

# DANTE AND MUHAMMAD (P.B.U.H.)

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Dante, the national poet of Italy of the middle ages of Europe is famous for his 'Comedy' to which his admirers later added the epithet 'Divine' so that it came to be known as the Divine Comedy'.<sup>213</sup> It has three sections i.e., Hell,

Purgatory and Paradise. In it he describes his imaginary visit to the three regions of After-Life, guided in the first two by the ancient poet Virgil while in the last by Beatrice with whom as a young boy of about 9 years he had passionately fallen in love which Continued not only after h marriage to another man but also after her death.

I. In Canto No. 28 of 'Hell', Dante described his imaginary meeting with "Mahomet" (Muhammad, peace be upon him). Misled by the utterly false and baseless stories circulated by ill-educated and prejudiced Christian and Jewish historians of those dark ages of Europe, Dante quite wrongly assumed ' Mahomet'<sup>214</sup> and 'Ali'<sup>215</sup> to have been fomenters of Schism in Christianity and in his misguided zeal proceeded to assign to both of them a place in his imaginary hell. He tarnished both in the said verses which offend against all moral and ethical standards and are too sordid and profane to be reproduced here. One who so desires may read them In any standard translation of Dante's Inferno. English rendering by Dorothy Sayers, published as a Mentor publication is a popular book.<sup>216</sup>

In fact, the Mahomet and the Ali of Dante's conception were not the real and historical Muhammad (peace and blessing be upon him) the Prophet of Islam, and Ali (the fourth Caliph and son-in-law of Hazrat Muhammad), but were as we shall prove hereafter phantoms of the brains of the so-called historians of the Middle Ages of Europe.

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<sup>213</sup> *A Short History of Our Religion*, Somervell; G. Bell and Sons, London; 1922, p. 185 and note thereunder.

<sup>214</sup> Dictionary of Proper Names & Notable Matters In The Works of Dante, Paget Toynbee, Oxford, 1968, pp. 422-423 and pp. 28-29. Some commentators of Dante have stated that All was nephew of Muhammad.

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<sup>216</sup> The Divine Comedy of Dante: I. Hell; Penguin, England; 1960, verses 22-45, pp. 246-47. Translation by Dorothy Sayers.

II. Let us first examine the general nature and intrinsic worth of the sources of information of Dante with particular reference to Hazrat Muhammad and Hazrat All (peace be upon them).

It is a hard fact and stern reality that during the middle ages of Europe when Dante lived (1265-1321), the knowledge of history and of other branches of learning which go to make up culture and civilization was deplorably poor. Buckiley has reported that during the period in question ill-educated Christian priests monopolized the writing of history and that their main aim was to increase “general credulity, since it was the basis upon which their own authority was built.” They had no scruples to circulate baseless legends and even to distort facts with which they fired the pseudo-religious zeal and puerile imagination of the illiterate laity. The result was that the history of Europe became corrupted to an extent for which there is no parallel in any other period. Properly speaking, there was no history and unhappily, men, not satisfied with the absence of truth, supplied its place by the invention of falsehood. For the sake of brevity we omit many instances of the ludicrous fictions which have been cited by Buckiley in support of his assertion in this behalf, but would confine ourselves to giving a minimum of such instances as deal with the ‘Origins of Historical Literature of Europe’ during the period in question with side-lights that they throw on Islam and on Muhammad<sup>217</sup> (peace be upon him).

(a) Mathew Paris was the most eminent historian during the Middle ages. This celebrated historian informs us that on one occasion Muhammad appeared to have gorged himself with food and drink until he fell unconscious on a dung-hill and a litter of pigs saw him in that disgraceful condition and attacked and suffocated him to death. This is why the Muhammadans abominate pigs and refuse to partake of their flesh.<sup>218</sup>

(b) Let us now turn to another absurd legend which obviously led Dante to believe that Hazrat Muhammad caused schism in Christianity and then proceeded to found his own sect of Muhammadans. It runs thus: “It was well-known that Muhammad was originally a cardinal, and only became a

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<sup>217</sup> Vol.1 of History of Civilization In England: Buckley; Longmans Green and Co. London; 1901. Chapter VI dealing with ‘Origin of History And State of Historical Literature During The Middle Ages’ is worth reading and in particular its pages 309 & 315-16.

<sup>218</sup> Vol.1 of History of Civilization In England: Buckley; Longmans Green and Co. London; 1901. Chapter VI dealing with ‘Origin of History And State of Historical Literature During The Middle Ages’ is worth reading and in particular its pages 309 & 315-16.

heretic because he failed in his design of being elected pope". This baseless fable was a favourite in the Middle Ages and is said to have been a rabbinical invention.<sup>219</sup> It was later taken up also by many Christian priests regardless of the fact that the Quran eulogised [as per verses 91 and 12 respectively of surah-i-Al-Anbia (xxi) and At-Tahrim(LXVI)]<sup>220</sup> Hazrat Maryam for her chastity and the virgin Birth of Hazrat Isa (Jesus Christ) while the Jews calumniated both as borne out by notes in Col. 2968 of Encyclopedia Biblica (Vol III)<sup>221</sup> They castigated Hazrat Maryam by alleging that (God forbid) she had illicit relations with a soldier named Stada or Pandera and that Hazrat Isa (Jesus Christ) was born of that illegitimate union.

(c) A few more samples of absurd medieval fables about Muhammad (peace be upon him) needs must be given to establish lack of knowledge of the so-called historians of the period of Ignorance of the Middle Ages of Europe for details of which reference is invited to La Leggenda di Maomette in Occidente by A.D.' Ancona.<sup>222</sup> Based on these legends Miguel Asin states: "The Christian historians of Dante's age out-vied one another in weaving the most extravagant and contradictory tales about Mahomet. According to some, he was a pagan; to others a Christian. He was given in turn the names of Ocin, Pelagius, Nicholas, and Mahomet. Some depict him rightly as illiterate; others, as a magician or even a scholar of Bologna. He is represented as having been a Spaniard, a Roman or even a member of the family of Colonna. Some historians, again confuse the prophet with his mentor, the Nestorian monk Bahira,<sup>223</sup> and make him a deacon or cardinal

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<sup>220</sup> Surah Al-Anbiya (XXI,91) and Surah-Tahrim (LXVI,12) which are quoted below: "And she who was chaste, therefore We breathed into her (Something) of Our Spirit and made her and her son a token for (all) peoples." 91/XXI "And Mary, daughter of Imran, whose body was chaste, therefore We breathed therein something of Our Spirit. And she put faith in the words of her Lord and His Scripture and was of the obedient." 12/LXVI

<sup>221</sup> *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, Adam & Charles Black, London, Vol. III 1902.

<sup>222</sup> *Islam And The Divine Comedy*: Miguel Asin; John Murrey, London 1926; pp. 260. In addition *Dictionary of Proper Names* etc., mentioned at 2 and 3 above: Paget Toynbee; Oxford; 1960; pp. 423 the portion within brackets.

<sup>223</sup> The statement that the Nestorian monk named Bahira or Sergius etc. was the mentor of Hazrat Muhammad (peace be upon him) is contradicted by De Bunsen at pp. 131 of 'Islam or True Christianity' published by Trubner & Co., London in 1889 and also by Carlyle at pp. 48 of his Hero-Worship published by Chapman and Hall, London in 1889.

who aspiring to the papacy, set out for Arabia from Constantinople, Antioch or Smyrna.”<sup>224</sup>

IV. It is a pity that as has been brought out above, Dante’s knowledge of Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) was based on the then current fabricated falsehoods set afloat by grossly ignorant and prejudiced priests of his day. Had the papal authorities of those days not proscribed the Quran in Christendom and had Dante been fortunate enough to be acquainted with its teachings, he would have formed a correct opinion of Al-Islam, the universal religion which the Omniscient and Omnipotent Allah, the sole Creator of the whole universe, had revealed to all His prophets, the last and greatest of whom was Muhammad (peace be upon him).

IV (a) Finally, we assert with all the emphasis at our command that Muhammad (peace be upon him) did believe in the prophethood of Jesus Christ (Hazrat Isa, peace be upon him) as also in all other prophets and never preached any schism as misconceived by Dante in common with other Europeans of those Ages. The mention in his ‘Hell’ of his supposed meeting with Hazrat Muhammad (peace be upon him) is, therefore, the result of only his gross ignorance coupled with unjustifiable prejudice generated by the sad memories of the disastrous Crusades in the second of which Dante’s only notable distant ancestor named Cacciaguida had been killed.<sup>225</sup>

(b) According to some of Dante’s critics, “the libel that he was a peevish political exile who indulged in his petty spites and prejudices by putting his enemies in Hell and his friends in Paradise persists with the tenacity of an evil weed”.<sup>226</sup> Be that as it may, we have fully established that his views about Muhammad and All (peace be upon them) were absolutely wrong and therefore, his narration of their state in After-Life was quite perverted and distorted.

(c) It will not be out of place to mention that as proved by the researches of Miguel Asin and Francesco Gabrieli, Dante did not display any originality in conceiving the plot and the general scheme of his epic for which he had drawn inspiration from various accounts of the Mi’raj of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) published in Moorish Spain. These accounts became very popular and were widespread in Europe and

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<sup>224</sup> *Islam And The Divine Comedy*: Miguel Asin; John Murrey, London 1926; pp. 260.

<sup>225</sup> Please refer to the note on Cacciaguida in *Toynbee’s Dictionary* referred to at notes 2 and 3 above, page 122.

<sup>226</sup> Page 10 of Dorothy Sayer’s Introduction to the book mentioned at note 4 above .

particularly Italy before and during Dante's life time as has been established by Miguel Asin in *Islam and the Divine Comedy*<sup>227</sup> and by Francesco Gabrieli in his paper entitled "New Light on Dante and Islam."<sup>228</sup> There is, however, a world of difference between, i) "the account of the terrestrial cum celestial Mi'raj of the Prophet who was guided by the Arch-angel Gabriel meeting en-route various prophets e.g. Adam, Moses, Jesus Christ etc. etc.; ii) the epic of the lay poet (who had been condemned and aberrant) describing his imaginary journey through the three regions of After-life guided partly by the unbaptised Virgil and partly by Beatrice, another man's dead wife.

VI. Before concluding, we quote from "Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue"<sup>229</sup> in order to indicate how deep-rooted and wide-spread is the unjustifiable bias of the Christian world (against Muhammad and Islam) which took roots in the middle ages and persists up to the modern times:

"The average Christian's knowledge of Islam is still woefully weak. In many cases it is grotesquely distorted because of age-old prejudices and misconceptions. Emotions too, have played their divisive role, emotions excited and exacerbated by factors which have been political and 'economic' rather than religious. This is true, not only of average Christians, but also of highly educated Christians, and even of many Christians who hold responsible positions in their Churches."

It is high time that during the present Age of Enlightenment, the Christians and Jews alike shed their ignorance and prejudices and study Muhammad (peace be upon him) and Islam with an open mind. That will be to the general benefit of mankind at large. How truly has Iqbal said:

بمصطفیٰ برساں خویش را کہ دین ہمہ اوست  
اگر بہ او نہ سیدی تمام بولہبی است

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<sup>227</sup> Please see notes 8 and 10 above.

<sup>228</sup> *The Diogenes*: Spring 1954; published by "The International Council for Philosophy And Humanistic Studies; New York pp. 61-73.

<sup>229</sup> *Mary's Place In Christian Dialogue*, edited by Alberic Stacpoole, published by St. Paul Publications, England, 1982.