



The Odd Brilliance of Dante's Epic Poem, *The Divine Comedy*

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Dante Alighieri was one of the greatest epic poets in world history. He lived more than 700 years ago in Italy. He created the extraordinarily imaginative tale, *The Divine Comedy*, while he was in exile from Firenze (Florence), his beautiful hometown. A fascinating history of political intrigue had caused Dante to be banished from Firenze in the year 1302 and sentenced to death if he ever stepped foot in the city again.

Curiously, the city council of Firenze approved a motion in 2008 to revoke this sentence of exile. One might wonder why more than 700 years had elapsed before the city council finally gave this recognition to its native son for his great contributions to literature and philosophy. Dante's exile from his home town had caused him great anguish and hardship, and he never saw his wife, children or possessions again. He spent the last twenty years of his life in various other towns in Italy, writing furiously in *The Divine Comedy* about his imaginative conceptions of *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Yes, those mythical places that some religious folks in the U.S. still literally believe in: Hell, Purgatory and Heaven.

Oddly enough, the motion of the city council of Firenze in 2008 was approved by a vote of 19 to 5. One might wonder exactly what the 5 folks were thinking in their opposition! It seems that there is always some antagonistic element that opposes every idea; Why, there are even Americans who are against apple pie!

The Divine Comedy is a great allegory of good and evil. The action in *The Divine Comedy* is primarily about Dante's encounters and conversations with historic personages on an eventful journey. In this epic, according to the New World Encyclopedia, "Dante establishes a dialogue with the past in a way never before realized, and leads the way into a future that would become the Renaissance -- literally, the rebirth -- of European culture, a recapturing and 'baptizing' of its Hellenic past."

Just the thought of this influential old masterpiece makes one wishful for a new modern day update of all the characters who have lived in the last 700 years and gone on to an afterlife in the hot place due to their transgressions of self-indulgence, abuses of power, violence or malice. I would be quite curious to find out which persons may have more commendably made it into the seven terraces of *Purgatorio* -- and to find out about the eminences who have gotten into any of the nine celestial spheres of *Paradiso*.

Being so inspired, I yearn instead to create a modern treatise that might be effective in transforming our current day economic, political, social, moral and environmental mess into a more auspicious future for us all, so as to increase the number of folks who deserve to go to the good place, and to decrease the number of reprobates and exploiters deserving of an eternal destiny in the bad place.

An exploration of Dante's extraordinary story in *The Divine Comedy* can be a revealing undertaking. A review is undertaken below. Knowing that an author's writings can be best understood in the context of their own personal experiences, and of the events of the times in which they lived, let's begin with a summary of Dante's eventful personal history and motivating drives.

[Dante's Life, and How He Came to His Perspectives](#)

As a boy, Dante loved Firenze. When he was nine years old, he fell madly in love at first sight, from afar, with an eight-year-old girl named Beatrice who became a kind of courtly-love inspiration for his poetry and philosophy for the rest of his life. At the moment he first glimpsed Beatrice, he regarded her as ineffably lovely and sublime. He wrote (as related in *Inspiration, Imagination, and the Deep Well of Human Impulses*):

"The moment I saw her, I say in all truth that the vital spirit, which dwells in the inmost depths of the heart, began to tremble so violently that I felt the vibrations alarmingly in all my pulses, ... As it trembled, it uttered these words <Behold a goddess more powerful than I, who comes to rule over me> ... From then on indeed Love ruled over my soul ..."

Dante and Beatrice never got together, but he occasionally glimpsed her in Firenze and always felt a passionate sense of inspiration toward her. "Courtly love" was an idealized and romanticized kind of relationship during feudal times that was modeled on noble love relationships between an aspiring knight and a high lady of the court. The courtly love relationship typically was not between husband and wife because it was an idealized sort of platonic affair that could not exist within the context of real life medieval marriages. Courtly love laudably sang of the nobility of the feminine, which is an attitude I personally extol and appreciate.

When Dante were only 25 years old, Beatrice died. Dante was utterly disconsolate at the loss of this muse that he had elevated to a high pedestal, so he devoted himself to philosophical studies at religious schools in Firenze. He was known to have read Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*. This fact sends me back to Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses, and a memory of reminiscences contained in *Comprehensive Global Perspective*:

"Treachery had reduced Boethius from a position of power and wealth to that of a condemned prisoner in 524 CE. A vision of Lady Philosophy came to him in prison that embodied true wisdom and compassion. Lady Philosophy provided consolation to Boethius, and he realized that happiness comes from within. He observed: 'Understanding of the self only arises in relationship, in watching yourself in relationship to people, ideas, and things; to trees, the earth, and the world around you and within you. Relationship is the mirror in which the self is revealed. Without self-knowledge there is no basis for right thought and action.'"

Dante had experienced his own feelings of being a victim of treachery. He took part in disputes of the times between Franciscans and Dominicans, two religious factions that were involved in struggles between mystical beliefs, as represented by Saint Bonaventure, and those who believed that reason should be paramount, as embodied in the ideas of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

The following two paragraphs are a parenthetical sidebar for background understanding:

The Franciscan Order was founded in the 13th century by Saint Francis, who, in a vision, felt he had been charged by God to rebuild the Church. Franciscans are typically characterized by living lives of simplicity, penance, poverty and expressions of love for the poor. Franciscan communities tend to emphasize contemplative and apostolic pursuits, as the Capuchin Sisters of Nazareth do.

The Dominican Order is known as the "Order of Preachers". It was founded by Saint Dominic, also in the early 13th century. Dominic saw a need for greater education and engagement in intellectual society. The "charism" of the Dominicans -- that is, the "distinct spirit that animates a religious community and gives it a particular character" -- has its primary focus on preaching and teaching, with a goal of converting souls. Today, this apostolic spirit has adapted itself most notably to education and catechisms of the young, so it's common to find Dominicans in schools as teachers and professors.

Dante's particular inspiration came not only from his courtly-love admiration for his muse Beatrice, but also from powerful political passions that had been stoked by abuses of power by Pope Boniface VIII. Dante had been permanently exiled from Firenze because he sided with a political faction that had fallen out of favor, and he became bitter, desperately angry and all but suicidal, because of the extreme inequity of this harsh punishment. He achieved a catharsis through the process of writing *The Divine Comedy*, and this impressive act of creativity is said to have saved his life.

Here is how his exile came about. A protracted conflict had been taking place between Guelphs and Ghibellines in early Medieval Italy. The Guelphs were a political alliance that supported the Pope and religious authorities, and

were involved in a complex opposition to the imperial party, the Ghibellines, who backed the Holy Roman Emperor. The Holy Roman Empire existed from 962 CE until 1806 in Central Europe, and the territory of the empire was centered in the Kingdom of Germany.

This struggle between Guelphs and Ghibellines can be accurately understood as having been a conflict between the "church party" and the "imperial party", but the strife was actually in many instances simply a manifestation of local rivalries between different city-states in Italy at the time. Today in the United States, one might note, the church party and the imperial party have united together into one party -- the Republican Party -- and the supporters of this Party primarily oppose the fair-minded ideals of the Democratic Party, an organization that supposedly has its basic concern with the best interests of the majority of the people.

"Broadly speaking," Wikipedia informs, "Guelphs tended to come from wealthy mercantile families, whereas Ghibellines were predominantly those whose wealth was based on agricultural estates." The conflicts basically pitted merchants against the aristocracy. A villainous act of treachery by a Florentine man by the name of Bocca degli Villani helped the Ghibelline factions from Siena to emerge victorious over Guelphs from Firenze in the Battle of Montaperti in the year 1260, before Dante was born. Dante was later to relegate Bocca degli Villani to the worst and lowest place in Hell, where Dante imagined cold-hearted traitors to be consigned after they died.

Some years later, in 1289, the opposite outcome was achieved when Guelphs from Firenze defeated Ghibellines from Siena at a battle in the Tuscan countryside near Campaldino. Dante himself, 24 years old at the time, was one of the combatants on the Guelph side in this battle. After the victory, the Guelphs divided into two factions who then fought among themselves: the White Guelphs and the Black Guelphs. Dante's father was a White Guelph. Severe civic disturbances resulted, with many unintended consequences; one of these was that Dante, as a member of the White Guelphs who were opposed to the overweening power of the Pope, was exiled from Firenze for the rest of his life. This was a terrible hardship for him, as he desperately missed his wife, children, possessions and former aristocratic status.

The Black Guelphs supported the Pope. The White Guelphs were particularly opposed to the abuses of power by Pope Boniface VIII, who Dante later placed in the eighth circle of Hell along with those who practiced "simony", a form of clerical malfeasance in which religious authorities sold positions of power and trafficked for money in spiritual matters. Pope Boniface VIII had proclaimed that "it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman pontiff." He basically claimed that the popes were the final authority over both the church and the state. He arrogantly stated: "God has set popes over kings and kingdoms."

When men speak for God and proclaim doctrines that appear nakedly self-serving or narrowly biased or harshly discriminatory, it should cast suspicion on their motives, and discredit and disgrace their doctrines. Another of the reasons that Dante put Pope Boniface VIII in one of the worst levels of Hell may have been that the scheming Pope conspired to get his predecessor, Pope Celestine V, to abdicate his position in 1294, and then after getting himself elected Pope, one of his first acts as pontiff was to throw his predecessor in prison for the remainder of his life.

In a weak defense of Pope Boniface VIII, however, he did come up with one clever and somewhat fair-minded plan. He offered a full pardon for all sinners on a "Jubilee" that he declared for the entire year of 1300. There were two specific conditions for such Jubilee pardons: (1) a sinner must confess his or her sins, and (2) the sinner must visit the basilicas of St. Peter and St. Paul in Rome once a day for a whole month if they were Roman inhabitants, or once a day for 15 days if they were strangers to Rome. This was a brilliant plan, because the original Jubilee in 1300 resulted in an average of 200,000 pilgrims a day in Rome for most of the year, so it was a windfall for the material benefit of the not wholly holy city. Rome had never received such crowds before, and the economic stimulus was no doubt heartening to the local merchants -- and materially beneficial for the coffers of the Church.

It is noteworthy that Pope Boniface VIII had originally intended that a Jubilee of forgiveness would be held every 100 years, but it was so popular that another was held in the year 1350, and every 25 years ever since, more or less. The last Jubilee was held in the year 2000, when conditions were liberalized for getting "indulgences", although it has always required confession, Communion, prayer for the Pope, and freedom from all attachment to sin. (*Prayer for the Pope*, of all the possible top priorities for salvation!)

These remissions of the penalties of sin have been a big source of profit to the church -- and a significant source of scandal. An "indulgence", curiously, was a remission of all the penalties for sin, but NOT of the guilt of the sin itself, which God would deal with, presumably with harsh vengeance, once the sinner has died.

Firenze in those days had become a place that had "lost its way, a society that had sacrificed the good of the community to the interests of the most powerful individuals." This incisive observation has resonance for us today due to widespread abuses of power by our representatives, and it reminds me of Mark Twain's laconic remark, "History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme."

Remember, in pondering the implications of these unfolding events in Dante's life, that most religious establishments throughout history have always been extremely undemocratic institutions. The Pope is chosen, for example, by a group of very conservative old men -- the 115 to 120 conservative Catholic cardinals around the world.

Corporations in modern times are likewise highly undemocratic institutions. They have oft narrowly-focused goals, and they sometimes wield the power of their influence even more ruthlessly than religious establishments. Since only governments have a semblance of being democratic, among the primary institutions that affect our lives, this understanding makes the fairness principles at the heart of democracy eminently laudable. This way of seeing society should parenthetically give us strength to resist the threats posed by abuses of power by either corporations or churches. These observations are the reason that a separation of church and state is so crucial for fairness, social justice, and peaceful coexistence in the world today. Also, a greater independence of government from powerful business entities and the domineering influence of rich people and church authorities is needed to bring greater good goals into being. That's my opinion!

The Divine Comedy - Particulars

One reason *The Divine Comedy* is often regarded as the greatest epic poem in world history is because of its complexity and grand scope. It is a tale of an allegorical journey that is couched in medieval Christian theology, and it is also an exploration of broader mystical, spiritual, psychological, philosophical and moral themes. In addition, Dante used remarkable symbolism in his story and made extensive references to famous personages from historical times as well as his own contemporary day.

The poem's 3 parts each consisted of 33 Cantos, and each Canto was written in 3-line stanzas, and every line of every Canto contained 11 syllables in its original Italian language. That is some complex haiku! Try to imagine how these constraints that Dante imposed on his writings in *The Divine Comedy* must have influenced the expression of his imaginative ideas. Just try to write a single stanza that expresses something meaningful using such constraints, and you'll achieve a better appreciation of the brilliance of this artistic accomplishment.

During medieval times, numbers held symbolic significance. The number 3 was a symbol of the Holy Trinity. Dante divided *Inferno* into three divisions, as signified by a she-wolf that represented self-indulgence, a lion that represented ambition and violence, and a leopard that represented fraud.

I personally find *The Divine Comedy* to be much more sophisticated than the astonishingly successful classic by John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is To Come*. Like Dante, John Bunyan had become burdened by terrible woes in his life. As related in *Inspiration, Imagination, and the Deep Well of Human Impulses*, "... he had become convinced that all men are destined to eternal damnation unless they pursue a straight and narrow path to salvation. He trembled, and lamented, and became obsessed with the question, "What shall I do to be saved?"

This crisis eventually prompted John Bunyan to create the thinly allegorical character Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Christian was a man who was so mentally burdened by literal beliefs in terrible Biblical teachings of sin and eternal damnation that he abandoned his family in a gamble for the illusory goals of glory and eternal life. To abandon your family in such a gamble seems to me to be "unconscionably irresponsible!"

My literary hero Mark Twain himself had strived to piggyback his book on the shoulders of Bunyan's classic by naming the best-selling of his works during his lifetime *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrims' Progress*. Mark Twain, being a clever purveyor of sardonic humor, would have appreciated Voltaire's comment about Dante

when he wrote that Dante's fame was secure because nobody reads him! Admittedly, Dante's story is conveyed in abstruse language and obscure references, but a study of *The Divine Comedy* can yield valuable insights for people in their lives.

Dante's magnum opus begins with the line, "In the middle of the journey of our life, I awoke within a dark wood where the straight way was lost." On the evening of Good Friday in the year 1300, Dante had imagined himself in this dark forbidding forest, fearful and unable to find his way out, and driven to depths of despair and discouragement.

Dante sought salvation but couldn't find the way and was at the end of hope when he encountered the ghost of Virgil, the ancient Roman poet who epitomized the veritable voice of reason. Virgil claims to have been sent to Dante by his muse Beatrice to guide him through Hell and Purgatory. She herself could not come to guide him because she was in *Paradiso*, and was thus much too pure to be sullied by descending to the depths where he needed to go on his journey of salvation.

Dante finds many persons from earlier in history in *Inferno*, where those who tried to justify their active sins were sent because they were unrepentant. Others who admitted their sins of intention and asked for forgiveness while they were alive were allowed to avoid Hell and go on to *Purgatorio*. Dante's allegory assumes a Christian perspective of sin as worldly vice, so it is fascinating to find out that the word "sin" is actually derived from a linguistic root in archery, which meant, "to miss the mark." This meaning of the word sin is less judgmental than conventional understandings, so it can point us to an evaluation of how each of us may be missing the mark in our own lives, and how our cultures determine what marks are to be regarded as virtue or vice, righteous or sinful.

Together with Virgil as his guide, the two seekers approach *Inferno*. Before entering the vestibule of Hell, Dante and Virgil see the souls of the Uncommitted, the people who did nothing in their lives that was either good or evil. These are outcasts who took no side in moral conflicts, and instead eternally pursued a banner of self-interest, so they are condemned to be constantly pursued and eaten by insects. This punishment of these souls involves them being mercilessly stung by their conscience and eaten by spiritual stagnation.

Wailing and blasphemy of damned souls accompanies Dante on his journey in *Inferno*, in contrast to the joyful and hopeful singing of the blessed souls who arrive in *Purgatorio* on their journeys of redemption. Dante envisions the circles of Hell as concentric, descending in gradual worsening states of wickedness through nine levels that finally culminate at the center of the Earth where Satan is held in bondage. In each successive circle, Dante imagines sins to be punished with appropriate symbolic instances of divine vengeance and poetic justice.

When Dante and Virgil enter the gates of Hell to travel through its nine circles, they are assailed by three frightening beasts they cannot evade: the she-wolf, the lion, and the leopard. Dante used these three beasts to symbolize three types of sins: the self-indulgent ones, the brutally ambitious ones, and the maliciously fraudulent ones. The first five Circles of Upper Hell that Dante imagined were for those whose sins are self-indulgent; Circles 6 and 7 were for worse sins, the violent ones; and Circles 8 and 9 were for the worst sins, the malicious ones.

The first Circle of Hell is Limbo. This is where Dante consigns unbaptized people and "pagans" who lived before Christianity was invented, so could not possibly have been faithful believers in the LORD God to come. Here Dante finds some of the world's greatest heroes and thinkers, and the most creative minds of ancient Greece and Rome, including the classical poets Homer, Horace and Ovid and the philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Dante envisioned Limbo as a rather admirable place, with lots of calm philosophic discussions going on.

Since Christian eschatology expects every person to conform to its dogmas and doctrines, those who have not accepted the Christian Creation story are damned to this Limbo region of Hell-lite, which is similar to Asphodel Meadows in Greek mythology. Everyone who lived before the New Testament of the Bible was written had to be relegated to Limbo because they could hardly have chosen to accept Jesus Christ into their lives before Jesus even existed!

Dante describes the second circle of Hell as a place for those who yielded to lust during their lives, and who let their carnal appetites sway their reason. These sinners are blown about by terrible winds with no hope of rest.

Dante put the famous lovers Paolo and Francesca, who were the models for Rodin's beautiful sculpture *The Kiss*, in this part of Hell for their adultery-besmirched love affair.

Dante envisions the third circle of Hell as a place where those who indulged in gluttony during their lives were forced to wallow in a vile slush. Those who surrendered to cold-hearted selfishness, and who indulged in "empty sensuality", resided in this third circle of Hell.

Dante envisions the fourth circle of Hell as a place where two categories of people are found. The first were those who manifested avaricious and miserly propensities, and hoarded possessions during their lives. Many clergymen, popes and cardinals fell into this group. The second type were the "prodigal" wasters, who squandered material goods and resources. These two groups form a struggling multitude that jostled and cried out at each other: "Why do you hoard?", and "Why do you squander?" (In today's materialistic times, we have developed a mindless insouciance toward wasting resources, but this obtuse attitude may well prove to be a fateful form of reckless folly.)

In Canto VII, Dante examined these misers and prodigals -- scrimping cheapskates on one side and wild spenders on the other. "Useless saving, and useless spending, robbed them of their time ... Men may brawl and swindle their way into Lady Fortune's favors, but she deceives them. Not all the gold that is, or ever was, could buy any of these exhausted wretches a single moment's rest."

The fifth circle of Hell is for those who wreak their wrath on others. Sullen and angry people in this part of Hell lie gurgling beneath a surface of swamp-like waters of the mythical river Styx, withdrawn "into a black sulkiness which can find no joy in God or man or the universe."

As they cross the river Styx, Dante and Virgil approach the city of Dis and the sixth circle of Hell, where heretics are consigned. These souls are trapped in flaming tombs. Even the commendable Greek philosopher Epicurus is found there, for his supposedly heinous sin of having expressed the opinion that the soul dies with the body. That is a belief that apparently contradicts one of God's central doctrines of the existence of an immortal soul, and is thus a hellishly evil thing to profess.

Dante and Virgil next entered Lower Hell where violent and malicious sins are punished. Foul-smelling, the seventh circle of Hell is a place for violent people. It is divided into three rings: an Outer ring for those who perpetrate violence against property and other people, and are immersed in a river of boiling blood and fire as punishment; a Middle ring, for "profligates" who destroyed their own lives, and people who committed suicide; and a Lower ring for those who purportedly perpetrate violence against God directly through blasphemy, and those who commit violence against nature through acts of sodomy, and money lenders and usurers who take unfair advantage of other people. I encourage some of today's "conservative" evangelical Christians to clarify the reasons for this odd ordering!

In the last two circles of Hell, people whose sins involve conscious fraud or treachery are punished. These people are judged as being the very worst sinners on Earth because they are guilty of cold-hearted, deliberate and intentional acts of treacherous evil.

The eighth circle of Hell has an assemblage of people in it who have exploited others by committing various kinds of fraud. This circle of Hell includes a wide variety of people like panderers, seducers, flatterers, false profits, corrupt politicians, hypocrites, thieves and deceiving manipulators. This place includes people who sowed discord, like Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Islamic prophet Muhammad who caused the dangerous and violent schism between Sunni and Shia branches of Islam. Ali and his descendants have been responsible for great grief in the world, and it seems like it is spiraling out of control in the Middle East with terrible wars in Syria and Yemen. The eighth circle of Hell is also the destiny of those who commit "simony", the form of materialistic trafficking for money in spiritual matters that involves the sale of religious offices, positions, perks and power.

Dante called the eighth circle of Hell "Malebolge" ("evil ditches"). Malebolge is envisioned as a funnel-shaped cavern divided into ten concentric circular trenches, called bolgia. At the center of Malebolge is the ninth and final circle of hell. Dante and his guide Virgil make their way into Malebolge riding on the back of the monster Geryon, a personification of fraud. Geryon possessed the smiling face of an honest man "good of cheer", but had a

sinisterly sinuous body and the tail of a deadly scorpion. Just for fun, imagine a handsome dissembler like Mitt Romney or Donald Trump pulling a reverse Ronald Reagan and becoming actors to play the role of Geryon in a new *Divine Comedy* movie.

The ninth circle of Hell is reserved for traitors, the most outrageous sinners of all. The 9th circle is not a seething hot cauldron. No, it is aptly a frozen lake of ice, called Cocytus. The source of water in the lake is the tears of a statue of the Old Man of Crete, which symbolized the sins of humanity. Cocytus is divided into four descending rounds for different degrees of the sins of treachery that correspond, in their order of seriousness, to betrayal of family ties, betrayal of community and country ties, betrayal of the trust of guests, and betrayal of benefactors. I can visualize the Old Man of Crete crying in sadness and chagrin at the woes wreaked on the populace by those who abuse power for nefarious purposes. Tyranny, after all, sucks! Let's liberate ourselves -- and let democratic fair-mindedness, honorable Golden Rule principles, and future-respecting factions prevail.

If any capitalists today act as traitors to the people who help enable them to get rich, they are thus acting in ways that Dante would have seen as deserving of the very worst of all the levels of Hell. Since actions reveal far more than words, people like Mitt Romney who have always shown a much greater concern for profits than people would face a daunting future life in a hellishly hot eternity. "Dude, you may be going to Hell." Ha! -- just kidding! (This quip was written when Mitt Romney was running for President, and advocated slashing tax rates on rich people like himself.)

Dante imagines in *The Divine Comedy* that those who tried to justify their sins and are unrepentant will go to Hell, while those who admitted their sins and asked for forgiveness while they were alive were entitled to go to *Purgatorio*, where they would at least have a chance to achieve redemption.

Satan is found at the very center of Hell. He had been condemned for having committed the ultimate sin: personal treachery against God. Yep, that's the very worst sin there is. Dante imagined Satan as having three faces. Each face had a mouth that is chewing on a prominent traitor like Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus Christ, or Brutus and Cassius, who took part in the assassination of Julius Caesar in the Roman Senate. The mouths chew their victims, constantly tearing the traitors to pieces but never killing them. A real lovely tale, that.

Finally Dante and Virgil entered a hidden road to return to the bright world, "And without care of having any rest ... we came forth to rebehold the stars."

Having survived the depths of Hell and ascended out of the gloomy underworld, Dante sought to discover how a penitent soul can convert itself "from the sorrow and misery of sin to the state of grace". He arrived, still guided by Virgil, to explore *Purgatorio* on Easter Sunday. On the lower slopes of the Mount of Purgatory, an area is found where seekers of penitence must wait a long period of time if they have been excommunicated by Church authorities for some act considered egregious, or if they merely repented at the last minute before they died. Church authorities vastly prefer people to toe the line throughout their lives, and not just convert at the last minute in case there actually may be an eternal life in a terrible hot place for everyone who does not sincerely profess belief to attain everlasting bliss.

The angel at the gate of Purgatory uses two keys to admit pilgrims on their journey; one is silver, representing remorse, and the other is gold, representing reconciliation. These are the two qualities that were regarded as necessary for salvation and redemption. I regret; please forgive.

Dante and Virgil then ascended up through the seven roots of sinfulness in *Purgatorio*. These sins were seen to be "more psychological" than the sins in the *Inferno*. Sins that are being absolved in *Purgatorio* are based on sinful motives rather than on the sinful actions of people who were consigned to Hell. The seven sins in *Purgatorio* arise from some type of distorted love, like perverted love that harms others, or a wide variety of kinds of deficient love, or the excessive or disordered love of good things like wine, women and the wrong kind of song.

Purgatorio, the second part of Dante's great allegorical poem, tells the story of Dante climbing up a mountain from Ante-Purgatory at the bottom through seven levels of suffering and spiritual growth beneath the summit of Earthly Paradise. The seven terraces of *Purgatorio* represent the "seven deadly sins" -- pride, envy, wrathfulness, sloth, covetousness, gluttony, and lustfulness.

Dante had described Hell as existing underneath Jerusalem, and as having been created by the impact of Satan's terrible fall. The Mount of Purgatory lies on the exact opposite side of the world, in the Southern Hemisphere, and was created by a displacement of rock caused by the reverberating shock-wave impacts of Satan's fall. Amazingly enough, Dante was brilliant enough to have realized that the world was round, and to do so almost two centuries before Christopher Columbus dared to sail toward what many people reckoned was the edge of the flat Earth.

Even more interesting, Dante even anticipated, in the early 1300s, a discovery that was made more than 600 years later in the 1960s, which suggested that the impact of an enormous asteroid at the Chicxulub ("Chick-shoe-lube") Crater site near the Yucatan Peninsula some 65 million years ago was responsible for setting off a long series of volcanic eruptions at the antipodes of the colossal impact on the opposite side of the planet. There, in the Deccan Traps area of present day India, almost 200,000 square miles of land is still covered as much as 6,000 feet deep with igneous flood basalt.

When spiritual pilgrims ascended the Mount of Purgatory and prepared to leave it, Dante imagined them becoming shipwrecked if they trusted only their own intelligence and shrewd acumen. Reason alone cannot teach us the full scope of virtuous action; love, too, must be allowed to provide its valued guidance. When a person is shipwrecked, they require reconnection, community and a degree of grace. Remember, the gates of Hell are wide open, but to enter the gates of Purgatory the keys of repentance and reconciliation are needed. Right and wrong go walking together in Purgatory.

Let the story of the life of St. Francis of Assisi inform this essay. During his youth, Francis was a dandy in dress and he was popular, handsome and musically talented, and he even presided over the Dionysian Saturnalia in Rome as a kind of master of ceremonies. This wild celebration was such a debaucherous indulgence and involved such scandalous revelry in those days that the Roman authorities decided to crack down harshly on the festivities. The Vatican today, I reflect, may want to investigate the annual Burning Man event in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada for any similar outrages to propriety and decorum.

Circumstances have a way of humbling the fortunate as well as the unfortunate, and some profound humiliations rudely interrupted the privileged life Francis had been leading. Mortified by some real embarrassing experiences in his involvements with the Crusades, he began hearing voices that told him to be a warrior for God and to renounce the pursuit of wealth, status and material things. So he sought solace in nature and made a vow of poverty, and preached to birds, and eventually was honored by being anointed the honorable saint of the natural world and wildlife. Bravo! for that, no matter how dark the woods had become, or how lost Francis felt before being inspired to achieve some transcendent good. Purgatorio done him good!

Paradiso

At last, having completed his journey through *Purgatorio*, Dante passes through an immense wall of flame at the far end of the terrace of the lustful, and he finally meets his enchanting muse Beatrice in *Paradiso*. She then guides him through the River Lethe, which erases the memories of past sins, and he finally drinks from the River Eunoë that restores good memories, and he is pure and prepared for his ascent to Heaven and his "climb unto the stars."

The Divine Comedy was a comedy in a classic sense: it concerned everyday subjects rather than more tragic affairs, and it had a happy ending. Perhaps I should rename the Earth Manifesto *The Earthly Comedy!* This modern Comedy has an auspicious happy ending, despite the travails that it considers in transit, because it proposes many positive ways forward that could have truly far-reaching and transformationally auspicious impacts on the future well-being of humankind.

In the realm of ancient Rome, Fortuna (Lady Fortune) was the goddess of fortune and the veritable personification of luck. Lady Fortune figuratively smiles and frowns on each of us, and since every person born will eventually die, the ultimate criteria for a happy ending can only be one in which we all leave the world a better place by our character and actions to make a positive difference. Even illustrious people can fall to ruin, as was shown by Dante's disastrous personal life after he was exiled from his beloved hometown. Empathy and compassion are

among the most honorable human principles, and people who exhibit a jealously entitled sense of mean-spirited and exclusive deservedness are of a much lower moral realm.

"I bemoan the wounds of Fortune with weeping eyes, for the gifts she made me she perversely takes away. The wheel of Fortune turns; I go down, demeaned; another is raised up; far too high up sits the king at the summit - let him fear ruin!"

--- Carl Orff's operatic *Carmina Burana*

Understanding that Lady Fortune can be both good luck and bad, Christian philosophy explained random and often ruinous turns of Fortune's Wheel as being both inevitable and providential, because they are a part of "God's hidden plan." I myself doubt this, and imagine that God would be much too busy to concoct each of our individual fates at every moment.

I believe, in contrast, that each of us has some degree of free will, and that we should all work together to remake our societies so that they will be fairer for all -- especially those of our heirs in future generations, who we are harming by our obliviousness when we "miss the mark" with our unchristian acts and ecological shortsightedness.

Yours Truly,

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