

A MESSAGE HIDDEN BUT ALWAYS SEEN:
THE SPIRITUAL FRANCISCANS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON THE WORKS OF
DANTE

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In the early 14th century, Dante Alighieri wrote the *Commedia*, a work which has influenced the minds and souls of those who have been privileged to read it. The late 13th and early 14th century also witnessed the rise of the Spirituals' movement, a faction of the Franciscans. Scholarly debate has continued for centuries on the multitude of influences that could have contributed to Dante's work. My intention in this project is to find historical parallels, specifically through literary sources, between Dante and the Spirituals. If we can better understand the roots of Dante's inspiration, we can continue to build a history of his life. A further intention is to understand the lost messages the Spirituals strove to preserve, particularly in the role of women, most notably St Clare of Assisi.

The writings and philosophy of Dante are strikingly similar to the writings and ideology of the late 13th century movement within the Franciscan order, the *spirituali*. Geographically and poetically it is evident that there is relationship between Dante and the Spirituals, however, their impact and concurrence within his life is tenuous. Based on an overlapping history of the Spirituals' movement and an investigation of Dante's works beyond and including the *Commedia*, it is my position that Dante was a proponent of the Spirituals.

This argument integrates not only the later life of Dante and the Spirituals but the early movements of the Spirituals, which influenced Dante as early as 1274. In 1274, the year Dante mentions in the *Vita Nuova* his first sighting of Beatrice, several Spirituals in the March of Ancona were imprisoned for radical beliefs which were contrary to those of the Pope. It is also noteworthy to mention the difficulty of defining a 'Spirituals' movement. Only recently has the extensive work of David Burr¹ proven that there was a clear distinction between the order and a group collectively labeled the 'spirituals.'

Dante's poetry alone is so inspiringly beautiful that it is not necessary to over-analyze the ultimate meaning, and the reader should take from Dante's prose the transformation of spirit which it was written to perform. However, it is the character of the historian to find answers to constant questions so we may better understand the world of someone we so admire. Historians attempt to find deeper meaning in words that expand with the increased knowledge found in their collective past. Through the words of Dante the answers are always in front of our eyes.

¹ Burr, David. 2001. *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press.