CHAPTER 41

An Islamic Paradiso in a Medieval Christian Poem? Dante’s Divine Comedy Revisited

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God is the Light
Of the heaven and the earth,
The parable of His Light
Is as if there were a Niche
And within it a Lamp
The Lamp enclosed in Glass
The glass as it were
A brilliant star
Lit from a blessed Tree,
An olive, neither of the East
Nor of the West,
Whose Oil is well-nigh
Luminous,
Though fire scarce touched it;
Light upon Light!
God doth guide
Whom He will
To His Light.

Q 24:35

In his article “Dante and Islam” which was published in 1973, Sir Richard William Southern, a notable English medieval historian, argued that

Medieval Europe was extremely resistant to cultural influences except in the single area in which Islam acted as a link with ancient Greek thought.

1 Ali (trans.), Kur’an.

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Nothing that has a specifically Islamic inspiration took root in the west. The west had enough of its own. That was all... [Miguel Asín Palacios] was wrong to think that Dante’s mind especially was filled with images drawn from Islamic sources... [Dante] was a wholly western man.  

Southern’s argument is certainly not unique in this regard. It may represent the attitude of many western scholars who believe that the West differs from other civilizations not only in the way it has developed but also in the distinctive character of its values and institutions. Westerners are indebted only to other Westerners. They constitute a unique breed of human beings. Unfortunately, once the distinction between the Orient and the Occident is accepted as a starting point in research, the notion of the encounter between Islamic civilization and the West, particularly in the medieval period, is either marginalized, or ignored.

Asín Palacios was a Catholic priest and Professor of Arabic at the University of Madrid. In 1919 he published a monumental book entitled *La Escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia* (Muslim Eschatology and the Divine Comedy) in which he traced the influence and religious thought of medieval Islam on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Asín considered Muhammad’s nocturnal journey and ascension from Jerusalem to the throne of God as the basic models that had influenced the great Florentine poet. But he also referred to other Muslim journeys and traced in particular the influence of some Neoplatonic mystics, such as the Spanish Muslim Ibn ʿArabī on Dante’s allegory. The book was abridged and translated into English by Harold Sutherland and published in London in 1926, and then reprinted in 1968. Although there was heated argument among scholars at the time concerning the validity of Asín’s thesis and the emergence of a trickle of studies since then, there is no doubt that Dante’s scholars have largely ignored these claims and continued to teach and write on Dante either as the perfect embodiment of Christian Western culture, or as the ultimate rebel against religious authority and the corruption of the pastors of the church. But in either case, Dante remains a unique ‘western man,’ absolutely oblivious to foreign Islamic ideas during his troubled age.

2 Southern, Dante and Islam 143–4.
3 The most prominent advocate of this position is Samuel P. Huntington in his book *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*.
4 See for instance what Harold Bloom writes on Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in his book, *The western canon*. Bloom criticizes American professors who teach the Comedy as something religious. “The theological Dante of modern American scholarship,” he observes, “is a blend of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and their companions. This is a doctrinal Dante, so absolutely