



Islamic Hell

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Abstract

Ideas about punishment in hell (the Fire, *Jahannam*) have an important place both in the Qur'an and in later Muslim literature. The article surveys the scenarios of hell given in these sources and discusses the various functions of hell-talk in Islamic discourse. In particular, a tension exists between conceiving hell as a place of punishment for sins and as a place reserved for disbelievers, or non-Muslims. The two perspectives meet in the idea that disbelief (*kuffr*) is the worst of all sins, though ambiguities regarding who belong in hell remain. Strategies to mediate this ambiguity are found in the ideas that hell is divided into several levels or that the punishment in hell is only temporary.

Keywords

hell in Islam, *Jahannam*, Kafir, eternity of hell

The doctrine of hell forms an integral part of Islamic theology. It is an essential aspect of the belief in the Day of Judgment, which is one of the six or so fundamental tenets by which the Muslim faith is traditionally defined.¹ According to this doctrine, when the day of reckoning

¹ The belief in Allah, his angels, his books, his messengers, the Last Day and the "decree" (predestination). The first five items are always included; after them, the list is usually expanded with other points of doctrine. For an early, representative example, see the *Fiqh Akbar II*, art. 1: "The heart of the confession of the unity of Allah and the true foundation of faith consists in this obligatory creed: I believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His Apostles, the resurrection after death, the decree of Allah the good and the evil thereof, computation of sins, the balance, Paradise and Hell; and that all these are real" (quoted from Wensinck 1932:188).

comes, each person will be judged according to his beliefs and deeds. The believers and the righteous will be admitted to the Garden, whereas the disbelievers and the wicked will be thrown into the Fire.

There are numerous references to hell in the Qur'an — nearly five hundred altogether. In the subsequent history of Islam, the indications given by the Holy Book about hell were often expanded, and several problematic issues were discussed. In this paper, an attempt will be made to survey the most important features of the qur'anic ideas about hell, as well as those found in later Islamic theology. An exhaustive treatment will not be aimed at in this brief article — not only because of constraints of space, but also because the subject has not been extensively studied in recent scholarship.²

The topic of a particular religion's ideas about hell regularly invites certain basic questions such as “What's it like?” and “Who goes there?” The Islamic answers to these questions will appear in the course of this article. More specifically, however, I shall also try to give some answers to the somewhat less simple question which is the theme of this issue: the *uses* of hell; or, What purpose does talking about hell serve in the discourses that employ that idea? To this question, the answers are less than clear-cut; in fact, it seems a plausible hypothesis to assume that the purpose and function of hell-talk have not always been the same throughout Islamic history but have changed according to the circumstances. A few ideas in this regard will be offered in what follows.

Hell in the Qur'an

It is inevitable to start with the Qur'an. A couple of samples will give an impression of the tenor of the qur'anic discourse about hell:

Surely the day of decision is (a day) appointed:
The day on which the trumpet shall be blown so you shall come forth in hosts,
And the heaven shall be opened so that it shall be all openings,

²⁾ The only monograph on the subject I know of is Meyer 1901, which is based on a limited range of sources. Much relevant material is provided by Smith and Haddad 1981, which will be drawn upon frequently in this article; important as well is Asín Palacios 1968, 1984. A brief, recent survey, with bibliography, is found in Gwynne 2002.

And the mountains shall be moved off so that they shall remain a mere semblance.
 Surely hell lies in wait,
 A place of resort for the inordinate,
 Living therein for ages.
 They shall not taste therein cool nor drink
 But boiling and intensely cold water,
 Requital corresponding.
 Surely they feared not the account,
 And called Our communications a lie, giving the lie (to the truth).
 And We have recorded everything in a book,
 So taste! For We will not add to you aught but chastisement. (78:17–30; Shakir trans.)

... those who disbelieve, for them are cut out garments of fire, boiling water shall be poured over their heads.
 With it shall be melted what is in their bellies and (their) skins as well.
 And for them are whips of iron.
 Whenever they will desire to go forth from it, from grief, they shall be turned back into it, and taste the chastisement of burning. (22:19–22)

Several names are used for hell in the Qur'an (see especially O'Shaughnessy 1961). As a proper name Jahannam often occurs — derived from the Hebrew *Gê Hinnôm*.³ Even more frequently, however, hell is referred to by its most salient characteristic and is simply named “the Fire” (*al-nār*), and this is also the most usual designation for hell in Islamic literature generally. Several other terms expand on the idea of fire: hell is called *al-sā'ir*, “the blaze,” *al-jahīm*, “the hot place,” *al-laẓā*, “the flame,” etc. It is a fire that punishes by inflicting torments: “(As for) those who disbelieve in Our communications, We shall make them enter fire; so oft as their skins are thoroughly burned, We will change them for other skins, that they may taste the chastisement; surely Allah is Mighty, Wise” (4:56). The fire also consumes: it is “the fire of which men and stones are the fuel; it is prepared for the disbelievers” (2:24).

The inmates of hell will also be punished by having to eat fire (2:174), or they will drink boiling water (6:70), or melted brass, or their drink will be bitter cold, unclean, full of pus (Gwynne 2002:416a). Their food will be the heads of devils that hang from the evil tree Zaqqūm

³ From a linguistic point of view, however, the name seems to have been transmitted via Ethiopic: Jeffery 1938:105–6; O'Shaughnessy 1961:454.

growing at the bottom of hell (37:62–66; 44:43–46). In spite of this nourishment, the inmates of hell will be constantly thirsty and hungry.

Skin sensation and digestion thus seem to be the two favourite themes in the Qur'an's description of the infernal torments. However, the psychological terrors are at least as painful as the corporeal torments. It is a humiliating punishment (3:178). All around one will be hearing "sighs and sobs" (11:106). It is an eternal punishment, for the Lord will not allow them ever to die (35:36).

It is clear, moreover, that hell is a prison: the people there have chains around their necks (13:5, 34:33 36:8, 76:4, etc.), and they are fettered by hooks of iron (22:21). They are guarded by merciless angels (66:6), nineteen in number (74:30–31), at their head stands a ruler (43:77: *mālik*, interpreted as a proper name in later tradition). These angels are clearly appointed for their task by Allah; they are not devils, and Iblis himself is not the ruler of hell — rather, he will himself be punished there (17:63, 38:85; Gwynne 2002:417).

Who, then, will be punished in the Fire? Most typically, it is the disbelievers, *al-kāfirūn*. Idolaters will end up in the Fire, we are told (10:24). More specifically, apostates (3:86–87) and hypocrites (4:140) are also assured of a painful retribution. Also, the arrogant and haughty will face a humiliating punishment, that is, all those who have not submitted to Allah and heeded the warnings of his messengers. Thus, one may say that, on a general level, the threat of infernal punishment is directed against all those who reject the message of the Prophet, openly or covertly, in other words, persisting idolaters, apostates or hypocrites. The condemnation to hell of the arrogant (*istakbara* 7:36.40.48) appears to be closely associated with this general category, since the attitude of being arrogant clearly implies not having submitted oneself to God, i.e. not being a *muslim* (cf. Abu Zayd 2001). Similar to this is the case of people who are self-content, satisfied with the things of the world (10:7–8, 17:18). In both cases, the condemnation to hell results not simply from a moral defect but ultimately from a religious fault, in the qur'anic sense of "religion" as showing awareness of and gratitude to the Creator.

Also attested, however, are several cases of condemnation to the Fire for specific offences. Some of these concern the rejection of specific tenets of faith, such as denying the divine origin of the Qur'an (74:16–

26), or the reality of the Day of Judgment (25:11–14). Other kinds of behaviour that lead to hell are serious criminal offences, such as the murder of a believer (4:93, cf. 29–30, 3:21), eating up the property of orphans (4:10), practising usury after God has explicitly forbidden it (2:275), or slander (104), particularly slandering chaste women (24:23).

Now, what may be said about the general purpose and function of the hell-fire threat in the Qur'an? One rather obvious observation that can be made is that threatening the audience with eternal torment if they don't believe what they are being told serves as a rhetorical amplifier: the threat is intended to add to the persuasiveness of the prophetic announcement.⁴ On the other hand, the function of qur'anic hell-talk cannot be reduced to this relatively trivial point. The doctrine about the coming judgment, and the sorting of humans for either Paradise or hell, obviously formed an integral part of the total package of the message of Islam that Muhammad thought he had inherited from the tradition of prophets. To warn about the consequences of not acknowledging the one true god, and of acting unjustly, was an essential aspect of the prophetic role, as Muhammad conceived it, from the start.⁵ On the other hand, once the prophetic mission was in progress, the frequent reminders of the painful consequences for those who were not yet persuaded naturally served to amplify the authority of Muhammad himself.

Another important function of the qur'anic discourse about hell is that it is an element in the construction of social boundaries leading to the formation of a new community — that of the believers, the *mu'minūn*, or the submitters, the *muslimūn*. It is noteworthy that the descriptions of the torments of hell-fire often occur in symmetrical antithesis to the descriptions of the blessings of Paradise.⁶ If the texts highlight the terrible food and drink of the inmates of hell, and the pains suffered by their bodies, this is done in order to contrast the conditions of hell with the delightful food and drink that will be served to

⁴ Conversely, the same is, of course, the case with the promise of a reward for the believers.

⁵ This is clear from the way in which the doctrine of the Last Judgment is routinely added to those of God, angels, messengers and books in such texts as 2:177, 4:136.

⁶ The point is also made by Smith and Haddad 1981:86.

those lounging pleasantly on couches in Paradise. The description of the punishments is not an end in itself — as is the case with certain descriptions of hell in later Christian and Islamic traditions, where the authors sometimes seem to take an almost sadistic delight in detailing the torture and the sufferings awaiting the sinners. In the Qur'an, the descriptions of the Fire and the Garden most of all serve instead to distinguish, and to underline the contrast between, the two groups of believers and disbelievers. This social dimension of the eschatology is evident in the use of such a collective designation as *ashāb*, “the people of . . .,” to describe the inmates of the Fire and the Garden respectively: the *ashāb al-janna* are contrasted with the *ashāb al-nār*, for instance in 7:44: “And the dwellers of the garden will call out to the inmates of the fire: Surely *we* have found what our Lord promised us to be true; have *you too* found what your Lord promised to be true? They will say: Yes.” Thus, the contrasting prospects of heaven and hell serve in important ways to categorize people, and thereby to create social identity and religious-political allegiance.

A final function of hell in the Qur'an, however, concerns individuals. As was mentioned above, those who have committed grave crimes, such as murder, stealing from orphans, etc., are also condemned to hell. These statements serve to impose law and discipline within the already constituted Muslim community. Typically, they belong to the Medina period, after a Muslim state organized and led by Muhammad had come into being.

To sum up: The proclamations about hell in the Qur'an serve (1) to complete and confirm the image of Muhammad as a prophet, that is, of him being a member of a long tradition of prophets and messengers; (2) to add persuasive urgency to his message; (3) to categorize people as either Muslims or non-Muslims, and thereby to contribute to the establishment of Islam as a discrete social entity; (4) to discipline individual offenders within the Muslim community itself. However, between these various types of discourse involving hell there exist potential tensions. What, for instance, will be the fate of Jews, Christians and other “peoples of the Book”? Will they be counted among those who have heeded the warnings of the prophets in general, and thus be candidates for Paradise, or will they be punished in hell because they are not Muslims? Furthermore, what is the status of the grave Muslim sinner? If Muslims

go to Paradise as a matter of principle, because they are Muslims, has the Muslim sinner who goes to hell ceased to be a Muslim because of his sin? These are questions that later came to preoccupy Islamic theologians, and I shall return to them later in this paper. First, we shall take a brief look at the way the descriptions of hell itself were elaborated in later Muslim literature.

The Topography of Hell

One aspect that received considerable attention by later Muslim writers was the topography of hell. The Qur'an itself gives few details on this topic, though it does state, in 15:44, that Jahannam "has seven gates; for every gate there shall be a separate party of them" (that is, of those who have gone astray). A widespread interpretation of this verse, attested in a relatively early *ḥadīth*,⁷ was that hell had seven levels. Each of these levels came to be associated with one of the names employed for hell in the Qur'an, and to each level a specific category of inmates was assigned. The result was the following architecture:

1. *Jahannam*, reserved for Muslims who have committed grave sins;
2. *al-Lazā*, the Blaze, for the Jews;
3. *al-Ḥuṭama*, the Consuming Fire, for the Christians;
4. *al-Sa'ir*, the Flame, for the Sabaeans;
5. *al-Saqar*, the Scorching Fire, for the Zoroastrians;
6. *al-Jahīm*, the Hot Place, for the idolaters;
7. *al-Hāwiya*, the Abyss, for the hypocrites.⁸

It is interesting to note that a main motive in this elaboration is the placement in hell of the various non-Muslim groups, a fact which confirms the impression that an important function of the idea of hell in Islam is to effect identity construction and boundary demarcation

⁷ Asín Palacios (1984:138; 1968:88) dates it to the second century AH. Smith and Haddad (1981:83, 216 n.64) quote it from Ibn Ḥanbal's *Musnad* (Cairo 1895 ed., vol. IV, 14, 185 ff.).

⁸ See also e.g. Meier 1901:29–32; Asín Palacios 1984:138–39; 1968:88–89; Gardet 1967:328–29.

vis-à-vis “the other.” On the other hand, Islamic tradition also witnesses a different type of systematization, in which the various levels or regions of hell are distinguished in accordance with the types of sinners consigned to each of them and/or the types of punishments inflicted. Such descriptions are above all characteristic of the vast traditions recounting the *isrāʾ* and the *miʾrāj*, Muhammad’s night journey and ascension, where the Prophet not only ascends to heaven but is usually also given a tour of hell.⁹ To convey an impression of how the various sinners and their torments are described in these traditions, I quote the summary given by Asín Palacios (1968:13–14):

Hell... is formed of seven floors, one underneath the other. The uppermost, which is reserved for deadly sins, is subdivided into fourteen mansions, one close above the other, and each is a place of punishment for a different sin.

The first mansion is an ocean of fire comprising seventy lesser seas, and on the shore of each sea stands a city of fire. In each city are seventy thousand dwellings; in each dwelling, seventy thousand coffins of fire, the tombs of men and women, who, stung by snakes and scorpions, shriek in anguish. These wretches, the Keeper enlightens Mahomet, were tyrants.

In the second mansion beings with blubber lips writhe under the red-hot forks of demons, while serpents enter their mouths and eat their bodies from within. These are faithless guardians, devoured now by serpents even as they once devoured the inheritances committed to their trust. Lower down usurers stagger about, weighed down by the reptiles in their bellies. Further, shameless women hang by the hair that they had exposed to the gaze of man. Still further down liars and slanderers hang by their tongues from red-hot hooks lacerating their faces with nails of copper. Those who neglected the rites of prayer and ablution are now monsters with the head of dogs and the bodies of swine and are the food of serpents. In the next mansion drunkards suffer the torture of raging thirst, which demons affect to quench with cups of a liquid fire that burns their entrails. Still lower, hired mourners and professional women singers hang head downwards and howl with pain as devils cut their tongues with burning shears. Adulterers are punished in a cone-shaped furnace... and their shrieks are drowned by the curses of their fellow damned at the stench of their putrid flesh. In the next mansion unfaithful wives hang by their breasts, their hands tied to their necks. Undutiful children are tortured in a fire by fiends with red-hot forks. Lower down, shackled in collars of fire, are those who failed to keep their word. Murderers are being knifed by demons in endless expiation of their crime. Lastly, in the fourteenth and lowest mansion of the first storey, are being crucified on burning pillars those who

⁹ On these traditions, see now Colby 2008.

failed to keep the rule of prayer; as the flames devour them, their flesh is seen gradually to peel off their bones.¹⁰

The description of the various categories of sinners and the punishments inflicted on them is reminiscent of what one reads in such texts as the Christian *Apocalypse of Peter* and the Zoroastrian *Ardā Virāz*, but also of the Buddhist accounts of hell. Some of the categories of sinners, such as the “shameless women” who show their hair to outsiders and persons who neglect their ritual duties, are characteristically Muslim and allude to elements of Islamic Law. It is, however, perhaps even more significant that the majority of the transgressions listed are not specifically Islamic but rather seem to inscribe themselves into a wider tradition about punishments in hell. Nevertheless, evidence of direct dependence on earlier sources is hard to establish.¹¹ In the other direction, the question of an influence of the *mi‘rāj* traditions on Dante’s *Inferno* (famously argued by Asín Palacios 1968, 1984) remains contested.¹² Interesting as these questions are, they will not be further pursued here. Instead, I shall, for the remainder of this article, discuss some of the more theoretical questions regarding hell debated by Muslim theologians, questions which nevertheless have grave practical implications and which represent a distinctively Islamic contribution to the theme.

Who goes to Hell, and is Hell Eternal?

While the various descriptions of hell in Islamic literature, especially as found in the *mi‘rāj* traditions, manifest a tendency to heighten the force

¹⁰ For the Arabic text summarized here, and a Spanish translation of it, see Asín Palacios 1984:432–37. Asín’s source is a Leiden ms. (Leiden University Library Or. 786, no. 7) containing a copy of the anonymous *Khabar al-Mi‘rāj* attributed to Ibn ‘Abbas. Graphic illustrations of the various punishments are found in the famous miniatures of Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Suppl. turc 190; see Séguy 1977. See also Smith and Haddad 1981:86–87.

¹¹ See the tentative remarks by Schrieke 1916:17–18; Horovitz 1919:173–74. Further research in this direction seems not to have been undertaken.

¹² See Asín Palacios 1984: 469–609 “Historia y crítica de una polémica”; and the bibliography, specifically with reference to the Late Medieval *Liber Scale Machometi*, in Colby 2008:283–84 n.37.

of the threat of hell, by expanding the number of the categories of sinners and elaborating the gruesome details of their sufferings, in other contexts a contrary tendency is evident, viz. an interest in reducing the reality of the threat. Thus it may be insisted that Allah in his mercy is both able and likely to forgive sins and to give sinners a better lot in the hereafter than what they deserve on the basis of their own merits. Moreover, the value of repentance has been often stressed, though the question of whether God's mercy is dependent on such external factors has been a problem with some theologians. Finally, the possibility of intercession has been an important issue in this context, especially the power of the Prophet himself to intercede on behalf of the members of his community.¹³

Associated with these questions is also the matter of defining what constitutes grave sins, as different from small, and more easily forgivable, sins. There is no fixed canon of mortal sins in Islamic theology. It may be said that the only sin that all theologians have regarded as definitely unpardonable and assuredly leading to hell, is disbelief, either in the form of *kufr*, the stubborn refusal to believe, or *shirk*, the worship of something other than the one God — in other words idolatry (Smith and Haddad 1981:22). Although there exists a prophetic tradition listing seven deadly sins — idolatry, magic, murder, robbing orphans, usury, apostasy, and the slandering of faithful women (ibid. 23) — the tendency has been to suggest that even grave sinners may hope for God's mercy, as long as they have professed belief and are Muslims (ibid. 81–82).

The overriding category for unpardonable sin is, however, undoubtedly *kufr*, disbelief, and because of that, the idea could be formed that committing a grave sin in itself constituted evidence of *kufr*. That is, a murderer (i.e. someone who had killed another Muslim) or a usurer had by this very, ungodly act ceased to be a Muslim. Some of the most famous theological debates in early Islam revolved around these questions: the Khawārij claimed that all grave sinners were *kāfirūn* and would be eternally damned in hell (in addition to deserving capital punishment as apostates in this world), whereas the opposite party, the

¹³) On these issues, see e.g. Smith and Haddad 1981:24–27, 81–82, 141–43; Gardet 1967:305–14.

Murji'a, thought that the grave sinners must still be considered believers and could therefore hope eventually to enter the Garden by God's mercy. As is well known, out of this debate arose the so-called Middle Position, al-Mu'tazila, whose proponents, in order to solve the dilemma, introduced an intermediary category between the believer and the disbeliever: the *fāsiq*, the "depraved Muslim." This type of person would go to hell, the Mu'tazila argued, at least if he had not made a sincere repentance, but his punishment would be milder than that inflicted on the downright non-Muslim, the *kāfir*. Ultimately, however, the prevailing view of the classical Islamic theology of the Ash'arite school came to be that, on the one hand, God was free to judge as he chooses ("We do certainly know best those who deserve most to be burned therein" Q. 19:70),¹⁴ but, on the other hand, all believers might rest assured of salvation, since God himself had explicitly promised that he would forgive all sins other than *shirk* (4:48.110) and said that anyone who had done an atom's weight of good would be recompensed (99:7–8).¹⁵

This reassuring proposition nevertheless did not quite resolve the issue once and for all. The idea that going to hell is a real possibility even for Muslims has continued to play an important role throughout the history of Islam. Judgment on the last day is a prospect that all humans must face, the Qur'an says (19:71). Muslim preaching has always emphasized that humans are responsible for their acts and that life in this world must be led in awareness of its consequences for the hereafter. It is important not just to be a Muslim but also to be a good Muslim. In practice, the more or less implicit assumption is generally made that the bad Muslim risks going to hell. Thus, the threat of hell has served an evident function, and still does, in admonitory and edificational discourses, where the continuity between this world and the next is a frequent theme.¹⁶

¹⁴ The Ash'arites were concerned with affirming the omnipotence of God even to the extent that, "it seemed theoretically (*ʿaqlān*) possible to some dogmatists that the Faithful should dwell in Hell for ever on account of their sins, and that the infidels should dwell in Paradise for ever on account of divine forgiveness" (Wensinck 1932:184).

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. Smith and Haddad 1981:21–25, 81; Gardet 1967:292–314. For more detailed accounts of the positions of the various schools and individual theologians see van Ess 1991–97, 4:1059: index, s.v. "Hölle," "Höllenstrafe."

¹⁶ For a survey of more modern Muslim views on hell, see Smith and Haddad 134–43.

A certain amount of tension therefore exists between the idea that hell is essentially a place of retribution for the disbelievers, the non-Muslims, and the idea that it is an instrument for the punishing of sin. As was shown above, this tension exists in the Qur'an as well, and it arises from the co-existence of two distinct functions of the idea of hell: that it serves, on the one hand, to separate Muslims and non-Muslims and that it works, on the other hand, to ensure the moral and religious discipline of the Muslims themselves.

One way to resolve this tension has been to introduce differentiations within hell. The idea, already mentioned, that hell contains different levels serves this purpose. The highest level, reserved for sinful Muslims, holds somewhat milder punishments than the lower levels where disbelievers of various kinds are tormented. Even more common, however, is the idea that the punishment of Muslims will be only temporary, so that after having been punished for a suitable period of time the bad Muslims will eventually be admitted into the Garden with the rest of the believers. To be sure, the Qur'an several times gives the impression that the torments of the Fire will be eternal (10:52, 32:14, 41:28). Other verses, however, state that the punishment will last as long as God wishes (6:128), or as long as the heavens and the earth endure (11:107), a formulation which has been commonly interpreted to mean that the sinners will not remain in hell for ever. It has been usual to think, for instance, with reference to the seven levels of hell, that the highest level, reserved for Muslims, will be temporary, while the lower levels will exist eternally as places of punishment for the various kinds of disbelievers.¹⁷

The idea that hell may be a temporary experience for certain categories of persons has sometimes been compared to the Christian doctrine of purgatory (Smith and Haddad 1981:93). In some respects this comparison is appropriate. A number of Muslim authors, both classical and modern, have stressed the correctional, purging and healing purpose of such a limited infernal punishment. On the other hand, it is still hell, and not a separate place, like the Catholic Purgatory, and other Muslim sources tend rather to stress that hell in this case is like a limited time

¹⁷⁾ For the debates on the eternity of hell, see e.g. Smith and Haddad 1981:93–95, 142–43; Gwynne 2002:418–19; Robson 1938.

sentence needed for the sinners to pay back what they owe their Lord, and not a school of spiritual improvement.

It should also be mentioned that Islamic eschatology also includes the idea that the soul of each dead person is interrogated and tormented already in the grave immediately after death. The punishment suffered in the grave, in the intermediary period called the *barsakh*, may then be subtracted from the sentence to hell incurred before the throne of judgment on the day of resurrection.¹⁸

To conclude on the subject of hell's eternality, it may be remarked that several types of concerns have worked against the idea of an eternal hell in Islamic thought. The belief in the mercy of God, combined with the optimistic interpretation of the above-mentioned Qur'anic verses, is one of them. Another is the basic difficulty of admitting that Muslims, even if they have committed serious crimes, will end up together with the disbelievers in the hereafter. This seems basically to be a problem of logical classification, since an essential aspect of the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims is that the former will be rewarded and the latter punished. This difficulty could be resolved, as we have seen, either by redefining the grave Muslim sinner as being no longer a Muslim, or by making his (or her) stay in hell temporary. A third concern has been the reluctance to admit, from the perspective of Islam's strict monotheism, the notion that something other than God himself might have eternal existence — an argument that was made by groups later to be condemned as heretical such as the Jahmiya.

Whatever the arguments advanced, it has become a widespread opinion that even if the Garden with its blissful existence will be eternal, the other place, the Fire, will not exist forever, so that even the worst sinners will be redeemed in the end though God's mercy (Smith and Haddad 1981:142–43). Since the function of hell, however, is not only to punish sinners but also to separate Muslims from non-Muslims, that contention leaves unsolved the question of what will happen to the disbelievers dwelling in hell. Will they, too, be redeemed in the end?

¹⁸⁾ See Smith and Haddad 1981, esp. chapters 2 and 3; Zaki 2001, with bibliography. The period between death and the resurrection is the chief subject matter of the vast body of *qiyāma* books, the “eschatological manuals” that are extensively drawn upon in Smith's and Haddad's book and of which translations into European languages are sometimes marketed under such titles as “The Islamic Book of the Dead.”

After all, the notion that the *kāfir* will suffer eternal punishment in hell has been a well-established dogma (Björkman 1978:407–8). Among those who hold that hell itself will one day cease to exist, however, some have stated that the non-Muslims who inhabit it will also be annihilated at that moment (ibid. 143).¹⁹ Other voices have taken an explicitly universalist position on this issue. Thus, a modernist such as Maulana Muhammad Ali have stated that

there can be but little doubt that Hell is a temporary place for the sinner, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, and this also supports the view that the chastisement of Hell is not for torture, but as a remedy, to heal the spiritual diseases which a man has incurred of himself and by his own negligence, and to enable him to start again on the road to the higher life. (Quoted from Smith and Haddad 1981:143–44)

This remarkably optimistic view, which gives hope of salvation in the end even for non-Muslims, is hardly representative for contemporary Muslim theology in general. However, discussion is still carried on about such matters. There is, for instance the verse that occurs twice in the Qur'an and which says: "Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve" (2:62; cf. 5:69). On the other hand, there exists a strong exegetical tradition that claims that those verses have been abrogated by 3:85: "... whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the hereafter he shall be one of the losers."²⁰ Nonetheless, the question of the salvation of "the others" continues to be a significant topic in contemporary Muslim discourse. Influential theologians are currently speaking out against the idea of "a monopoly of salvation" in Islam — though not without causing opposition.²¹ The issue is hotly debated among Muslims on the Internet. These debates indicate that

¹⁹ Smith and Haddad (1981:230 n.49) only refer to the al-Azhar *shaykh* Maḥmud Shaltūt (1893–1963) for this opinion. It would be interesting to have more documentation on this position. For older examples, see van Ess 1991–97, 4:554.

²⁰ On this topic, see now Acar 2008, esp. 299–304.

²¹ See Heck 2004, presenting the Syrian theologian Muḥammad al-Ḥabash. For related discussions, see Acar 2008, and the interesting dissertation by M. H. Khalil 2007.

whereas the notions of salvation and perdition, and of eschatological rewards and punishments, play an important role in the construction and maintenance of religious identity, they also become increasingly challenged in the context of a global society recognizing common humanitarian values. For some, the conviction that the disbelievers will end up in hell becomes a matter of preserving religious identity; for others, it has become clear that religious identity must these days be affirmed by other means than by imagining the “others” as destined for hell.

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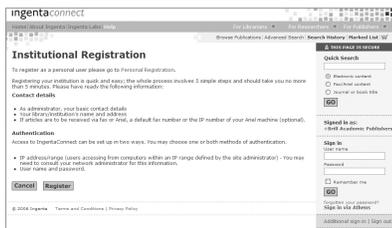
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