

Dante's Religious Thought in Inferno

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Abstract—Christianity and The Church formed an important part of Dante's time. This paper discusses poet Dante's view toward religion through focusing on his book *Inferno*. The main cantos that will be talked about are canto seven, canto ten, canto eleven, and canto nineteen. The paper will explore the poet's ideas toward salvation, heresy, and the church. Dante's religious ideas are very distinctive from his contemporary views. His idea on how to reach salvation is closely combined with philosophical ideas. For him, the reason is the prerequisite for getting salvation. He has little interest in criticizing the major heretics of his time. Instead, he highly criticized the corruption of the current Church and expresses his view about what is the right way for the Church. The paper will discuss these main points in more detail with the support of Dante's own words in the text and other materials focusing on his life and ideas.

Index Terms—Dante, *Inferno*, religion, church.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most important elements of the *Divine Comedy* is religious thought. The context of the poem is built on a religious idea, the existence of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. The religious atmosphere results in Dante discussing much about Christianity in his text. It is impossible to investigate the whole pattern of Dante's thought in relation to his Christian views by only reading his *Inferno*, the first of the three sections of his poem. Nevertheless, the characters who are placed in Dante's Hell are those whom he considered to be evil and sinful. Through focusing on the *Inferno*, Dante's view toward the corrupting aspects of religion can be analyzed. Some aspects of what he considers the best qualities of the religion might also be deduced either by reflecting on these negative examples or by the conversations he presents in the cantos.

An investigating of Dante's religious views could be separated into two parts, the abstract theory of Christianity itself, that is, theology, and how to practice it on earth. In the discussion of the former category, we could see that Dante engages in complex philosophical and theological thinking. By combining philosophical theory with sacred religious belief, one can have a peek into Dante's view on how salvation can be obtained. For the latter category, several cantos directly reveal his dissatisfaction about current Church practices, including habits of the clergy. If we go further, it is also possible for us to trace Dante's idea toward Church and state as well as his thoughts on religious and secular power.

II. DANTE'S VIEW ON SALVARION

Dante had an experience of studying theology and philosophy, reading works of great philosophers and theologians such as Cicero and Boethius [1]. It should not be surprising that Dante highly regards philosophy and there is a clear sign of this in *Inferno*. The most straightforward evidence is in canto four. In that noble castle Dante creates for those unbaptized great men, a great number of philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Democritus are included. Moreover, also present is "the master of those who know" [2], in Dante's phrasing, the Greek philosopher Aristotle. The later discussion will reflect Aristotle's influence on Dante's thought.

Canto eleven goes deep into Dante's theory and shows the clear influence of philosophical thought on his mind. The canto takes place after Dante and Virgil pass through the circle of heretics and before they enter the circle of the violent. Basically, this canto serves the function of introducing the layout of the remaining parts of Hell and explaining the principles underlying of this arrangement. In lines 23 and 24, Virgil explains that the sins to follow could be divided into two aspects, violence and fraud. He soon details that since fraud "is man's alone, it more displeases God" [3]. In Dante's mind, violence and fraud are two intolerable sins with similarities and differences. The crime of these sinners is that they all willfully commit acts that violate the rule of God and harm others. Fraud is considered a more serious crime. As a commentator Bernardino Daniello had pointed out, this physical and conceptual layout can be linked to Roman philosopher Cicero's work *De officiis*. Cicero defined the word *iniuria* in his passage. In the meaning of doing harm, *iniuria* has two modes which are force (violence) and fraud. Among these two malices, fraud merits more hatred [4].

At lines 52-54, Dante further divides fraud into two sub-groups. Sinners are designated as frauds or traitors depending on which groups of people they harm. In this case, frauds responsible for more general cheating behavior, while traitors mostly relate with betrayal actions. This dual meaning of fraud emerges here with the dual meaning of love. The fraudulence against "the love that nature makes," while the traitors against the love with "a special kind of trust." The former meaning refers to the love people are naturally born with which is thus equally distributed. Fraudulence consists of tricking people who do not have special trust in the fraudulent actor. The latter meaning refers to the love between people who trust each other. They will have a special relationship built on this kind of love, which is destroyed by treacherous behaviors. Since the special trust can be considered as the love that goes one step beyond natural, generic love for humankind, treachery can also be the sin that goes one step beyond simple fraud in its seriousness. As a result, although treachery is similar to fraud in its basic principles, it is considered more intolerable.

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In Dante's theory of love and fraud, we see an engagement with nature. Nature plays a key role for Dante in explaining his idea in this canto. Dante refers to sodomites and usurers as people who commit violence against God. He concludes that these sinners "scorn nature and her bounty" on line 48. Sodomites have sexual behaviors that violate the theological natural law. The case of usury is more complex, as Virgil explains from line 99 to line 111. Genesis defines the view that men "must earn its bread in the sweat of its brow, precisely by following the rules of nature and whatever craft it practices. [5]. In other words, People must follow the rules of nature. Men need to work in order to gain wealth. Usurers, however, gain their wealth from loaning money. Since using wealth to garner more wealth is not considered as a proper way of working, usurers are also sinners against natural labor. Since nature is the creation and belonging of God, both sodomites and usurers are actually against God in an indirect way.

In addition to theologically rooted thought, Dante also mentions philosophical theory and combines these two together. In line 101, Virgil mentions Dante's *Physics*, as a reference to Aristotle's work *Physics*. At the beginning of Book II of *Physics*, Aristotle points out that human art follows nature just as pupils follow their masters. The point made by Dante from line 103 to line 105 is based on this theory. He builds a relationship between human art (which, in the sense of this canto, means craft) and God. In his mind, since men follow nature as pupils and nature is the creation of God, men's toil is the grandson of God. Thus, by utilizing Aristotle's idea as well as the sacred book of Genesis, Dante well explains the reason he set these sinners in this position in his *Inferno*.

Besides this point, there is another part in this canto that involves Aristotle's theory. When Dante the pilgrim expressed his confusion of how violence and fraud are more intolerable than the sins in the previous circles, Virgil mentions "the three dispositions Heaven opposes" in the *Ethics*. Similar to his *Physics*, this work again refers to Aristotle's *Ethics*. In the seventh book of *Ethics*, Aristotle concludes these three dispositions as incontinence, malice, and mad brutishness. "Incontinence" refers to the sins in the previous circles. Rather than harming others, these sinners basically have too much enthusiasm for something and cannot control themselves well. The things they are enthusiastic about, such as love, food, and wealth, are not sinful in and of themselves. Thus, their crimes are not as serious. The divisions of the remaining two are debatable. In the annotation by Robert Hollander, "malice" refers to the sin of violence and simple fraud, while "mad brutishness" refers to treachery [6]. According to Aristotle, mad brashness is similar to malice but goes a few steps further, thus becoming more serious. It seems to fit in Dante's definition between the crime of treachery and the crime discussed above.

In this canto, there is a clear involvement of philosophy into the development of a theological idea. The basic function of this involvement is to help Dante explain the layout of his *Inferno*. In other words, Dante uses the philosophical ideas to advance his theological theory. The combination of philosophy and theology in the poem was important in understanding the relationship between reason and revelation. Here, the allegorical significances of Virgil and Beatrice are

important. Beatrice is Dante's heavenly guide, while Virgil is a philosophical poet. Many Dante scholars consider Virgil as a symbol of reason, while Beatrice is viewed as a symbol of revelation. Virgil guides Dante through an investigation, one could say, of these sinful people and explains the philosophy underlying their conditions and punishments, while Beatrice is the one who assigns Virgil the task of saving Dante when he becomes lost in the forest. She will also be the one who eventually guides Dante in Paradise. Virgil's human wisdom led Dante to the point where Beatrice's grace can save him [7]. This can lead to a common statement that many scholars have made about Dante's view on how to obtain salvation. The poet might use St. Thomas Aquinas as an authority for this idea. Aquinas has once argued that human reason discovered the nature of truth through its own power and a "supernatural truth...which is known only through divine revelation" [8]. It can be concluded that Dante thinks both reason and revelation are the keys to salvation. Reason or human wisdom, however, basically serve the function of preparing one's soul before it receives divine grace.

III. DANTE'S VIEW ON HERESY

Heresy was a frequent topic for the medieval Church and was treated harshly. Several crusades, such as the Albigensian crusade, were even launched in the name of defeating heretics. Often the true root cause for these sorts of wars was that of geo-political struggles, but eliminating heretics served as a justification. At least in theory, believing in a heresy was considered an extremely serious crime by the Church. Catharism and Waldensianism were major examples of groups that the Church declared to hold a threatening heresy, especially for favoring a humble life which would potentially go against the material lives that many high-class people had at that time, including members of the Church.

Nevertheless, Dante seems to have little interest in these so-called heretical groups and does not even name them in his poetry [9]. Nor does he have straightforward hostility toward Islam which had struggles with Christianity about the Holy Land. It seems that, though treated negatively, adherents of Islamic belief could also be viewed, to some degree, in a positive light. In canto four, he places an Islamic scholar Saladin among the great philosophers of antiquity to demonstrate his respect. Though this is a minor example, it still reflects Dante's relative tolerance for this different religion. Further, he generally places the heretics in the sixth circle and excludes them from those more serious crimes which had been described above. It should be clear that Dante has a different view toward heresy than was typical. What he does include in canto ten as heresy is epicureanism. The main point he wants to critique about epicureanism is denying the immortality of the soul which obviously violates his belief system. Although he writes a whole canto concerning the heretics, he does not have many critiques on their heretical behaviors. Instead, the interactions between him and the sinners from this canto serve the function of leading to the discussion of contemporary political situation. The main characters with whom Dante interacts in canto ten are his political opponent Farinata and his friend Guido Cavalcanti's father Calvalcante. Their conversations are mostly about the earthly matters rather than religious thoughts or repentance.

Farinata, for example, provides a way for Dante the poet to discuss the political struggle in Florence between the Guelf and Ghibelline parties. They are not presented as denying immorality but holding single-minded concerns about earthly matters [10].

Dante has no interest in those heresies as defined by the Church, nor does he identify himself, for example, as a Franciscan or a Dominican, two important theological factions in his time. Nevertheless, he did have a chance to get in touch with both theories and was influenced by each of them. One thing that he clearly has considered was the Franciscan order's vow of poverty. Somehow, he even went further in his view than that of the Franciscan leader Ubertino da Casale by pointing out that Franciscan poverty should be practiced by the entire clergy [11]. These concerns reflect his dissatisfaction about the current Church climate, directly relating to his critiques of the clergy in other cantos. One thing should be kept in mind is that besides the holy messages, criticizing living people in the poet's life is also a noteworthy facet of this work. He does not simply judge historical or mythological people or analyze theological theories. Some of his contemporary figures are also included in the poem. Most of them appear as sinners who suffer due to their crimes. Thus, he will not always discuss abstract religious ideas but also spend much effort in earthly matters such as real-life political conflict.

IV. DANTE'S VIEW ON CURRENT CHURCH

Although Dante lived before the protestant reformation, the idea of the corrupt Church was already becoming widespread during his time. The papal power started to assert itself to a markedly elevated degree around the late eleventh century, competing with secular rulers and developing canon law that was beneficial for its earthly domains. During this period, the Church would intervene in secular issues to fulfill its own interests. Despite that, the Church also linked sacred issues into material lives by making profit in the name of religion. For example, indulgences were highly commercialized by the medieval Church, being widely sold to advance the Church's financial strength. For those who believed that the Church should separate itself from secular and material matters, such developments would be viewed as a spiritual betrayal and advance beliefs that the current Church was corrupt. This climate directly resulted in many anti-Church theories and religious factions such as those "heretics" mentioned above.

Dante was not necessarily considered a follower of any named faction. Nevertheless, he was influenced by some of their ideas and definitely had a strong sense of dissatisfaction about the state of the current Church. In addition, during his political life in Florence, he had a direct conflict with papal power. He had participated in opposing Boniface VIII's exaction on Florence. Because Boniface solicited Charles of Valois to intervene militarily in the Italian peninsula, Dante was sent as an emissary to persuade the pope and eventually went into exile [12]. Ideological and political conflict with the papacy provided Dante with a strong motive to place many popes in Hell. One of the cantos that most clearly reveals Dante's attitudes toward current popes is canto nineteen, in

which he names three popes from his time for the crime of simony.

The canto begins with an allusion of Simon Magus. It refers to the sorcerer of Samaria who attempted to buy divine power. His thought that God's gift can be purchased with money was very offensive and was rebuked by Peter [13]. Simon Magus's behavior echoes the crime of the sinners in this bolgia. The term simony is actually derived from his name. "The brides of goodness" that are mentioned in line four refer to the Church or the clerical power which belonging of God. Buying and selling those clerical positions is prostituting God's grace. Dante despises this behavior of measuring sacred gifts with material things and considers it as an evil that deserves harsh punishment. The people he features in presenting this crime are popes. His placement of evil popes in this lower circle of Hell well reflects Dante's belief of the current Church's corruption.

The whole canto is mainly composed of Dante's direct and indirect critique to the Church. At line seventeen he refers to livid stone which is filled with sinners as the holes in the Florentine baptistry of San Giovanni, where he mentions his previous experience of saving someone from drowning in one of its holes. Some scholars interestingly argue this connection is meant to suggest metaphorically that Dante wants to break the stone block of the papacy and save people's spiritual lives [14]. This seems plausible to me. The Church, in its corruption, might turn normal people away from the way to salvation. If this interpretation were accurate, the stone could further refer to the misleading of the Church which blocks the way of salvation and drowning could refer to the spirits that are misled. Dante's action of breaking the block also fits in with his motive of writing his *Divine Comedy*, using his words as a guide that awakens people and shows them a way toward salvation.

Dante gets his chance to interact with one of those sinners in line 46. The one he talks with is Pope Nicholas III. By his confusing Dante with Pope Boniface VIII, the poet anticipates that Boniface will wind up in Hell for the same crime in the future. In the later part of the canto, Dante also presents the same prophecy regarding Clement V's future. The contrapasso that Dante presents to these three popes, and all of those condemned for simony, can also be considered as a revealing metaphor. Their bodies are turned upside down within the holes, and the soles of their feet are burned by fire. When the next sinful pope comes to replace the former one, the previous sinner will go further downward into the hole. Foster described this as "an evil chain forever moving steadily downward" [15]. The upside-down state can be viewed not only on physical terms but also moral ones. Applied to the contemporary religious atmosphere, the corrupt Church would continuously go downward under the weight of those evil popes.

Nicholas' identity is revealed in line 70 by naming him "a son of the she-bear" which connects to his family name, Orsini. He then admits to his intense interests of advancing his "cubs," representing the fact that he has practiced nepotism in favor of his relatives [16]. What is more, and probably the most problematic, he utilizes his sacred power to "fill his purse." Boniface, who earned Dante's enmity during previous political struggles, does much the same thing. Nicolas suggests that he made a great deal of financial profit

by outraging the “beautify lady,” the Church, between lines 55-57. Similarly, Clement is judged as a “simoniac pope” as his corrupt practices are compared to Jason [17].

Dante’s hostility toward these popes is salient. The pilgrim directly criticizes them from line 90 all the way through line 117. He starts his criticism with a history of the Church. The poet mentions the event of Christ’s calling of Peter and the apostles to choose Matthias to replace Judas. The point he is trying to make here is that those great saints never involve material things in their sacred missions. What the popes have done is against God’s model. On line 104 and line 105 he blames them because their “avarice afflicts the world” and says that they are “trampling down the good and raising up the wicked.” These lines reveal Dante’s idea that the Church is harming the earthly kingdom, echoing the metaphor of the morally upside-down state of the popes. In line 107 he mentions the one who sits upon the waters. This is an image of the woman on the beast in Revelation 17 “sits on many waters,” adorned by extravagant clothing and ornaments. She is called “the great prostitute” [18] by the angel and she causes the fall of the seven kings. Indeed, she is the sign of evil, corruption and immorality. The poet mentions this woman in order to convey the extent of the Church’s current corruption.

Dante’s motive for including a large number of biblical materials here can be understood as his way of conveying the appropriate nature of the Church. In Dante’s view, nature is created by God. All people should follow nature and God’s behavior is what people should imitate as a proper model. However, the popes are doing exactly the opposite. They violate the nature created by God and this is the reason why they are punished in the circle of fraud. He also states in line 113 that they are practicing idolatry, the worst crime in the religious order [19], idolatry being the worship of an idol of gold or silver, including the worship of money as mammon. This can be a sign of Dante’s attitude toward wealth as idolatry which is similar to some contemporary religious factions such as the Franciscan order.

Dante’s opposition to excessive wealth, especially toward a clerical body that has developed this form of idolatry, can also be found in other cantos. For example, in canto seven, he depicts clerics who were obsessed with riches. The sinners in this circle were accused of using money improperly, either avariciously or prodigally. Although their crime should be considered as a lack of self-control and is not as serious as the popes’ in canto nineteen, Dante still directly critiques this same habit in stating that their “avarice achieves its excess.” In his view, money is in the hands of Fortune and people should not try to maintain control over it, further revealing his religious views on excessive wealth and the pursuit of money alongside religious authority. Because all the sinners referenced in this circle are “clerics who have no lid of hair upon their heads, and popes and cardinals, in whom avarice achieves its excess” [20], there is strong evidence that the contemporary Church in Dante’s mind is corrupt due to the practice of worshipping Mammon.

By this point, it should be clear that Dante views poverty as befitting for the Church. His argument is generally based on the example of Christ. The logic behind that can be linked to another of Dante’s works, *Monarchia*, which uses rational

persuasion and includes his view toward a well-founded Church. In the third book of *Monarchia*, Dante discusses the similar topic with this canto. He critiqued the Church authority for gaining improper profits. In his argument, the Church should adopt only pure good faith and should not go astray [21]. While worshipping mammon is absolutely excluded from pure good faith, another topic can also be raised from this point. Since most of the popes need to fulfill their financial interests by intervening in politics, the practice of earthly power by the Church is another thing that Dante addresses. Dante makes his argument based on Church history again. The creator of the Church once claimed that “My kingdom is not of this world.” In other words, the power of managing the earthly kingdom is not the original jurisdiction of the Church. In fact, during previous centuries the Church had separated itself from the secular world in theory. By Dante’s age, however, most popes were not following that rule properly and used religion for political aid. Dante’s hostility toward this kind of behavior can be distinctly seen in his previous struggles with Boniface.

The text in canto nineteen also contains lines that may prove Dante’s support for the separation of Church and state, to use modern phrasing. Between lines 115 to 117 he mentions the donation of Constantine which he also does in *Monarchia*. In this event, Constantine granted temporal sovereignty to Pope Sylvester I who cured him. After that, the Church started to have power over the secular world [22]. Although the document has been since proven a forgery, it was still an influential claim in Dante’s time and reveals Dante’s view. In his opinion, the corruption of the Church was rooted in that moment. The Church’s secularity brought it short-term benefit but long-term loss. Pope Sylvester I who supposed received this donation, also gains Dante’s criticism as the “first rich father” [23] in the text. He is put at the bottom of this evil line in the hole. It is wrong, in Dante’s view, for popes to hold secular power because it will eventually result in their use of religious power for material aid.

V. CONCLUSION

Dante had once mentioned through the mouth of his ancestor Cacciaguia in *Paradiso* that he had become a party unto himself. He is indeed not a person that could be simply classified into a single group or sect. Nevertheless, he had interacted with many different theories and bodies of knowledge and absorbed what seems plausible for him. As an ambitious man, he participated in the political affairs and came to express his own opinions about these matters. Although he had faced many struggles in his life and even went into exile, his unique learning and political experience helped form his views. The *Divine Comedy* is a work based on religion, nevertheless, the author’s interest in philosophy, literature, and politics is also well demonstrated through the text. Dante has a mature theory that combined those elements together. In a period when religion played a dominant role in society, reaching salvation can be the ultimate goal of one’s life. In order to reach salvation, however, elements of the secular world are also fairly important. Dante uses theology

as the base but writes about many different aspects of the human world. In general, his contemporary society was far removed from his ideals. *Inferno* is a work that represents his dissatisfaction with the current world. His expressed disappointment in the cantos featured in this paper is directed mainly toward people who veered from divinely created natural behaviors and toward the corrupt Church which abandoned pure religious faith. The *Divine Comedy* is a literary work, distinct from a purely theoretical or philosophical text. Yet, Dante's desire to address people alive at his time about contemporary matters is very strong. For those reading generations after Dante's own time, this work can help them to understand the author's outlook and thus investigate the nature of his times.

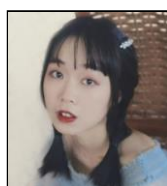
CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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