Jean-Marie Mérigoux, 65.

[32] Aquinas mentions Muslims ("Mahumetistae") and Muhammad in passing in the *Summa contra gentiles*, book 1, chapters 2 and 6. Cf. Aquinas, *Reasons for the Faith against Muslim Objections*, especially 32, where he writes: "The Christian faith principally consists in acknowledging the Holy Trinity, and it specially glories in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

[33] Riccoldo da Montecroce, *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ed. Jean-Marie Mérigoux, 63-66.

[34] George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*, 141 and 149.

[35] Riccoldo da Montecroce, *Contra legem Sarracenorum*, ed. Jean-Marie Mérigoux, 106. See also George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*, 164.

[36] The importance of this passage, which frames the corporeal unity of the Church in relation to the sacredness of the Trinity, is confirmed by the fact that Boniface VIII cites it in the first paragraph of his famous 1302 bull *Unam Sanctam*, last accessed March 13, 2015 (http://www.americancatholictruthsociety.com/docs/unamsanctum.htm#http://www.americancatholictruthsociety.com/docs/unamsanctum.htm).

principle of kingly unity between father and son that Accursius outlines in his gloss to Justinian's *Institutes*, Christ states: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). The significance of this verse in the context of my discussion of the Muslim objection to the Trinity is emphasized by the fact that Saint Augustine cites it in a section of his *De trinitate* dedicated to the rebuttal of the Arian heresy (*De trinitate* 5.3.4)[37]—the heresy that, as Peter the Venerable and Riccoldo da Montecroce argued, was widely considered to be the forerunner of Islam.

Conclusion

In light of the foregoing examination of the doctrinal division between Islam and Christianity, the analogy between Muhammad and Bertran de Born should now be clearer. Not only did these two sinners break the cohesion of the *corpus mysticum* and of the *corpus politicum*, respectively, but both of them also separated fathers from their sons—the prophet of Islam did so on theological grounds, the Provençal poet from a political standpoint. In the process of probing the correspondence between these two prominent characters, this essay has also examined the possible relevance of Peter the Venerable's *Summa totius haeresis Saracenorum*, Thomas Aquinas' *De rationibus fidei*, and Riccoldo da Montecroce's *Contra legem Sarracenorum* to our understanding of *Inferno* 28. My analysis has focused especially on the scatological image that Dante uses in his portrait of Muhammad and on the Muslims' refusal to accept the doctrine of the Trinity. However, the significance of Peter the Venerable's, Aquinas's, and Riccoldo's writings, as well as that of numerous other anti-Islamic polemics that circulated widely in Western Europe during the Middle Ages which I have not discussed in this article, should be further assessed in order to provide a more comprehensive account of how the views articulated in such polemics contributed to shape Dante's depiction of Muhammad.

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[37] Consulted on http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130105.htm (accessed March 13, 2015).

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