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**MILLENNIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF MEDIEVAL
RELIGIOUS SCHISM IN WESTERN MEDIA:
An Iconographic Analysis of Dante's *Inferno* 28 and the Twenty-
First Century Films *Dracula Untold* and *Kingdom of Heaven***

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ABSTRACT

Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* 28 is the place of the sowers of discord and scandal who are responsible for causing a split within their own communities; among them in the ninth *bolge* of the eighth circle is Muhammad whose mutilated body represents the division he brought to Christianity. A historical contextualization of the *Inferno*, however, confirms that the hostility between Christianity and Islam had emerged earlier with the rise of Islam as a political power in the seventh century. This paper examines Medieval and twenty-first century visual representations of this division within Christianity, which mirror the schism within *Inferno* 28. Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and Gary Shore's less-discussed film *Dracula Untold* (2014) provide a common ground to analyze the visual and verbal stimuli. In so doing, I identify the elements of naïve responses to such texts, which help to minimize the conformity of the audience to classificatory thought systems, and, therefore, creates a dynamically constituted text open to multiple interpretations.

Keywords: *Inferno* 28, *Dracula Untold*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, Schism, Iconography

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the religious and political schism between Christianity and Islam during the Middle Ages. It discusses the representations of this divide within the Medieval literary texts as well as the twenty-first century visual texts, particularly those which mirror the schism within *Inferno* 28. As for the twenty-first century films, Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and Gary Shore's *Dracula Untold* (2014) provide a common ground to analyze the visual and verbal stimuli in the representations of this theological and political schism.

Religious and Political Polemics Against Islam in Medieval Europe

A historical overview of the main political and theological polemics of the time reveals two strands of the Medieval depiction of Islam. Both insist on the fundamentally "retrogressive nature of the religion": Islam as "idolatry" and Islam as "Christian heresy." In the first mode, which is called "fanciful," Islam is seen as a continuation of pre-Islamic idolatry, and Muslims as polytheistic idolaters; in the second mode, called "realistic," Muhammad is the focus and is characterized as a "trickster," as "devious," and as a "manipulative magician," who is the leader of a heretical sect. In fact, the embodiment of Muhammad as a trickster encapsulates the range of deceitful qualities attributed to Islam

by Medieval Christians.¹ [2] Drawing on the work of commentators, including Jacopo Alighieri (1322), Jacopo della Lana (1324), and Anonimo Fiorentino (1400), Conklin Akbari points out that Muhammad was indeed a Christian cleric who was frustrated in his effort to achieve the papacy; thus, he satisfied his lust for power by founding his own religious sect.² [2]

Consistent with this reasoning, Medieval texts frequently suggest that Islam is the “manifestation of satanic power” and the Prophet of Islam is “an instrument of the devil,” an “Antichrist” per se.³ [3] Similarly, Maria Esposito Frank draws on the work of the Medieval historian and theologian Venerable Bede who identified Muslims as “unbelievers” and “idolaters who worshiped Venus/Lucifer,” and Muhammad as the “forerunner of the Antichrist.”⁴ [8] Indeed, Muhammad’s claim to be a prophet is literally what Jesus predicted when he warned “many will come in my name, saying, “I am the Messiah;” and shall deceive many.”⁵ [1] Notably, the idea of Antichrist serves at least two purposes for the religious and political entities in Medieval Europe: first, as a “threat to the integrity of the Christian church,” the concept of Antichrist “reunifies” communities in crisis; and, second, as “a rhetorical weapon,” it is “used to diabolize a common enemy, whether religious, political, or military.”⁶ [3] Moreover, Maria Rosa Menocal observes how the Christian attitude toward Muslims in the Medieval period reflected the fear of the new, especially in the face of the significant loss of the territories and of the political and cultural expansion of Islamic civilization.⁷ [11] In fact, these anti-Muslim sentiments emerged with the rise of Islam in the seventh century and culminated with the fall of Constantinople as the last bastion of the Eastern Roman Empire: Islam was seen as both “a military threat, endangering Christian countries,” and a religious threat, “offering an alternative to Christianity.”⁸ [3]

Literary Polemics Against Islam in Medieval Europe

The Medieval representation of Islam was not limited to religious and political texts but incorporated cultural products as well. There are myriads of Medieval literary texts that deal with this schism. I start with a quick overview of some Medieval literary texts, and then delve more deeply into one of the most renowned literary texts of Medieval Europe, Dante’s *Inferno*, and particularly the representation of this divide within *Inferno* 28.

A typical example of the Medieval account of Muhammad as Antichrist can be found in *Roman de Mahomet*. This book draws parallels between Muhammad’s qualities, such as his “claim to be messiah,” or the “ability to work miracles,” and the qualities associated

¹ Conklin Akbari, 224 & 227.

For a comprehensive analysis of the topic read Conklin Akbari’ *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient 1100-1450*, particularly chapter five: “Empty Idols and a False Prophet” (200-247).

² Ibid 229.

³ Conklin Akbari, “The Rhetoric of Antichrist in Western Lives of Muhammad” page 297.

⁴ Qtd. in Esposito Frank’s “Dante’s Muhammad: Parallels Between Islam and Arianism” page 189.

⁵ *Authorized King James Bible*, Matthew 24: 5.

⁶ Conklin Akbari’s “The Rhetoric of Antichrist in Western Lives of Muhammad” page 298.

⁷ For a detailed analysis, read Maria Rosa Menocal’s *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, particularly chapter five, “Italy, Dante, and the Anxieties of Influence,” pages 115-135.

⁸ Conklin Akbari’s “The Rhetoric of Antichrist in Western Lives of Muhammad” page 298.

with the Antichrist in historical and religious texts.⁹ [3] William Langland's fourteenth-century French allegory *Piers Plowman* is another classic representation of Islam as a Christian heresy. In fact, Langland's comparison between Christianity and Islam also draws a comparison between Christ and Muhammad.¹⁰ [2] Furthermore, anthropomorphism of the Islamic idols and Muslim's representations as polytheistic idolaters are two of the characteristics of the discourse of Islamic alterity in literary texts of the period.¹¹ [2] Nowhere is this attribute better represented than in the old French text, *Chanson de Roland*, in which the Christian Trinity is reflected correspondingly in a "pagan anti-trinity of Apolin, "Mahum," and "Trevagan."¹² [2]

However, one of the most nuanced treatments of Islam in Medieval literature is found in Dante's *Inferno* which is based on the works of Medieval historical commentators of the time. In lieu of a quick summary, Dante's *Divina Commedia* is a long narrative poem, an imaginative vision of the afterlife, an image of divine justice which draws on Medieval Romantic Catholic theology. This allegory of human life represents the inseparable nature of politics and religion in Medieval Europe. Guided by the Roman poet Virgil, Dante takes a journey to the inferno, purgatory and paradise. The point of his journey is to save his soul from a fate similar to those he encounters in the inferno. Dante's first journey to the inferno communicates the idea that as human beings, we are responsible not only for our actions, but also for their results, because all sins cause sociopolitical disorders. Although treachery is the worst sin and occupies the lowest circle within the *Inferno*, it is fraud that is the core of the corrupt society in Dante's scheme. In fact, fraud is a sin committed against society rather than an individual, hence the scope of evil is expanded by increasing the number of victims. The *Inferno* holds the souls of religious figures and political leaders who introduced serious division in the major institutions on earth; as a result, their sins are manifested in their bodies which are hacked apart by the devil's sword: "disseminators of scandal and schism / they were in life, therefore they are so rent."¹³ [6] In other words, through the bodily phenomenon of *contrapasso*, Dante transforms corporeal violence into a spiritual punishment in which the immortal, incorporeal soul suffers a somatic punishment. Placed deep in hell, in the ninth *bolge* of the eighth circle stands Muhammad whose mutilated torso embodies the split he brought within the Christian community: "cleft from the chin right down to where men fart. Between the legs the entrails dangled. I saw the innards and the loathsome sack that turns what one swallowed into shit."¹⁴ [6] Here, the divided community of the faithful is reflected in the fragmented body of Muhammad who stands as "a microcosm of the community."¹⁵ [2] Dante employs vulgar language of evisceration to describe Muhammad, which indicates a revulsion directed at the Prophet of Islam. At the time, autopsies were performed merely on "the lowlands of society;" thus, by comparing

⁹ For a detailed analysis: (ibid 301-2).

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of the topic read Conklin Akbari' *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient 1100-1450*, particularly chapter five: "Empty Idols and a False Prophet" (200-247).

¹¹ For a detailed analysis, Ibid.

¹² Ibid 208.

¹³ Dante's *Divine Comedy* (28. 35-36): "seminator di scandalo e di scisma / furor vivi e pero son fessi cosi."

¹⁴ Ibid (28. 24-27): "rotto dal mento infin dove si trulla. Tra le gambe pendevan le minugia; la corata pareva e'l tristo sacco / che merda fa di quel che si trangugia."

¹⁵ Conklin Akbari' *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient 1100-1450*, page 229.

Muhammad to an autopsied corpse, Dante associated the Prophet with vagrants, prisoners, and prostitutes, and anyone “bearing the badge of shame” in society.¹⁶ [10]

Millennial Representations of the Religious Schism in Western Media: The Case of the Twenty-First Century

Though the concept of religious schism has been modified over the centuries, the theological and political elements of the critiques of Islam, and their depictions across Western media, are essentially anchored to the same Medieval principles discussed earlier. Indeed, these representations are central to Western Christian understanding of Islam today, and they continue to define modern popular perception of Medieval events. Accordingly, a close reading of the representation of Muhammad in Dante’s *Inferno* in conjunction with the historical analysis of this schism via modern media anchor the paper’s argument at this point. We have already discussed schism and the representation of Muhammad within the *Inferno*, now let us move ahead a few centuries and look at modern representations of this divide.

Dracula Untold is a 2014 American dark fantasy horror film directed by Gary Shore which creates an origin story for the eponymous character of Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*. It casts Luke Evans as Vlad the Impaler the prince of Transylvania, and Dominic Cooper as the Turkish Sultan Mehmed II. The film looks at the historical events that happened during the reign of Mehmed II which coincides with that of Vlad III. Both are real historical figures with Mehmed being the conqueror of Constantinople bringing an end to the Byzantine Empire in 1453, and Vlad the Impaler being one of the most important rulers in Wallachia. Famous for his constant bloodshed, Vlad led his patronym Dracul as a sobriquet to the literary vampire Count Dracula.

The film offers a novel perspective into a lesser-known aspect of the story of Dracula and how Vlad III earned his reputation as a bloodthirsty ruler. The film begins with the voice-over of Vlad’s ten-year-old son, Ingeras, explaining that Vlad, as a child, was held a royal hostage at the palace of Murad II, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. Here, Vlad was trained as a soldier in the Sultan’s Janissaries corps and became the most-feared warrior, earning the title “Vlad the Impaler” after he slaughtered thousands of his enemies and impaled them on spears. Years later, when Vlad’s captivity ends, he returns to his palace in Transylvania to live in peace among his people. As time passes, however, the new Turkish Sultan, Mehmed II, demands one thousand Transylvanian boys, including Vlad’s own son, to join his new Janissary. Refusing to hand over the boys to Mehmed, and knowing war is imminent, Vlad makes a sacrificial exchange by undergoing a vampiric conversion to gain magical fighting powers to subjugate the Turkish Muslim marauders. In fact, *Dracula Untold* casts the Transylvanian prince as a devoted husband, a protective father, and a courageous, national hero; he is ready to sacrifice himself by striking a Faustian bargain with the Nosferatesque Master Vampire to gain superhuman powers and save his people from the Muslim marauders. Indeed, his sacrifice reverberates throughout history and it befits his grandeur as a national hero: if the “Turks never conquered the capitals of Europe,”¹⁷ [7] it is because of Prince Vlad’s sacrifice. If the Roman mystics’ prophesy about coming of a great evil, a vampire as such, comes true, it is the Muslim Turks and

¹⁶ Lippi’s “The Autopsy of the Prophet Muhammad,” page 1838.

¹⁷ *Dracula Untold* (00:10:04).

their wanton thirst for power which actualizes the prophesy and brings destruction upon Vlad. In fact, Prince Vlad chooses his damnation and moral condemnation to the darkness of a cave; however, this choice has a heroic purpose: to sacrifice his life for the betterment of his people and family.

At this point in the paper, historical hermeneutics and contextualization of the events within the film underpin the argument. In 1461, Pope Pius II wrote a controversial letter to the historical figure Mehmed II offering him papal support and political legitimacy to extend his rule among Christians in exchange for his conversion to Christianity and accepting the faith of the Gospel. Pius believes that the flaw which keeps Mehmed from exerting his power over the Christians is neither Mehmed's ethnic identity, nor the form of his government, but his faith which makes him unfit to rule over the Christian world. In fact, "the rejection of Mehmed's conquests lies on theological grounds and, therefore, a 'little bit of water' would turn this ruthless enemy into 'the greatest, most powerful and illustrious man of all who live today.'"¹⁸ [13] Furthermore, by drawing attention to Mehmed's baptism, 'the little bit of water,' Pius II emphasizes "the importance of faith in Quattrocento political discourse and the belief that politics alone may not overcome conflicts rooted in religious grounds."¹⁹ [13] Furthermore, the historical evidence indicates that European engagement with Islam during the Middle Ages was "marked by the deep interconnectedness of political and the theological," as these two realms were bound to intersect with one another.²⁰ [13]

Let us return to a cultural hermeneutics of the film by comparing the theological/political divide within the film with that of *Inferno 28*. In fact, in *Dracula Untold*, the connection between the wicked Sultan Mehmed II and the damned soul of Muhammad in *Inferno 28* is reinforced, as, arguably, Mehmed II is the outcome of Muhammad's schism, which resulted in the division within Christianity. Moreover, a closer look at the iconography of the film reveals a second link, this time between the hero-vampire Vlad and Messiah. Richard Corliss states that:

Vlad spends part of his childhood in a foreign land (not Egypt but Turkey) before maturing into an idealist and a freedom fighter. Choosing to die—to be undead—for the salvation of his people, Vlad endures a Calvary of sacrifice, and spends the requisite three days between Crucifixion and Resurrection. The difference is that for [Vlad] the resurrection, as a vampire in training, comes first [, and] he'll pay later.²¹ [4]

Although Vlad makes a deal with the Master Vampire to give him the strength to defeat the Turkish army, it is because as he observes, these days "Men do not fear swords. They fear monsters."²² [7]

Moreover, a closer scrutiny of the religious aspect of the events within *Dracula Untold* reveal subtle connections that the film makes with Medieval beliefs. For instance, commentators such as John of Damascus and Eulogius of Cordoba considered Islam as a

¹⁸ Moudarres, "Crusade and Conversion: Islam as Schism in Pius II and Nicholas of Cusa." Page 49.

¹⁹ Ibid 52.

²⁰ Ibid 52.

²¹ Richard Corliss, *Time*.

²² *Dracula Untold* (01:05:54).

form of Arianism because the main doctrine of both faiths was an attack on the central dogmas of the “Trinity and Incarnation.”²³ [8] In fact, this denial constituted the central source of doctrinal dissent between Islam and Christianity throughout the Middle Ages in which Muslims refused to believe that “Jesus Christ was the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father.”²⁴ [12] Thus, by denying the divine nature of Christ, Muhammad sought to remove the Father from the Son: “If, in the footsteps of Saint Paul, we assume that ‘the head of Christ is God,’ by denying the Trinity, Muhammad and his followers figuratively beheaded the Son.”²⁵ [12]

Returning to *Dracula Untold*, Mehmed also severs Vlad from his son who is the next heir to the throne. Moreover, the doctrine of Trinity is emphasized throughout the film in the form of iconography and symbolism. When Vlad arrives in Turks’ bivouac for negotiations, he carries the silver cross that his wife had given him, both as a token of his wife’s love and as a religious symbol. On the other hand, Mehmed rejects Vlad’s offer of peaceful negotiations; instead, he signs the contract with his own blood by stamping near the name of Allah written in Arabic script. Additionally, Christian iconography within certain scenes cements the connection between Vlad and Jesus. Knowing that the Turks’ vengeful attack is immanent, Vlad goes to the Cozia Monastery asking God if He has not yet forsaken him, then saves Vlad and his people. Vlad needs the help of his family to undergo the crucifixion; and as a result, his son brings him the bread and his wife gives him her blood as the last Supper before the sacrifice. Vlad has come to believe that for all the destruction that Muslim Turks have brought upon them, the world needs, not a sacrifice on the Cross for the redemption of humanity’s sins, but a monster that is strong enough to stand against those atrocities. Therefore, the monster becomes the new Messiah, who with his sacrifice, saves the rest of the Christian world from the yoke of the slavery to the Muslim Turks.

The second film that I am analyzing is Ridley Scott’s *Kingdom of Heaven*, a 2005 historical epic drama which represents the events during the brief years of peace between the second and the third Crusades in the year 1184 AD. On the way back to the Holy Land, Godfrey, a crusader, invites his son, Balian (Orlando Bloom) to accompany him. Seeking personal redemption for his wife’s suicide and his own murderous sins, the disillusioned Balian accepts the quest to Jerusalem in search of salvation to regain his faith in humanity. Although film’s visual style and cinematography are impressive, the effective camera angles and visual stimuli cannot divert the viewers’ attention away from Scott’s deeper message. In fact, *Kingdom of Heaven* is anti-war polemic in which the real atrocities often happen outside of the lens of camera and the film does what “good art” seeks to do, which is to “extract the pharmakon of healing from the poison of history.”²⁶ [5] Accordingly, the film is concerned with the right conduct rather than carnage and bloodshed; more focused on personal heroic codes and honor, than on imperialism or theological conflicts. At times, even the cinematography and the *mise-en-scène* become part of the allegory and a metaphoric projection of all humanity, and as a result, “all

²³ Esposito Frank, “Dante’s Muhammad: Parallels between Islam and Arianism.” 195.

²⁴ Moudarres, Andrea. “Beheading the Son: Muhammad and Bertran de Born in *Inferno* 28.” Page 560.

²⁵ Ibid 561.

²⁶ Dabashi, “Warriors of Faith.” *Sight and Sound*. Page 5 of 7 in the PDF file.

religious affiliations fade in the light of [a] melancholic quest to find a noble purpose in life.”²⁷ [5]

For nearly four decades, Muslims and Christians coexist peacefully in Jerusalem, and religious tolerance is practiced. It is only when extremists on both sides decide to control the Holy Land, in accordance with centuries-old hostilities, that things go wrong. One of Balian’s speeches to his troops communicates the futility of such wars: “We fight over an offense we did not give, against those who were not alive to be offended.”²⁸ [9] Finally, Saladin (Ghassan Massoud) leads the Muslim army against the Christians and Balian unwillingly surrenders the city to him.²⁹ When asked by Balian, “What is Jerusalem worth?” Saladin responds: “Nothing!” Grinning he adds, and “Everything!”³⁰ [9] The film then ends with the epilogue: “Nearly a thousand years later, peace in the Kingdom of Heaven remains elusive!”³¹ [9]

CONCLUSION

Although the notion of religious schism has changed over the centuries, the primal components of critiques of Islam and their representations across Western media are still rooted in the same principles constructed during the Middle Ages. Cultural products are an effective way to deliver an implied or even distorted historical message to the audience in whom the traits of conformity to the prescribed categories are often reinforced through exposure to such media. However, in order to break the conformity of the audience to such classificatory thought systems, one needs to disembed the elements of a naïve response from the calculated construction of the visual and verbal texts. This can be achieved by reading between the words and images; that is to say, one needs to get not only into what is being said and shown directly, but also into the double entendres or even silences to find out what hidden messages can be drawn from what isn’t said or shown directly in the text. This way the audience can remake reality, and the text becomes open to multiple interpretations.

While *Dracula Untold* and *Kingdom of Heaven* depict heroic tales, each takes opposing views in showcasing the historical events of their respective times. While the latter disparages extremist religious views about the Holy Land and instead focuses on Christian/Muslim peace and brotherhood, the former is a tale of revenge and damnation. If the message of *Kingdom of Heaven* is embracing a common humanity, that of *Dracula*

²⁷ Ibid pages 4-5 of 7 in the PDF file,

Muslim scholar Hamid Dabashi maintains that *Kingdom of Heaven* is “neither pro- nor anti-Islamic, neither pro- nor anti- Christian. It was, in fact, not even about the Crusades. And yet I consider the film to be a profound act of faith.” “Warriors of Faith.” *Sight and Sound*. Page 4 of 7 in the PDF file.

²⁸ *Kingdom of Heaven* (01:37:33).

²⁹ Salah ad-in, better known simply as Saladin, is the Muslim Sultan of Egypt and Syria during the early twelfth century who reclaimed Jerusalem for Islam. Mackowiak describes him as a figure of myth and legend, mostly for his image as the “noble enemy” than for his grand victories. Look at “The Last Days of Sala al-Din (Saladin) “Noble Enemy” of the Third Crusade” by Philip A. Mackowiak, page 784. To learn more about the historical figure of Saladin, read *Saladin in His Time* by Newby, P.H.

³⁰ *Kingdom of Heaven* (02:01:50).

³¹ Ibid (02:10:03).

Untold is a herald to war. If Balian and Saladin as “noble enemies” are not rarities among epic heroes, Mehmed and Vlad are not two different ends of a spectrum either. At the end, if the audience is seeking ethical certainties and moral simplicity, perhaps *Dracula Untold* would be a better choice since *Kingdom of Heaven* is not the sought-after kingdom of God, but rather, in Balian’s words: It is a “kingdom of conscience, or nothing.”³² [9]

It seems to me that whether the two sides of a binary are historical/fictional narratives, fictional characters such as Mehmed and Vlad, or even historical figures such as Jesus and Muhammad, we should keep in mind that one side of the binary is always dependent on the other side, or relies on the act of excluding and subordinating the other. Perhaps one reason why such exclusion is necessary is that one side of the binary may not be quite so *other* after all. Taking the example of the film, perhaps Mehmed stands as a sign of something in Vlad which Vlad needs to repress and expel beyond his own being, or even needs to relegate to a securely alien place beyond his own limits; and perhaps what is outside is also somehow inside! In other words, the monster can be found not merely outside of Vlad and in his nemesis, but inside Vlad himself as well. All in all, isn’t the twenty-first century a time for a reconciliation and peaceful coexistence of religions in the Holy Land and the Middle East, rather than pursuing a futile hostility inherited from the previous centuries?

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³² Ibid (01:15:58).

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