

Book Review

ISLAM AND THE DIVINE COMEDY.

By Miguel Asin Palacios.
(Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 65s.).

Review by R. W. J. Austen.

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 2, No.4. (Autumn 1968) © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

This quite remarkable and interesting book which appeared originally in Spanish under the title of *La Escatologia musulmana en la Divina Comedia* is from the pen of the renowned scholar priest Miguel Asin y Palacios who devoted much of his life to the study of Islamic philosophy and mysticism in general and the works of Muhyiddin Ibn `Arabī in particular. It is from his very considerable knowledge in this field that the author seeks to show not only that the Divine Comedy derives many of its literary and philosophical inspirations from earlier Muslim sources, but also that its author, Dante, was himself very much inclined towards Muslim philosophy.

The book is divided into four main parts. In the first of these a detailed comparison is made between the Muslim legend of the Nocturnal Journey or *Mi`rāj* in its various forms and developments and the Divine Comedy. On the Muslim side he draws upon the Qur'an, the Hadith, various legends, scholastic theology, philosophy and Sufism. In doing so he seeks to trace the development of both the *Isrā* and *Mi`raj* traditions and their eventual fusion. In particular he illustrates the many similarities as between the Divine Comedy and Ibn 'Arabi's account of Muhammad's Ascension and also al-Ma'arīs *Risālat-al-Ghufrān*.

In the second part the author compares the descriptions of Heaven, Purgatory and Hell in the Divine Comedy with accounts of these places to be found in a whole host of Muslim traditions and legends. Throughout the first and second parts he is concerned to show that many of the ideas and images of the Divine Comedy whose origin remained a mystery to students of Dante and which had therefore been attributed to Dante's originality are, in fact, traceable to the eschatological lore of Islam.

In the third part Palacios attempts to show that even those Christian legends current before Dante's time which may be considered to have influenced him in the writing of the Divine Comedy are also themselves influenced both by Muslim legends on the subject and also by more ancient legends transmitted to Christendom by Islam. Among the Christian legends he cites those of St. Brandan, Tundal and Alberic. He further claims that this influence is shown by the fact that many of the Christian legends concerning punishment in the after-life conflict with the Church's teaching of eternal damnation and conform more to the Islamic idea of respite from punishment.

The fourth part is devoted to the thesis that not only was it possible that Dante had access to the Muslim material dealt with in the first three parts, but that it was almost certain in view of the

widespread currency of Muslim Learning throughout Europe. This Muslim intellectual influence is traced from its origins in Moorish Spain and the Middle East in considerable detail. Finally the author makes a very convincing comparison between the thought and writing of Dante and the great Murcian Sufi Ibn 'Arabī. Of particular interest is his comparison of Dante's *Convito*, an allegorical love poem with spiritual commentary, and Ibn 'Arabī's *Tarjuman al-Ashwāq*, a very similar work.

This book, which was very revolutionary in its time, is full of interest and, above all, information, particularly on Muslim eschatological tradition. Collected in the book are a multitude of well documented traditions and legends, not to be found elsewhere in translation.

As to whether the author has succeeded in proving his case, the answer must be, on the whole, in the affirmative. In this respect the first and fourth parts are the most convincing. With regard to the second and third parts one suspects that he might be on less firm ground, since many of the images must of necessity have arisen in both religions' traditions spontaneously.

It would appear that three main motives inspired Palacios to write the book. The principal motive is undoubtedly his desire to demonstrate the massive influence of Islam upon Christendom during the Middle Ages at all intellectual levels. This is a desire natural in a sincere student of Islamic culture at a time when the West dominated the world in many spheres and when the notion of an Islamic contribution to Christian achievement tended to be rejected without a hearing. Another motive, albeit perhaps a minor one, is the desire of the patriotic Spaniard to cast some doubt upon the assumed originality of Italy's foremost literary figure. Last, but not least, the author also hoped to show, as he had sought to do in his other works, that it was not that primitive Arabian creed of the Qur'an and the Prophet which had so heavily marked the culture of the Christian West, but an Islam itself refined and improved by Christian influences. Here the author is once again the champion of Christendom, refusing to see any true spirituality except in his own faith. Indeed this attitude towards Islam, so common among scholars in his time, and the many derogatory asides he makes on both the Qur'an and the Prophet mar what is otherwise a most readable and informative work.