

Dante's Demonstration of Secularism in *Inferno*

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(For the literature section of *Mukto-Mona*)

To comprehend the harsh force of the wind one must sail against wind. To gauge the strength of a stream one must swim against its current. That the tendencies of any given age may be grasped, they must be assessed from the perspective of an age different in its practice of belief. Wandering with his generation, the individual cannot measure its vigor, sees neither the path in which it moves nor the destination towards which it tends. Dante, being enlightened with rebellious spirit, believes that religion should not be involved in the organization of human life, and thus, manifests secularism in *Inferno*. He sails against the wind of Florence, sees the darkness of church corruption and as a light out of that darkness he brings secularism in his creation. Throughout his life, Dante had witnessed the corruption and immorality which he had blamed on the Church. In *Inferno*, Dante avoids simply ranting and raving about Boniface or the problems with the Church instead he competently gives us his interpretation on the correct role of the Catholic Church. The Church affected almost every facet of life: political, cultural, social, and economic. Dante Alighieri, the writer of the *Divine Comedy*, was not exempt from its influence. Throughout his life, he came into conflict with the Church and, in particular, Pope Boniface VIII. Dante saw the Church as a corrupt institution wrongfully involved in temporal and political affairs. The Church had strayed from its original purpose as a spiritual and ethical organ. Dante had a strong belief in the separation of Church and state, with each filling its role in God's divine plan, and thus advocated a powerful Holy Roman Emperor. Dante's involvement in the political affairs of Italy, and in particular Florence, helped to shape this view of the Church. In *Inferno*, Dante not only levels specific attacks on his political enemies, but also transcends the personal to make a convincing argument against the contemporary Catholic Church as an institution. Through the skillful use of numerous literary techniques, Dante is able to express his views on the role of the Church more effectively.

Hence, we should have some introductory knowledge of *Inferno*. Dante Alighieri (May/June, 1265 - September 13/14, 1321) was a Florentine poet. His greatest work, *La Divina Commedia* or *Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*), is a significant statement of the medieval world view and the foundation of the modern Italian language. *Inferno* is, generally speaking, the best loved part of *The Divine Comedy*. It, in a sense for readers, tends to more easily identify with sinners and things of this world than with saints and the theoretical glories of heaven. No poem in any tongue is more informed with rhythmic life than *Inferno*. And yet, such is its extraordinary distinction; no poem has a rational and emotional essence more independent of its metrical form. Its complex structure, its elaborate measure and rhyme, are mastered by the brilliance of the poet. It becomes the most natural expression of the spirit by which the poem is inspired. At the same time, the notion and emotion alive in the verse and the narrative have such interest that they do not lose their value when uttered in the prose of another tongue. They always have the power to accelerate imagination, and to stir up sympathy.

We should have a glance of conflict between papal and imperial power of Florence which leads Dante against church. Italy in Dante's time was a mass of self-seeking smaller states: the cities of northern Italy, the kingdoms of southern Italy and France and the Papal States. All had constantly shifting alliances. One subject of particular controversy concerned the amount of influence the popes in Rome ought to have in worldly affairs. The Holy Roman Emperor, who was in effect the king of all Christian lands¹, was supposed to be the ruler of rulers, and hence the king of the rulers of England, France, and Norway. But the pope, who had the sole authority to crown the Holy Roman Emperor, also claimed, on the basis of his absolute spiritual authority over all Christians, to be the supreme power in Europe. This tension is played out throughout the *Inferno*, primarily in the recurrence of evil churchmen in Hell's many circles.

¹ Although this was a hard claim to back militarily

Pope Boniface VIII and Philip IV of France² (“Philip the Fair”) fought for control of Europe in the late 1200s. The power-hungry and unpleasant Boniface and the equally powerful French monarchy both earned Dante's hatred; their perpetual wrangling and political maneuvering prevented the crowning of a rightful Holy Roman Emperor. Although the German Hapsburg dynasty continued to insist that it was entitled to the role of Holy Roman Emperor, the family had many rivals for the position. Nothing ever came of the Hapsburg efforts. Not until 1308 was another emperor (Henry VII of Luxemburg) crowned in Rome; Boniface died in 1303.

Dante demonstrates the theoretical approach of secular philosophy in his book *De Monarchia* where "we first find in its full maturity the general conception of the nature of man, of government, and of human destiny, which was afterwards transfigured, without being transformed, into the framework of the Sacred Poem" (Wicksteed 1879:21). Dante proceeds successively in this book to show that a single supreme temporal monarchy as the empire is necessary for the well-being of the world, that the Roman people acquired universal sovereign sway by Divine right, and that the authority of the emperor is not dependent upon the pope, but descends upon him directly from the fountain of universal authority which is God. Man is ordained for two ends: blessedness of this life, which consists in the exercise of his natural powers and is figured in the terrestrial paradise; blessedness of life eternal, which consists in the fruition of the Divine aspect in the celestial paradise to which man's natural powers, cannot ascend without the aid of the Divine light. To these two ends man must come by diverse means: For to the first we attain by the teachings of philosophy, following them by acting in accordance with the moral and intellectual virtues. To the second by spiritual teachings, which transcend human reason, as we follow them by acting according to the theological virtues. But,

² Boniface and Philip first came into conflict when the French king insisted that he had the right to levy a tax upon the clergy who lived in his kingdom. Boniface was furious at what he saw as an attack upon his own authority and tried to excommunicate Philip, an act which amounts to denying a person all church sacraments, rituals believed to be necessary for the saving of one's soul. Philip won this round of sparring, however, by cutting off the export of all money from France. Since Pope Boniface needed the rich revenues that came from the French clergy, he caved in and “allowed” Philip to tax the clergy in his country. When Philip accused a French bishop of treason, Philip and the pope each claimed to be the final authority on such matters. Their battle escalated to the point where Philip's men actually captured the pope and held him prisoner for several days before releasing him.

although these ends and means are made plain to us by human reason and by revelation, men in their cupidity would reject them, were not they restrained by bit and rein. As Dante says:

Wherefore man had need of a twofold directive power according to his twofold end, to wit, the Supreme Pontiff, to lead the human race in accordance with things revealed, to eternal life; and the Emperor, to direct the human race to temporal felicity in accordance with the teachings of philosophy. It is therefore the special duty of the emperor to establish freedom and peace on this threshing floor of mortality. (Alighieri 1313/1969:101)

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the singlemost powerful institution in all of Europe was the Roman Catholic Church. In Florence, Dante continuously accused Church authority for conflicts that enhances his secular point of view. Further evidence of Dante's anti-clerical sentiment can be found by looking at his views on the imperial state. When Dante learned of the election of Henry of Luxemborg as the German King (1308), he was overjoyed. Dante "had become convinced that those events and the ensuing disorder had occurred only because there was no Holy Roman Emperor" (Britannica, 484). Dante was delighted in the crowning of Henry as Emperor in Rome. He urged Henry VII to crush Florence, which opposed the new King. While in exile, Dante wrote a letter to the inhabitants of Florence detailing their forthcoming defeat at the hands of the Emperor:

What help will it be to have built your ring of ramparts and fortified yourself with bulwarks and battlements, when there swoops upon you the eagle in the field of gold...What indeed, when you stand dumbfounded, you most miserable of men, before the Emperor at your doors to check the delirium of Italy. (Britannica 1997: 486)

The "eagle in the field of gold" was the seal of the Holy Roman Empire. Dante is clearly advocating a reassertment of Imperial authority. In the above passage he glorifies the role of the Emperor as a bringer of order to the "delirium of Italy." Dante's desire for a strong Holy Roman emperor to rule at least Italy is an indication of his belief that the Church should stay out of political affairs. It is the purpose of the Emperor to run government, not the Catholic Church.

By extension, Dante concluded that the purpose of the Church was a spiritual organ, and not a political power: "For Dante, imperial authority, as that of the pope, issued directly from God, so that direct power in temporal things was denied to the Church, the spiritual organ" (Britanica 1997:484). The empire was responsible for man's earthly well being, while the Church could take care of the afterlife. These clearly drawn lines of responsibility were the results of Dante's political experiences.

Perhaps Dante's most common topic of discussion, or target, in *Inferno* is the organized Catholic Church. Dante levels a nearly continuous attack on the Church and in particular the pontiffs. Dante clearly believes Boniface to be corrupt and immoral. Dante expands this condemnation to include most, if not all Popes. The Popes, who are supposed to be God's vicar on earth, are the cause of war and conflict, from which Christian blood is shed. Boniface in particular is responsible for Dante's own exile and grief, a fact that we know he does not forget. However, Dante's attack on the Church goes far beyond his own personal involvements. In *Inferno*, Dante accuses the popes of abusing their power through the acts of simony and corruption, as well as indulgence in earthly pleasures. Dante believes that the Church should avoid involvement in the temporal affairs of man, and stick to the spiritual. Dante's argument is made more compelling through the use of various literary techniques. The use of metaphors, dialogue, characters, and the trip through hell itself all strengthen Dante's claims.

Dante makes sure to wreak vengeance on Boniface in *Inferno*. In Canto XXVII, Dante asks Guido da Montefeltro³ who he is, and why he is in hell. Guido tells Dante that he was corrupted by Boniface, who needed advice on how best to destroy papal opposition at Penestrino. Guido refused at first, fearful of committing sin. However, Boniface promised to absolve Guido in advance:

He [Boniface] asked me to give counsel. I was silent.
his words had seemed to me delirious.

³ Dante and Vergil encounter Guido da Montefeltro in the Eighth pouch of the Eighth Circle of hell (Malebolge), the Fraudulent Counselors. Guido was a powerful Ghibelline leader in Florence, who underwent a conversion of sorts, changed his ways, and entered the Franciscan order: "I was a man of arms, then wore the cord" (Canto XXVII, 67).

And then he said: 'Your heart must not mistrust:
I now absolve you in advance-teach me
to batter Penestrino to the ground.
You surely know that I possess the power
to lock and unlock Heaven; for the keys
my predecessor did not prize are two. (Canto XXVII, 98-105)⁴

Dante's attack on Boniface in this passage is strengthened by the use of dialogue and allusion to actual people and events. The reader can read the actual abhorrent words of Boniface. Rather than being told in a summary what Boniface said, we are given quotations of actual dialogue from which we can make our own conclusion. In this case, of course, there is only one opinion that the reader can come away with horror and disgust. This indirect method of horror and attack instantly adds credibility and conviction to Dante's assault. Dante's use of actual people and events in this passage also increases its effect. Guido, an actual person, is telling us what occurred. Dante is distancing himself from the attack, making it look less like a personal vendetta by the author. Rather than lecturing on Boniface's terrible behavior, Dante is using the testimony of another character to assault the Pope. The condemnation of Boniface is backed up by the events at Penestrino, just as the topic of a paragraph is supported by the following examples of specific evidence. The magnitude of the attack on Boniface in the above passage is instantly increased by Dante's use of literary tricks and techniques. Dante has scored a powerful blow in his personal vendetta against Boniface.

In Canto XIX, Dante launches another personal attack, and then widens the scope of his ideas to a more general and far-reaching level. The entire Third Pouch of the Eighth Circle is devoted to simonists. Simony is the religious equivalent to barratry, the

⁴ The actual events that occurred at Penestrino are interesting as well. Boniface told the inhabitants of the town that if they gave up their resistance, he would grant them all amnesty. When they did so, Boniface promptly destroyed the town. Boniface is being compared to a ruthless, conquering, tyrant. Dante is clearly attacking the arrogance and corruption of Boniface. Boniface has pretended to usurp the power of God's judgment. Boniface is also committing a form of simony: he is granting absolution in return for advance. He is, in effect, selling absolution. Ironically, Boniface cannot absolve Guido, who ends up in the Ring of the Fraudulent Counselors. Thus, Boniface himself is a fraudulent counselor. This passage also displays the desire for power of Boniface. After all, this is a Pope that wants to "batter Penestrino to the ground." These are not words that one would expect to hear from a man of God. the Pope is ruthless, even bloodthirsty. The Pope, and the Church in general, is supposed to stand for peace: "Love your enemy..." Boniface is rejecting a fundamental tenant of Christian belief.

very crime Dante was accused of. Simony is the “selling of Church offices or indulgences, a common Medieval form of Church corruption. In this Third Pouch, each simonist is held headfirst in a rock with only their feet protruding. Their feet are constantly burned by a neverending flame. One flame, however, burns stronger than the others.”(Harrison, pg 6) Upon inquiry, Dante learns that this is the flame of the Pope, the chief-simonist. Dante approaches the Pope, who later turns out to be Pope Nicholas III, Boniface's predecessor. When Dante asks him to speak, the Pope responds:

Are you already standing,
already standing there, o Boniface?
The book has lied to me by several years.
Are you so quickly sated with the riches
for which you did not fear to take by guile
the Lovely Lady, then to violate her? (Canto XIX, 52-57)⁵

In the above quotation, Dante again uses literary tricks to strengthen his attack on Boniface. The fact that Dante has Nicholas inform the reader by mistake that Boniface, who just happens to be the author's enemy, is going to hell is a brilliant example of literary maneuvering. Rather than Dante telling us straight out that Boniface is going to hell, the reader is given a craftier hint to that end. Once again, "this accident" distances Dante's past personal history of animosity towards Boniface from the actual condemnation of Boniface as a hell-bound sinner. Dante is strengthening his argument by in effect saying, "I didn't say it, it was Nicholas." Nicholas, as opposed to Dante, has no bias against Boniface. The reader is inclined to believe an objective character who happens to be able to see the future. Nicholas, like Guido da Montefeltro, is corroborating

⁵ The Inferno, although completed in 1308, takes place in 1300. Boniface did not die until 1303. Nicholas, like all damned souls, has the power to see the future, not the present. Nicholas has foreseen the death of Boniface, and he has also observed Boniface's life. Thus, he knows that Boniface will be sent to hell. The discrepancy of three years from 1300-1303 explains Nicholas' comment, "The book has lied to me by several years." As we learn later, each corrupt Pope, upon his death, replaces the prior one in the spot that Nicholas now occupies while the previous Pope is pushed down into the rock, stacked upon each earlier corrupt Pope. Thus, when Nicholas asks if Dante is Boniface, what Dante is really doing is taking a swipe at Boniface, saying that he is condemned to hell. Dante is vindicating his own life by saying that his enemy was a damned sinner. It is interesting that Dante is wrongfully thought to be Boniface, when looked at in context to Dante's life. Boniface was a simonist. Simony, as I explained above, is the religious equivalent to barratry. Dante, as mentioned in Part I, was accused of barratry by the Black Guelphs and exiled from Florence. The fact that he is wrongfully called by Nicholas simonist, the religious equivalent to barratry, suggests that the original accusation of barratry in Dante's real life is also wrong. Thus, through this apparently innocent mistake, Dante is clearing his name.

Dante's negative opinion of Boniface. Thus, the author is adding more weight to his personal assault on Boniface.

Dante expands his personal attack on Boniface into a larger condemnation of the Church and the Papacy. First, he does this by indicating the sheer number of Popes condemned to this punishment in hell. Nicholas says:

Below my head there is the place of those
who took the way of simony before me;
and they are stuffed within the clefts of stone.
I, too, shall yield my place and fall below... (Canto XIX, 73-76)⁶

Perhaps the most striking example of Dante's outrage at the corruption and indulgence of the organized Catholic Church can be found in the long speech he gives at the end of Canto XIX. Dante begins by attacking the greed and materialism of the Church:

Then tell me how, how much gold did our Lord
ask that Saint Peter give to him before
he placed the keys within his care? Surely
the only thing he asked was "follow me."
And Peter and the others never asked
for gold or silver when they asked Matthias
to take the place of the transgressing soul. (Canto XIX, 90-96)

This is a blunt attack on the prevalent values of the contemporary Church. Dante is comparing the desire for money as a motivating force in the Church, to its original values of faith and morality. the Church has strayed from its original purpose. Dante continues his assault:

Stay as you are, for you are rightly punished;
and guard with care the money got by evil
that made you so audacious against Charles. (Canto XIX, 97-100)

Despite the theme of greed, Dante brings in by allusion the idea of the Church infringing on the state. Pope Nicholas, allegedly, for a large sum of money, supported a conspiracy

⁶ Nicholas' description and explanation of each Pope's temporary punishment and replacement indicates that many, if not most, pontiffs have found themselves in the Third Pouch of the Eighth Circle of hell.

against Charles⁷ which materialized in the successful uprisings of Sicilian Vespers. These uprisings eventually removed Charles from power. Dante is again referring to an actual event. The reader can recognize the vespers, which then serve as evidence supporting Dante's attack on the Church. Dante is condemning the interference of the Church in political affairs where it doesn't belong. In this case the political maneuvering of the Pope resulted in a violent uprising. The Church, according to Dante, should act solely as a spiritual organ and sower of harmony, not as a ruthless political machine causing discord and violence.

...your avarice afflicts the world:
it tramples on the good, lifts up the wicked.
You, shepherds, the Evangelist had noticed
when he saw her who sits upon the waters
and realized she fornicates with kings,
she who was born with seven heads and had
the power and support of the ten horns,
as long as virtue was her husband's pleasure. (Canto XIX, 104-111)

Here, the Church is being compared to a whore. The seven heads represent the seven sacraments, while the horns symbolize the Ten Commandments. The whore upon the water is the Church corrupted by the materialistic and secular interests of the Popes. The use of this metaphor, like the other previously mentioned literary devices, helps to add force to Dante's statement. The image of a whore engaging in lewd sexual acts is a powerful and disturbing image, especially when used in comparison with a supposedly sacred and pure institution like the Church. It attracts attention to the point Dante is trying to make about the role of the Catholic Church. The fact that the whore "fornicates with kings" is a clear indication of the temporal and political involvements of the Church that Dante so detests. Dante concludes his speech with a final blast at the Popes:

You've made yourselves a god of gold and silver;
how are you different from idolaters,
save that they worship one and a hundred?
Ah, Constantine, what wickedness was born
and not from your conversion the dower

⁷ Charles of Anjou (1226-1285) was the king of Naples and Sicily.

that you bestowed upon the first rich father! (Canto XIX, 112-117)⁸

The portion concerning Constantine is also valuable. Constantine, the Emperor of the Roman Empire, after having a sudden religious revelation which converted him to Christianity, granted the Church its current position of dominance. Dante is saying, then, that the conversion to Christianity was correct, and that, by extension, Christianity is indeed the true religion of God. The mistake that Constantine made was instead the granting to the Church and to the Pope its immense power and money ("dower"). The Church has been tainted and corrupted by money, and the pursuit of material gain. It has lost sight of its purpose as a spiritual institution, and has become corrupted by political entanglements. The Church is no longer an instrument of God; instead, it has become a symbol of earthly sin. Worst of all, the Popes have broken a trust they have made with the lay people, and with God. Instead of fulfilling their responsibilities to the people and to God as a spiritual intermediary, the Popes and the Church are corrupt and materialistic. They are raping religion and faith.

As one of the earliest poet of secularism, Dante's interaction with the Church in real life was extensive and hostile. In his eyes, the Church was responsible for the strife that inflicted his home, Florence, and for his own exile. The Church, supposedly a symbol of love and peace, had been the cause of the violence and bloodshed that the author experienced throughout his life. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante gets the opportunity to strike back in the best way he knows how, with words. *Inferno*, with its attacks on Boniface and Dante's attempts at vindication, clearly shows the relationship with Dante's writings and Dante's past. Yet, Dante is able to remove himself from his own personal conflicts towards the greater issue of the role of the Church in the society. In *Inferno*, he attacks the corruption, materialism and political involvements of the popes and thus he develops his rebellious spirit through secular philosophy. Dante the man clearly

⁸ A metaphor is again being used here. The Pope is being compared to a pagan idolater who worships God in specific form. A central concept of Christianity is the belief in one, omnipotent, God. This idea dates back as far as the story of Abraham in the Old Testament; the worship of idols is forbidden by God. Thus, when Dante accuses Nicholas, who as the pope is supposed to be the most upright of Christians, of being an idolater, he is really accusing him of being a traitor to Christianity and a traitor to God. Even worse is the fact that the God whom the Popes worship is money. The Church, then, has become materialistic.

influences Dante the writer to produce a set of ideas concerning the role of the Catholic Church in European society.

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