

**MUSLIM SCHOLARLY DISCUSSIONS ON SALVATION AND THE FATE OF
'OTHERS'**

by

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To my family and my teachers

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1. General Introduction

“What does Islam say about the fate of ‘Others,’ or those who do not believe in the Islamic declaration of faith: There is no god but God; Muḥammad is His Messenger?” This is an oft-asked question that has frequently evoked one-dimensional responses. It is not uncommon to encounter works that present the matter in black and white, the typical response being, according to Islam, non-Muslims are to suffer eternal damnation.¹ On the other hand, another response, which is less frequent but growing in popularity, is that Islam in its *true* form advocates soteriological religious pluralism, that is, pluralism in which Islam is only one among a number of religions that, by their very essence, lead to salvation.²

In this context, what is one to do when asked to describe ‘Islam’s position’?

Further complicating matters is the fact that there is a lacuna in the field of Islamic

¹ As a basic example, in *The Doctrine of Islam and Christian Belief*, Johannes Stöckle writes, “The impure who are not purified by Islam shall be in hell-fire...Hell will be punishment without end.” See Johannes Stöckle, *The Doctrine of Islam and Christian Belief: Common Ground and Differences* (Disputationes religionum orbis Series O: Orient et Occident Vol. 2) (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 1997), 48-9.

² This view is common among perennialists, such as those belonging to the Sophia Perennis school of thought. As an example, see Frithjof Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, trans. J. Peter Hobson, preface by Seyyed Hossein Nasr ([London]: World of Islam Festival Publishing Company, 1976).

studies when it comes to Islamic soteriology. And yet soteriology (from the Greek *sōtērion* [deliverance, salvation] and *logos* [discourse, reasoning], denoting theological discussions and doctrines on salvation) has always been a topic Muslim scholars have taken seriously. And rightfully so: salvation is arguably *the* major theme of the Qur'an.

In point of fact, this is no simple issue. Despite the general agreement among Muslim scholars that some will enjoy a life in Heaven while others will suffer in Hell, there has been a significant amount of discussion and debate among them with regard to who exactly will be included in each group, as well as the duration and nature of both reward and punishment.

In the present study, I isolate a few case studies of some of the most prominent medieval and modern Muslim scholars, and examine their writings on this ever-controversial issue, demonstrating, *inter alia*, just how multifarious these discussions can be. The five scholars I have selected for my analysis are Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240), Taqiyaddīn Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751/1350), and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) – well-known scholars whose names and legacies are familiar to any student of Islamic studies and who continue to be quite influential within their respective schools of thought.

Before proceeding, however, it is important that we first examine the major themes that serve as a backdrop to this study, namely, the issue of salvation and the notion of Heaven and Hell.

2. A Brief History of Salvation and the Afterlife: From Origins to Islam

Sigmund Freud once described religious doctrines and beliefs of an afterlife as ‘illusions.’³ As Daniel L. Pals explains, unlike a “delusion, which is something [we] may want to be true but which everyone else knows is not, and perhaps never could be so,” an ‘illusion’ for Freud is simply “a belief whose main characteristic is that we very much want it to be true.”⁴ As such, Freud describes such religious teachings as being the “fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes.”⁵ Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that the conception of an afterlife is an ancient one. The pyramids of Giza are a living testament to this fact. Even so, it is a notion that has evolved throughout the ages, often being intimately related to the notion of salvation.

According to Max Weber, there exist a variety of salvations: those that depend on supernatural assistance (e.g. Abrahamic faiths), those that do not (e.g. ancient Buddhism); those that require pure faith, those that maintain ethical requirements; those based on a rejection of this world, those based on an affirmation of this world; those that require ‘contemplative’ religious practices, those that require ‘active’ religious practices; and so on. Ultimately, however, the purpose of all these salvations, according to Weber, is to solve, or be liberated from, the ‘problem’ of this world.⁶ Such liberation is certainly demonstrable in any examination of the historical evolution of the two famous afterlife abodes, Heaven and Hell.

³ See Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 21, ed. James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 33.

⁴ See Daniel L. Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, 2nd Ed. (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 70.

⁵ Freud, *Future*, 21:30.

⁶ See Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (New York: Beacon Press, 1963), 184-206. Cf. Kenneth Surin, “Liberation,” *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 175-7.

Moving beyond the belief that human souls continue to inhabit this world after death, ancient Egyptian religion came to teach that in the afterlife, certain individuals would enjoy a life far superior to the present one. This paradise of sorts was conceived of in various ways, some seeing it as a long-lasting transient rejuvenation of the soul, others seeing it as the Field of Reeds, i.e. an “unendingly fertile paradise.”⁷ And while an eternally blissful afterlife was generally considered the fate of nobles only during the Old Kingdom, it was during the First Intermediate Period that we observe “the democratization of immortality,”⁸ which eventually gave rise to the notion that both rich and poor could attain a successful afterlife. As for the wretched, they would find themselves in the chaos surrounding the ordered world, which meant either annihilation or eternal torment. This alternative fate was a precursor to the notion of Hell that would later develop, and it could be avoided by worshipping Osiris, living one’s life according to *ma‘at* (the Egyptian principle of order), and magical spells.⁹ As Norman Cohn explains:

[A] person had to face a trial, with judges (commonly Osiris himself, with some forty-two assistant judges), counsel for the prosecution and the defence, witnesses, even a clerk of the court (commonly the god Thoth). In a room which was often called the chamber of the double *ma‘at*, i.e. the *ma‘at* of life and death, the heart of the deceased was weighed against a feather, representing *ma‘at*, to establish how far his conduct had been in accord with the divinely appointed order.¹⁰

While a light heart could have indicated the attainment of salvation in ancient Egypt, it would have meant very little to many of the world’s prophets who have since articulated their own conceptions of salvation. Indeed, ‘prophetic religions’ have tended

⁷ See Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1993), 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27-8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 28-30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

to develop into ‘salvation religions’ (a notable exception being Confucianism).¹¹ And while conceptions of an afterlife of reincarnations would gain currency among ‘eastern’ religions, ‘western’ religions would generally come to maintain doctrines of resurrection and the soul’s immortality.¹² According to the ancient Persian prophet Zoroaster, each individual would have his/her fate decided at a bridge. While the ‘privileged few’ would be able to successfully cross it, the rest would fall into a netherworld. Success would be determined by the weighing of one’s thoughts, words, and deeds (from the age of fifteen onwards). The successful ones would be those who were morally upright, and they would be granted admission into ‘the luminous mansions of the sky,’ where they would remain in the presence of Ahura Mazda and the Holy Immortals. As for the others whose evil thoughts, words, and deeds weighed more heavily, they would find themselves in the presence of Angra Mainyu, in, as Cohn puts it, “a place of punishment where, in darkness, amidst cries of woe, with the foulest food for nourishment, the souls of the damned are tormented.”¹³ It would appear that it was indeed Zoroaster who first articulated such a notion of Hell.¹⁴

This is to be contrasted with pre-exilic Judaism, which seems not to have had such a developed notion of the afterlife. Indeed, early Judaism maintained that the problem of evil “will be solved...*within* this world at some future time when justice at last will triumph.”¹⁵ As such, early Jewish visions of the afterlife appear to have entailed the belief that

¹¹ Pals, *Eight Theories*, 170.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³ Cohn, *Cosmos*, 96.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Pals, *Eight Theories*, 171.

[t]he common fate of all alike, rich and poor, righteous and unrighteous, was to go down to Sheol, the netherworld, ‘the pit’, never to return. Sheol was thought of as deep down under the earth, ‘in dark places, in the depths’. Some sort of existence continued there and, as in other Near Eastern societies, the descendants of the dead could ameliorate it by offerings of food and drink. Nevertheless, Sheol was ‘the land of oblivion’. The righteous man might console himself with the thought that he would leave behind him a good reputation, perhaps also that his name would survive in his sons. Beyond that the future held little promise for even the most righteous Israelite.¹⁶

This, however, stands in stark contrast to the picture portrayed by post-exilic Judaism. In the Book of Daniel, which, it is worth noting, was written during a period of persecution, one finds references to the future kingdom of God, a kingdom void of the suffering experienced in this life. This everlasting empire of the saints would be the abode of ‘all the faithful Jews’ who would be judged as such after having been resurrected (bodily), as Daniel 12 seems to indicate. Others, however, would suffer in – as the common translation has it – ‘eternal abhorrence.’ All in all, however, “the very notion of a new, eternal world, lying beyond time and history, is,” according to Cohn, “foreign to the Hebrew Bible,” and its adoption by later Jews can be traced to Zoroastrianism.¹⁷

While Christianity would adopt various Zoroastrian-inspired Jewish notions of salvation and the afterlife, it nevertheless developed a “wholly new” vision: On Judgment Day, eternal bliss would be granted to whoever truly accepted Jesus as his/her personal savior, for “Jesus’ death on the cross was a redemptive act, by which God offered mankind the possibility of salvation from the consequences of sin.”¹⁸ This form of salvation is often described as God’s “unmerited gift.”¹⁹ Thus, while salvation in Judaism

¹⁶ Cohn, *Cosmos*, 140.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁹ Pals, *Eight Theories*, 174.

has often been perceived as God maintaining “a particular religio-ethnic group in existence, when the operation of normal political and social factors might have been expected to result in its extermination,” in Christian writings it is generally “the saving of the individual soul from destruction or damnation by sin.”²⁰ An illustrative description of the connection between salvation and the Christian afterlife is to be found in 2 Thessalonians:

[I]ndeed God deems it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest with us to you who are afflicted, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction²¹ and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at in all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed (Revised Standard Version, 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).

Similarly, the apocalyptic Book of Revelation states that, unlike those who are cast into the fires of Hell to suffer continuously, those who are saved will be cast into the ‘realm of bliss,’ which is described by the following vision:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new” (Revelation 21:1-5).

²⁰ See H. W. F. Saggs, *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 65-6.

²¹ I must stress that this is simply a common translation of 2 Thessalonians. Surely those who do not conceive of the Christian Hell as being eternal would probably opt for a different translation (such that a Greek word like *aiōn* would not be translated as the Latin *aeternam*). As such, one would do well to consider alternative translations when thinking of these texts.

The vision of Heaven and Hell would be modified yet again with the coming of Islam. There were, to be sure, fundamental characteristics of the Zoroastrian-inspired Judeo-Christian afterlife that would be preserved in Islamic scripture (with an obvious exception being the notion of the Kingdom of God). The same is true of salvation in general (with an obvious exception being the role of Jesus as a savior who died for humanity's sins). The Qur'an repeatedly speaks of salvation in both this world (*al-Dunyā*) and the next (*al-Ākhirah*), with an emphasis on the latter.²² It also has much to say about the Day of Judgment, which is referred to as, *inter alia*, the Last Day (*al-Yawm al-Ākhir*),²³ the Hour (*al-Sā'ah*),²⁴ the Day of Resurrection (*Yawm al-Qiyāmah*),²⁵ and the Day of Reckoning (*Yawm al-Ḥisāb*).²⁶ It is on that Day that humans will be judged according to their faith and deeds, and, as in Zoroastrianism, they will be required to cross a bridge.²⁷ Heaven, or Paradise, is referred to as the Garden (*al-Jannah*),²⁸ and its plural, Gardens (*Jannāt*),²⁹ and is described as the reward of those who 'believed' and were 'righteous.'³⁰ Hell is described by names such as Gehenna (*Jahannam*),³¹ the Fire³² (*al-Nār*),³³ and the Blazing Fire (*al-Jahīm*),³⁴ and it awaits 'Unbelievers'³⁵ and

²² Cf. Muhammad Abul Quasem, *Salvation of the Soul and Islamic Devotions* (Bangi: Quasem, 1981; London: Kegan Paul, 1983), 19-20. Indeed, this notion of salvation in both this life and the next – with the emphasis being on the latter – is perhaps best illustrated by the well-known prayer in Q. 2:201: “Our Lord grant us good in this world, and in the Hereafter, and protect us from the torment of the Fire.”

²³ E.g. Q. 2:8, 3:114, 4:38-9, 5:69, 9:18-9, 24:2, 29:36, 33:21, 58:22, 60:6, 65:2.

²⁴ E.g. Q. 6:31, 40, 7:187, 12:107, 15:85, 16:77, 42:17-8, 43:66, 45:27, 47:18, 54:1, 79:42.

²⁵ E.g. Q. 2:85, 3:55, 5:14, 7:32, 10:60, 11:60, 16:25, 17:13, 19:95, 20:100-1, 21:47.

²⁶ E.g. Q. 38:16, 26, 53, 40:27.

²⁷ This notion of a bridge is arguably implied by Q. 19:71-2, and is explicitly referred to in hadith literature as *al-Ṣirāt*.

²⁸ E.g. Q. 2:214, 3:142, 4:124, 7:50, 41:30, 47:6, 68:17, 79:41, 81:13.

²⁹ E.g. Q. 4:13, 5:65, 9:72, 14:23, 22:14, 23, 56, 42:22, 44:52, 47:12, 51:15, 61:12, 64:9, 74:40.

³⁰ E.g. Q. 2:25, 14:23, 22:14, 23, 56, 29:58, 42:22, 47:12, 64:9.

³¹ E.g. Q. 2:206, 3:12, 197, 4:55, 169, 7:41, 8:36, 35:36, 38:56, 50:30, 85:10, 89:23, 98:6.

³² I should note that I elsewhere translate this as ‘Hellfire.’

³³ E.g. Q. 2:39, 3:185, 7:44, 50, 10:27, 14:30, 27:90, 32:20, 38:59, 50:24, 59:20, 74:31.

³⁴ E.g. Q. 2:119, 5:10, 86, 9:113, 22:51, 26:91, 37:163, 44:47, 52:18, 57:19, 69:31, 81:12.

³⁵ E.g. Q. 5:10, 86, 8:36, 9:73, 35:36, 39:71, 57:19, 98:6.

‘sinners.’³⁶ The Qur’an depicts both abodes in great detail in demonstrating the outcomes of decisions made in this life. (As Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick would have it, “No scripture devotes as much attention as the Koran to describing the torments of hell and the delights of paradise”).³⁷ Indeed, the Qur’anic emphasis on beliefs and actions having measurable consequences is, not unlike the Zoroastrian emphasis, perhaps best demonstrated by statements such as: “On that Day, people will come forward in separate groups to be shown their deeds: whoever has done an atom’s weight of good shall see it, and whoever has done an atom’s weight of evil shall see it” (Q. 99:6-8).³⁸ (In light of a comprehensive reading of the Qur’an, one can only wonder why Weber would declare that, in the final analysis, “Islam was never really a religion of salvation; the ethical concept of salvation was actually alien to Islam...An essentially political character marked all the chief ordinances of Islam...There was nothing in ancient Islam like an individual quest for salvation”).³⁹

Despite such similarities we also observe certain characteristics representative of the Arabian environment in which the religion arose. This arguably includes Qur’anic descriptions of Heaven being a place where the blessed will find shade, rivers, an endless supply of fruits, rich gardens, green cushions, and superb rugs.⁴⁰

³⁶ E.g. Q. 14:49-50, 19:86, 38:55, 43:74, 78:21-2. (These include references to ‘transgressors’).

³⁷ See Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 211.

³⁸ In translating Qur’anic passages, I have found it useful to make use of translations by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (*The Qur’an: A New Translation* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005]) and Majid Fakhry (*An Interpretation of the Qur’an: English Translation of the Meanings: A Bilingual Edition* [New York: New York University Press, 2004]).

³⁹ Weber, *Sociology*, 263-4.

⁴⁰ While the notion of the *houris* (*hūr al-‘ayn*) is not to be found in Biblical texts, it appears to have its origins in Zoroastrianism. See W. St. Clair-Tisdall, *The Sources of Islam: A Persian Treatise*, trans. and abridged by Sir William Muir (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901), 82-3. In light of contemporary discussions, it is perhaps unsurprising that such non-Biblical aspects of the Muslim afterlife seem to have attracted much of the attention of numerous pre-modern Western travelers to the Muslim world. See Jane I. Smith, “Old French Travel Accounts of Muslim Beliefs Concerning the Afterlife,” *Christian-Muslim*

I should pause to note, however, that when analyzing Qur’anic references to Heaven and Hell, it is perhaps helpful to keep in mind Michael Sells’ warning that such references (as found in Meccan *sūrah*s in particular)

are placed in an elusive literary frame that gives them a depth far beyond any simple-minded notion of heavenly reward and hellish punishment. Indeed, the references to the day of reckoning are filled with key syntactical ambiguities that translators and commentators often remove, thus simplifying and freezing the text. When those ambiguities are respected, the day of reckoning passages become centered on a kind of questioning – a questioning that combines a sense of awe with a sense of intimacy.⁴¹

Despite such considerations, it is precisely the exercise of going beyond the text and determining who will be given the privilege of enjoying the pleasures of Heaven and who will have to endure the toils of Hell that has consumed Muslim scholars engaged in Islamic soteriological discourse – a discourse that has much from Islamic scripture to work with.

Beginning with the Qur’an’s very first *sūrah*, *al-Fātiḥah* (The Opening), one can observe the significance of salvation in Islam. The *sūrah*, which takes the form of a seven-versed prayer, highlights the role of God as “Master of the Day of Judgment” (1:4) who guides to “the straight path, the path of those [He has] blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray” (1:6-7).

That the opening chapter of the *Muṣḥaf* would emphasize salvation should come as no surprise, for the Qur’an (as well as the hadith literature) is replete with such references. In fact, its transmitter, Muḥammad (as well as the Messengers before him), is

Encounters, Eds. Yvonne Y. Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 227-30. As John Esposito explains, the Qur’anic depiction of Heaven “stands in sharp contrast to the Christian tendency to compartmentalize life into the sacred and the profane, body and soul, sensual and spiritual.” See John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd Ed. (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1st edition published in 1988]), 31.

⁴¹ See Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999), 24.

frequently portrayed as a ‘bearer of glad tidings’ (*bashīr, mubashshir*) and ‘a warner’ (*nadhīr, mundhir*)⁴² to those whom he commands to “worship God and shun false gods” (Q. 16:36). In fact, Muḥammad, in his presumed role as a Messenger of God, is often described as being *only* a ‘bearer of glad tidings’ and ‘a warner.’⁴³ Q. 33:45 and 48:8 add that – presumably related to his other two functions – he is also a ‘witness’ (*shāhid*). (Accordingly, the Qur’an states that Muḥammad is not a ‘keeper’ [*ḥafīz*],⁴⁴ ‘guardian’ [*wakīl*],⁴⁵ or ‘tyrant’ [*jabbār*]⁴⁶ over the Unbelievers or Believers, over whom he has ‘no control’⁴⁷). And, as the Qur’an makes abundantly clear, Muḥammad’s ‘glad tidings’ are given to righteous Believers (*Mu’minūn/s. Mu’min*) of a continuous life in Heaven, while ‘warning’ is given to disobedient Unbelievers (*Kāfirūn* or *Kuffār/s. Kāfir*) of a continuous life in Hell,⁴⁸ whereby both outcomes come to fruition only by way of God’s will. (I am here carefully using the word continuous, as opposed to eternal, for reasons that will be made apparent below). Indeed, the dichotomy between salvation and damnation is closely associated with the line between obedience and disobedience, and what Toshihiko Izutsu describes as the Qur’an’s “basic dualism of believer and unbeliever,” as well as its “essential opposition of belief and unbelief.”⁴⁹ (And, as David Marshall argues, given “how the Qur’an distinguishes radically between belief and unbelief, believer and unbeliever, it is important not to exaggerate the significance” of the ‘undeniable,’

⁴² E.g. Q. 2:119, 2:213, 4:165, 5:19, 6:48, 11:2, 15:89, 22:49, 25:7, 28:46, 32:3, 34:44, 35:24, 35:42, 38:4, 50:2, 51:50-1.

⁴³ E.g. Q. 7:184, 7:188, 11:12, 17:105, 18:56, 25:56, 26:115, 27:92, 29:50, 34:28, 34:46, 35:23, 38:65, 67:26.

⁴⁴ E.g. 4:80, 6:107, 42:6, 48.

⁴⁵ E.g. Q. 6:107, 42:6.

⁴⁶ E.g. Q. 50:45.

⁴⁷ E.g. Q. 88:22.

⁴⁸ ‘Warning’ is also given to disobedient Believers; however, it has long been an issue of debate as to the extent of the punishment that grave-sinning Believers would have to endure.

⁴⁹ See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’ān* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), 105-7.

‘complex’ “range of human types” presented in the Qur’an and encountered by Muḥammad).⁵⁰

As such, the role of Messengers, according to the Qur’an, is perhaps best captured by Moses’ address to his people, where the significance and consequence of both faith and deeds are indicated, and the only instance in the Qur’an in which the word *al-najāh* (salvation) is mentioned (although there are numerous instances in which alternative forms of the word are used, e.g. the verb *nunajjī* [19:72]):

My people, follow me! I will guide you to the right path. My people, the life of this world is only a fleeting pleasure, but the Hereafter is the abode of permanence. Whoever does an evil deed will only be rewarded its like; but whoever does a righteous deed and believes, be it a man or a woman, will enter Paradise and be provided for without measure. My people, why do I call you to salvation (*al-najāh*) when you call me to the Fire? You call me to disbelieve in God and to associate with Him things of which I have no knowledge; I call you to the Mighty, the Forgiving One. There is no doubt that what you call me to serve is not fit to be invoked either in this world or the Hereafter: our return is to God alone, and it will be the rebels who will inhabit the Fire. [One Day] you will remember what I am saying to you now, so I commit my case to God: God is well aware of His servants. (Q. 40:38-44)

And while the Qur’an declares that God “guides whomever He will” and “leads astray whomever He will” (e.g. 35:8), it also states that those who disregarded God’s Message “have lost their own souls” (7:53) and that their punishment is “on account of what [they] stored up for [themselves] with [their] own hands, and God is never unjust to His servants” (3:182).⁵¹ It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Muslim scholars have long debated the role of human agency in terms of both beliefs and deeds. Without attempting to resolve the matter, I will simply note that multitudes upon multitudes of Muslim scholars have affirmed in various degrees *at least some* form of human moral

⁵⁰ See David Marshall, *God, Muhammad, and the Unbelievers: A Qur’anic Study* (Surrey, Eng.: Curzon Press, 1999), 24-5.

⁵¹ Cf. Q. 8:51.

responsibility, and that the ‘warnings’ and ‘glad tidings’ of Messengers are generally presumed to induce some sort of moral response.⁵²

Moreover, according to the Qur’an, “every community has been sent a warner” (35:24). Muḥammad’s significance, however, is to be found in the claim that he was the “seal (*khātim*) of the Prophets” (Q. 33:40) sent “as a mercy...to all people” (Q. 21:107). And though he is portrayed as a universal prophet, the Qur’an nevertheless states, “Say [O Muḥammad], ‘I am nothing new among God’s Messengers. I do not know what will be done with me or you; I only follow what is revealed to me. I only warn plainly” (Q. 46:9). It is worth noting at this point that while the Qur’an does speak of the fate of certain figures (e.g. Satan [*Iblīs*], Pharaoh [*Fir‘awn*], and Abū Lahab and his wife), the fact that the warnings are relatively general in nature is what allows for the range of viewpoints regarding the fate of non-Muslims.

And while the Messengers warn of impending doom for the unrighteous, one issue of debate among scholars has been whether it is their warning that actually warrants punishment in the first place. After all, the Qur’an declares, “We do not punish until We send a Messenger” (Q. 17:15). And it is because of the coming of the Messengers that “humanity will have no plea against God” (Q. 4:169). That Muslim scholars would interpret such verses very differently is ostensibly the result of the Qur’an’s ambiguity as to whether these references are to punishment in this life or the next.⁵³

⁵² See Vincent Cornell, “Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: The Relationship between Faith and Practice in Islam,” *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 71; Majid Fakhry, “Philosophy and Theology: From the Eighth Century C.E. to the Present,” *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 277-9, 281; Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa al-niḥal*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Wakīl (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 85-6.

⁵³ As Sells explains with regard to early Meccan *sūrahs*,

Much of [their effect] is due to what is not said, to the way in which a promise or warning is given but not fixed into a temporally or spatially located heaven or hell. The result is an openness as to

Indeed, Islamic scripture seems to allow for a wide variety of readings. For example, soteriological religious pluralists, who have employed arguments similar to those of evangelical Christian-turned-pluralist John Hick, will often cite verses such as Q. 2:62 and 5:69, which appear to speak of righteous Christians, Jews, and ‘Sabians’⁵⁴ (i.e. the ‘People of the Book’ [*Ahl al-Kitāb*]) being rewarded in the afterlife. But then the question becomes, Are these references to those living in a post-Muḥammadan world who choose to reject the final Message while maintaining their respective faiths? As Mahmoud M. Ayoub would have it, Q. 2:62 “is one of many general statements in the Qur’an in which faith is raised above any religious or ethnic identity.” Nevertheless, he goes on to note that exegetes have

sought to limit its universal application in several ways. Four main approaches may be distinguished. The first was to declare the verse abrogated and hence inapplicable. The second was to limit the application of the verse by assigning the reason for its revelation to a specific group of people. The third approach has been to limit the verse to a strictly legalistic interpretation, and the fourth has been to accept the universality of the verse until the coming of Islam, but thereafter to limit its applicability only to those who hold the faith of Islam.⁵⁵

Soteriological religious exclusivists, on the other hand, tend to look to Qur’anic critiques of the ‘People of the Book,’⁵⁶ verses which strongly condemn the ‘unforgivable’ sin of *Shirk* (associating partners with God),⁵⁷ and verses such as Q. 3:19 and 3:85, which speak of ‘*islām*’ being the only acceptable path. But, one may wonder, are critiques of non-Muslims particular (e.g. to Muḥammad’s context) or generalized? Moreover, what

what the warning or promise actually means— an openness that invites each hearer or reader to meditate upon that moment in which his or her life, in its perspective of acts of justice or injustice, generosity or meanness, is unfolded. (Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an*, 57)

⁵⁴ As we shall see in Chapter 5, Qur’anic references to ‘Sabians’ (*al-Ṣābi’ūn*) have been interpreted in different ways.

⁵⁵ See Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur’an and its Interpreters*, Vol. 1 (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1984), 110.

⁵⁶ E.g. 2:96, 5:17, 72-3, 9:29-33.

⁵⁷ E.g. 4:116, 5:72, 10:106.

exactly is meant by ‘*islām*’ (which could refer to the literal meaning of ‘submission,’ or Islam the religion, i.e. reified Islam)? And what of those who have not been exposed to Muḥammad’s Message in the first place? As we shall see, some of the scholars examined here make it a point to tackle the issues raised by these verses in ways that are meant to be both meaningful and consistent. And while none of them may be classified as Hickean-like, soteriological religious pluralists (despite some popular misconceptions regarding some of them), one especially contentious issue of debate has been whether adhering to the Message of Muḥammad in particular is absolutely necessary for salvation. This debate tends to revolve around the question, What does Islamic scripture indicate about the fate of those who have not been ‘properly’ exposed to the Message of the Messengers? (Even if “every community has been sent a warner” [Q. 35:24], this need not mean either that every individual has received a Message or that each community has preserved its original Message). And what of those who are ‘sincere’ yet choose to reject the Message because they do not find it convincing? What role do Divine justice and mercy play in all of this?

In any case, the mercy-justice tension typically found in such a debate is carried over into another dispute regarding the fate of Hell’s inhabitants. Are those described as being ‘Hell’s inhabitants’ doomed to live an *eternity* in Hellfire – even if their deeds were temporal, and even if they eventually reform themselves? Here too we find a variety of responses, as this had certainly become a controversial issue, with theological discussions on the eternity of Hell (and Heaven) beginning to proliferate from around the 2nd/8th century.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ See Binyamin Abrahamov, “The Creation and Duration of Paradise and Hell in Islamic Theology,” *Der Islam* 79 (2002), 87.

It is perhaps only fitting to restate at this point that discussions on salvation in Islam have generally been plagued with oversimplifications, and this is true of both theological and academic works.

One view – often deemed the ‘standard’ view – held by many is that while some Believers may be punished in Hell for a limited period of time, anyone who dies as an Unbeliever will suffer a fate of eternal damnation. This view is often presented in Muslim theological and legal manuals as being in accordance with the unanimous consensus (*ijmā‘*) of the scholars.⁵⁹ This view of an eternal Hell for Unbelievers – particularly the eternal aspect – is also considered standard in many foundational Western academic works when describing either Muslim scholarly views or the Qur’an itself. The following examples serve to illustrate this point:

1. In *Islam: The Straight Path*, John Esposito describes the Qur’anic afterlife, stating that

the Last Judgment, with its eternal reward and punishment, remains a constant reminder of the ultimate consequences of each life. It underscores the Quran’s strong and repeated emphasis on the ultimate moral responsibility and accountability of each believer...In sharp contrast [to Heaven’s inhabitants], the damned will be banished to hell, forever separated from God.⁶⁰

2. In *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, the late Muslim scholar and Western academic Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) affirms that “unbelievers and evil persons will earn [God’s] displeasure and alienation (*sakht*) as their greatest punishment.”⁶¹ He goes on to state that the

central endeavor of the Qur’an is for man to develop... ‘keen sight’ here and now, when there is opportunity for action and progress, for at the Hour of Judgment it will be too late to remedy the state of affairs; there one will be reaping, not

⁵⁹ For example, see Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Shifā‘ al-Saqām fī ziyāra khayr al-anām* (Cairo: AH 1315), 163.

⁶⁰ Esposito, *Islam*, 30-1.

⁶¹ See Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, 2nd Ed. (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994 [1st edition published in 1980]), 113.

sowing or nurturing. Hence one can speak there only of eternal success or failure, of everlasting Fire or Garden—that is to say, for the fate of the individual.”⁶²

3. In *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations*, Michael Sells describes the Day of Judgment as being one in which “[w]hat seems secure and solid turns out to be ephemeral, and what seems small or insignificant is revealed as one’s eternal reality and destiny.”⁶³ Elsewhere, he translates Q. 98:6 in such a way that the deniers of faith are described as having an “eternal” stay in Hellfire.⁶⁴

Indeed, the playing field of translation can be a theological battleground. As we shall see, one of the major debates revolves around Qur’anic descriptions of the stay in Hell (and, to a lesser extent, Heaven). The two most common word-types cited in these debates are those that have the root *’-b-d* (e.g. *abad*) and *kh-l-d* (e.g. *khuld*). As such, an expression like “*khālidīna fīhā abadan*” can be translated as either “they will remain in it forever” or “they will remain in for a long time”; “*khālidīna fīhā*” can be translated as either “they will remain in it forever” or, simply, “they will remain in it.”

In any case, if one were to take into consideration the spectrum of viewpoints maintained by a variety of prominent Muslim scholars, including those examined here, the result would be that the baseline assumptions noted above would be deemed questionable. While some would maintain that salvation is available only to Muslims, others would include non-Muslims who were ‘earnest.’ And among those scholars who discuss the punishment of Unbelievers in Hell, some did not conceive of such punishment as being eternal. Indeed, certain Sufi philosophers argued that while some will always remain in Hell, Hell will eventually transform from a place of torment to one of pleasure

⁶² Rahman, *Major Themes*, 120.

⁶³ Sells, *Approaching*, 199.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

because of the transformation of the very nature of Hell’s inhabitants.⁶⁵ And with certain Scriptural statements seeming to place relatively greater emphasis on both an eternal life in Heaven and God’s ability to do as He pleases, some scholars seemed to argue that *no one* will remain in Hell eternally – a view to be sharply contrasted with those scholars, particularly Rationalists (e.g. the Mu‘tazilite al-Zamakhsharī [d. 538/1144 CE]), who made it a point to emphasize the correlation between justice and the eternality of punishment in Hell, as they often included grave-sinning Believers among Hell’s eternal inhabitants.⁶⁶ Others would argue that Hell’s inhabitants would eventually perish.⁶⁷ And quite rare was the view attributed to Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 128/745 CE) and others that *both* Heaven and Hell are finite.⁶⁸

Given such complexities, what follows is an examination of the various academic attempts to untangle this soteriological web.

3. Present State of Research

Despite salvation’s primacy in Islamic scripture and Muslim thought, a simple search for *detailed, critical, au courant* studies dedicated *solely* to Islamic soteriological discourse – especially regarding the topic of non-Muslims – certainly leaves much to be desired. Nevertheless, there are a number of works, most of which are cited in the present study, which make useful references to various relevant issues. As will become apparent,

⁶⁵ See Chapter 3.

⁶⁶ Al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, 45.

⁶⁷ See Chapter 5.

⁶⁸ Al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal*, 87.

these works tend to involve more direct analyses of Islamic scripture and less examinations of Muslim scholarly discourse on salvation.

Looking to works written by contemporary Islamicists, we find relevant discussions on whether Islamic scripture can be understood in a manner that allows for a meaningful defense of soteriological religious pluralism. Besides the works of well-known perennialists of the Sophia Perennis school of thought (e.g., Frithjof Schuon, Rene Guenon, Martin Lings, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, William C. Chittick, Charles Le Gai Eaton, Titus Burckhardt, and Huston Smith), one particularly well-known argument for pluralism is to be found in *Qur'ān, Liberation, and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (1997) by South African scholar Farid Esack. Here, Esack cites the exegetical writings of medieval and modern scholars, as well as the works of Algerian thinker Mohammed Arkoun⁶⁹ and Fazlur Rahman,⁷⁰ in making a Qur'anic argument for soteriological religious pluralism – even though many of his sources are not necessarily accommodating to such pluralism.⁷¹ Also looking to the works of Rahman, as well as Iranian mullah Sayyid Maḥmūd Ṭāleqānī (d. 1979), Ayoub also makes a case for pluralism in his article “Nearest in Amity: Christians in the Qur'ān and Contemporary Exegetical Tradition” (*Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8

⁶⁹ These include the following: *The Concept of Revelation: From the People of the Book to the Societies of the Book* (Claremont, CA: Claremont Graduate School, 1987); *Rethinking Islam Today* (Washington: Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1987); and “The Concept of Authority in Islamic Thought: ‘La Hukma illa li-llah,’ *Islam, State and Society*, Eds. K. Ferdinand and M. Mozaffer (London: Curzon Press, 1988), 53-73.

⁷⁰ These include the following: *Prophecy in Islam: Philosophy and Orthodoxy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); *Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966); *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and “Interpreting the Qur'an,” *Inquiry* (May 1986), 45-9.

⁷¹ See Farid Esack, *Qur'an Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997).

[1997]).⁷² Such conclusions, however, are to be sharply contrasted with Jane McAuliffe's conclusion (after having examined medieval and modern exegetical works) in *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (1991): "In no way, then, does biblical Christianity remain a fully valid 'way of salvation' after the advent of Muḥammad."⁷³ Supporting this is Francis Peters' article "Alius or Alter: The Qur'ānic Definition of Christians and Christianity" (*Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8 [1997]), which argues that Qur'anic criticisms of Judaism and Christianity were revealed during the last years of Muḥammad's life (and thus reflect the 'final say' on the matter).⁷⁴ Another relevant rebuttal is to be found in T. Winter's article "The Last Trump Card: Islam and the Supersession of Other Faiths" (*Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 9 [1999]). Here, Winter briefly examines the Islamic view on salvation, and critiques contemporary Muslim arguments for religious pluralism.⁷⁵ The same critique, albeit in a different form (with more of an emphasis on Shī'ite sources and John Hick's pluralistic arguments) is to be found in Muhammad Legenhausen's article "Islam and Religious Pluralism" (*Al-Tawhid: A Quarterly Journal of Islamic Thought and Culture* 14 [1997]).⁷⁶

Mention should be made of those works that attempt to analyze directly the Qur'anic notion of salvation. Some early 20th century Western works are somewhat

⁷² See Mahmoud Ayoub, "Nearest in Amity: Christians in the Qur'ān and Contemporary Exegetical Tradition," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8 (1997), 145-64.

⁷³ See Jane McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 290.

⁷⁴ According to Peters, the Qur'an went from being a "meditation upon Christianity" to being "an argument with" it. See Francis Peters, "Alius or Alter: The Qur'ānic Definition of Christians and Christianity," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8 (1997), 165.

⁷⁵ See T. Winter, "The Last Trump Card: Islam and the Supersession of Other Faiths," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 9 (1999) 2, 133-55.

⁷⁶ See Muhammad Legenhausen, "Islam and Religious Pluralism," *Al-Tawhid: A Quarterly Journal of Islamic Thought and Culture* 14 (1997), 115-54.

useful, and include monographs such as W. R. W. Gardner's *The Qur'anic Doctrine of Salvation* (1914)⁷⁷ and H. U. Weitbrecht Stanton's *The Teaching of the Qur'an* (1919).⁷⁸ Besides being outdated, however, such works are also often geared towards a primarily Christian audience. As such, we find certain assumptions not shared by many contemporary Islamicists.⁷⁹ The same is true of W. Knietschke's article "The Koran Doctrine of Redemption" (*The Moslem World* 2 [1912]), in which the Qur'anic God is described as "an Absolute Despot" whose "holiness is swallowed up in His justice...He allows no wrong to go unpunished, no good deed...to go unrewarded...justice prevails over holiness[.]"⁸⁰ Also noteworthy, though quite different and more recent, is Muhammad Abul Quasem's *Salvation of the Soul and Islamic Devotions* (1981). Abul Quasem maintains a version of the 'standard' position and argues that "entry into Islam" (and thus the belief in God's oneness, Muhammad's prophethood, and the Last Day) "fulfills the most basic requirement of salvation."⁸¹ Moreover, on the basis of certain hadiths he states, "Those who will fall down into Hell are the damned eternally or for a period of time, and their number will be 999 out of every [1000] people."⁸² He also maintains that "salvation after damnation" is possible for grave-sinning Believers, and that "only infidels will be suffering in Hell forever."⁸³

⁷⁷ See W. R. W. Gardner, *The Qur'anic Doctrine of Salvation* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1914).

⁷⁸ See H. U. Weitbrecht Stanton, *The Teaching of the Qur'an: with an account of its growth and a subject index* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969 [Originally published in 1919 in London by the Central Board of Missions and Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge]).

⁷⁹ For example, unlike the New Testament, which is the implicit standard, Stanton describes Qur'anic portrayals of Biblical narratives as being reflective of certain "confusions." Moreover, the Qur'an is described as having "eliminated" Jesus' priestly character and setting aside "the idea of Atonement wrought by Him." (Ibid., 72)

⁸⁰ See W. Knietschke, "The Koran Doctrine of Redemption," *The Moslem World* 2 (1912) 1, 62-3. After discussing the role of religion (and its notions of salvation) in developing personality, Knietschke concludes by declaring that "Islam not only stands still but retrogresses." (Ibid., 65).

⁸¹ Abul Quasem, *Salvation*, 31-5.

⁸² Ibid., 25.

⁸³ Ibid., 26.

Dated yet notable nevertheless is J. Robson's article "Is the Moslem Hell Eternal?" (*The Moslem World* 28 [1938]). Robson's study appears to be the first English academic attempt to focus *exclusively* on the issue of the temporality/eternality of the Islamic Hell. Robson's article is brief and is essentially a response to the Aḥmadī scholar Maulānā Muḥammad 'Alī (d. 1951) based on Robson's own analysis of Islamic scripture. Robson concludes that the Islamic Hell is an eternal one. (Chapter 4 looks at this debate between 'Alī and Robson). Unfortunately, not much has been written on this topic since 1938 (besides those instances in which an eternal Hell is presented as a given).⁸⁴ An interesting exception is Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad's monograph *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (1981). In this study, Smith and Haddad discuss Muslim conceptions of the 'end of times,' beginning with the 'signs' of the Day of Judgment and concluding with the fate of the inhabitants of Heaven and Hell. Unfortunately, there is only brief (albeit valuable) mention made of Muslim scholarly discussions on salvation and the eternality/temporality of Heaven and Hell. According to Smith and Haddad, "In general it can be said that the non-eternity of the Fire has prevailed as the understanding of the Muslim community."⁸⁵ Also relevant but brief is Binyamin Abrahamov's article "The Creation and Duration of Paradise and Hell in Islamic Theology" (*Der Islam* 79 [2002]). Among other things, Abrahamov briefly discusses the views of prominent Muslim scholars regarding the debate over whether Hell is eternal. Abrahamov, who never refers to Smith and Haddad's discussion, argues that

⁸⁴ For example, see Thomas O'Shaughnessy, *Muhammad's Thoughts on Death: A Thematic Study of the Qur'anic Data* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 68.

⁸⁵ See Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [originally published in 1981 in Albany, NY, by SUNY Press]), 95.

the ‘orthodox’ position assumed by most traditionalist Muslim scholars has been that Hell is indeed eternal.⁸⁶ (I attempt to resolve this discrepancy below).

Also relevant are those works that examine the Qur’anic depiction of God’s relationship with His servants. In *God of Justice: a Study in the Ethical Doctrine of the Qur’ān* (1960), Daud Rahbar examines the nature of God according to the Qur’an, and its implications for the fate of humanity. He argues that the Qur’an’s “central notion is God’s strict justice” and that “[a]ll themes are subservient to this central theme,” which, he argues on the basis of statistical analysis, is constantly reaffirmed in reference to the Day of Judgment.⁸⁷ Moreover, he states:

God’s forgiveness, mercy and love are strictly for those who believe in Him and act aright. Wherever there is an allusion to God’s mercy or forgiveness in the Qur’ān, we find that within an inch there is also an allusion to the torment He has prepared for the evil-doers.⁸⁸

In his 1977 monograph *Gott und Mensch im Koran*, Johan Bouman states that while he is not completely satisfied with Rahbar’s study, and notes the presence of significant Qur’anic references to Divine mercy, he ultimately agrees with Rahbar that Divine justice trumps all other characteristics in the Qur’anic universe.⁸⁹ On the other hand, in *Major Themes of the Qur’ān* (1980), Fazlur Rahman speaks of God’s “merciful justice” and states:

The immediate impression from a cursory reading of the Qur’ān is that of the infinite majesty of God and His equally infinite mercy, although many a Western scholar (through a combination of ignorance and prejudice) has depicted the Qur’anic God as a concentrate of pure power, even as brute power—indeed, as a capricious tyrant. The Qur’ān, of course, speaks of God in so many different

⁸⁶ Abrahamov, “Creation,” 94-5.

⁸⁷ See Daud Rahbar, *God of Justice: a Study in the Ethical Doctrine of the Qur’ān* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), 223-5.

⁸⁸ Rahbar, *God*, 226.

⁸⁹ See Johan Bouman, *Gott und Mensch im Koran: eine Strukturform Religiöser Anthropologie anhand des Beispiels Allah und Muhammad* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977), 173, 178-9.

contexts and so frequently that unless all the statements are interiorized into a total mental picture—without, as far as possible, the interference of any subjective and wishful thinking—it would be extremely difficult, if not outright impossible, to do justice to the Qur’ānic concept of God.⁹⁰

In *God, Muhammad, and the Unbelievers: A Qur’anic Study* (1999), David

Marshall, among other things, defends Rahbar and Bouman, and attempts to argue that Rahman’s emphasis on Divine mercy is a function of what J. M. S. Baljon describes as a modern hermeneutic strategy that features both a “blurring out of terrifying traits of the Godhead” and “the accentuation of affable aspects in Allah.”⁹¹ Also in agreement with Rahbar, Marshall argues that the Qur’an’s position is that, once this life ends, Unbelievers “will be utterly excluded from any experience of God’s mercy.”⁹²

Also germane is Marshall’s main focus, the Qur’an’s description of Muḥammad’s relationship to ‘Others,’ with emphasis on the ‘punishment-narratives’ regarding Unbelievers. Relevant for our purposes is his examination of what he considers to be the sometimes blurred distinction between Divine threats of punishments in this world and those of ‘eschatological’ punishments. He makes the insightful observation that “the concept of temporal punishment does not have significance only in and of itself, but also as a pointer to the eschatological punishment.”⁹³

⁹⁰ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 1-2.

⁹¹ Marshall, *God*, 80-2; see J. M. S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880-1960)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1961), 58. I should note that Marshall nevertheless recognizes that, unlike the common misconception, the Qur’an “repeatedly refers to God’s mercy and its many manifestations.” (Marshall, *God*, 78)

⁹² Marshall, *God*, 83. Marshall goes on to note that Abraham’s statement in Q. 14:36 that God is “forgiving and merciful” with those who ‘rebel’

is precisely *not* expressive of God’s attitude to unbelievers; the wider Qur’anic context shows that God will lead Abraham away from such a disposition[.] So this verse does not provide a basis for an argument against Rahbar’s thesis; we should still conclude with him that despite the Qur’anic references to a universal divine mercy, the unbeliever *in his present reality*, is invariably spoken of as the object of the divine wrath. (Ibid., 83-4)

⁹³ Ibid., 64. This point was also recognized by Tor Andrae in *Mohammed: the Man and His Faith*. Even so, Marshall takes issue with Andrae’s claim that it was only in Muḥammad’s “last days in Mecca” that the Qur’an went from making purely eschatological threats to making threats of punishments in this world. See

Beyond these are a number of monographs on Islamic theology that make various references to Islamic soteriological discourse. These include, *inter alia*, A. S. Tritton's *Muslim Theology* (1947),⁹⁴ J. W. Sweetman's *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions* (1955),⁹⁵ A. J. Wensinck's *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (1965),⁹⁶ Dirk Baker's *Man in the Qur'ān* (1965),⁹⁷ Louis Gardet's *Dieu et la Destinée de l'Homme* (1967),⁹⁸ W. Montgomery Watt's *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (1973),⁹⁹ A. Kevin Reinhart's *Before Revelation* (1995),¹⁰⁰ and Tilman Nagel's *The History of Islamic Theology* (2000).¹⁰¹ Unfortunately, however, most of these works (particularly the first six) are dated and not reflective of recent scholarship.

Finally, besides the works noted above, there are additional studies that are helpful inasmuch as they touch on the soteriological discussions of some of the scholars examined here. These include Sherman A. Jackson's *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abu Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* (2002),¹⁰² and William C.

Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: the Man and His Faith*, trans. Theophil Menzel (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 54. As Marshall would have it, "as early as the middle Meccan period there is evidence, direct and indirect, of expectation of a temporal punishment." (Marshall, *God*, 64-5)

⁹⁴ See Tritton, A. S., *Muslim Theology* (London: Luzac and Co., 1947).

⁹⁵ See J. W. Sweetman's *Islam and Christian Theology: A Study of the Interpretation of Theological Ideas in the Two Religions* (London: Lutterworth, 1955).

⁹⁶ See A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (London: Frank Cass, 1965).

⁹⁷ See Dirk Bakker, *Man in the Qur'ān* (Amsterdam: Drukkerij Holland, 1965).

⁹⁸ See Louis Gardet, *Dieu et la Destinée de l'Homme* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1967).

⁹⁹ See W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1973).

¹⁰⁰ See A. Kevin Reinhart, *Before Revelation: the boundaries of Muslim moral thought* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995). I should note that even though I am here considering Reinhart's monograph as a study on theology, the subject matter he examines (*al-tahṣīn wa al-taqbīl*) was often discussed in *uṣūl al-fiqh* texts.

¹⁰¹ See Tilman Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology: From Muhammad to the Present*, trans. Thomas Thornton (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener, 2000).

¹⁰² See Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Chittick's works on Ibn al-'Arabī, particularly *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (2005)¹⁰³ and *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (1994).¹⁰⁴

Despite all of the above, and given its historical salience, there is yet a considerable void in the studies of Islamic soteriology, particularly with regard to Muslim scholarly discussions on the fate of 'others.' It is my hope that the present study will demonstrate the benefits of studying this oft-neglected yet critical subdiscipline of Islamic studies. Indeed, such an examination allows for a reassessment of the Muslim scholars involved, as well as Islamic scripture itself.

4. Objectives and Method of Approach

The present study is a preliminary excursion into the landscape of Muslim soteriological discourse on the fate of non-Muslims. It is also an attempt to reread Islamic scripture itself by utilizing an assortment of lenses. As such, I isolate a few case studies of some of the most prominent medieval and modern Muslim scholars and engage in literary analysis in order to arrive at a better understanding of how these particular scholars perceived the fate of their non-Muslim counterparts, and the different methodologies that they employed in arriving at their conclusions, which, as we shall see, are radically different – this, despite the popular notion that these are issues that have already been settled via *ijmā'*.

In examining the various methodologies, I will attempt to identify those Qur'anic verses and hadiths that are employed, and examine how they are understood. I will also

¹⁰³ See William C. Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005).

¹⁰⁴ See William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994).

attempt to pinpoint references to sources that are ostensibly extra-Scriptural.

Furthermore, I will attempt to observe how these particular discussions are placed in dialogue with the larger hegemony of Muslim theological discourse on salvation. How are divergences from the ‘standard’ view justified? Moreover, by examining both theological and exegetical discourse, I will attempt to show how these ideas would come to be perceived by later scholars (including some modern ones).

As noted, the central figures of this study are al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-‘Arabī, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā. Although quite diverse, this sampling is by no means comprehensive and inclusive of all the major schools of Muslim thought, such as the Shī‘ite, Māturīdite, and Mu‘tazilite schools. Nor is it even representative of the diversity of viewpoints within the schools of thought represented. And as far as milieus are concerned, my selections demonstrate a bias towards Middle Eastern, Muslim majoritarian contexts. Nevertheless, one could arguably make the case for any one of these scholars as having ultimately attracted a *broader* audience than any one Shī‘ite, Māturīdite, or Mu‘tazilite scholar, and all have undoubtedly become hallmark figures within their respective schools of thought, earning them extensive followings throughout the Muslim world. If the reader decides not to accept this assessment, then it is perhaps fitting that I pause to note that my main hope is that the present work, as a preliminary analysis, will be later supplemented by further studies of this nature.

For each of the five scholars covered here, I examine the relevant aspects of their lives, times, and writings. In analyzing their writings, I attempt to deduce their general views on salvation, the fate of non-Muslims on the Day of Judgment, and the fate of

Hell's inhabitants. I should note that, in light of the differences in emphasis, these discussions tend to be uneven. For example, while al-Ghazālī has much to say about the salvation of non-Muslims after the Resurrection, Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah allot considerable space to the issue of Hell's duration.

As the scholars I have selected have historically been quite influential, and given the benefits of comparative analysis as a means of evaluating their conclusions, I have found it helpful to provide supplementary excursions. These include examinations of debatable issues that arise from particular discussions, and instances of convergence and divergence among later scholars. And while these are not intended to be comprehensive analyses of all the potential issues that stem from these writings, they allow for reassessments of the impact of and views held by the main scholars, while presenting points of departure for future research.

The central figures of this study are covered in four chapters: Chapter 2 focuses on Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, and includes an excursus that examines the possibility that the 12th/18th century Indian thinker Shāh Walī Allāh independently arrived at unique conclusions that are nevertheless similar; Chapter 3 spotlights Ibn al-‘Arabī's unique positions;¹⁰⁵ Chapter 4 examines Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, the controversy surrounding their arguments for a non-eternal Hell, a response by the 8th/14th century Ash‘arite Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, and a strikingly similar debate between Maulānā Muḥammad ‘Alī and Western scholar J. Robson; Chapter 5 features Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (and, to a lesser extent, his master Muḥammad ‘Abduh [d. 1905]), assesses the manner in which his writings have been employed in contemporary debates on religious

¹⁰⁵ Although Chapter 3 does not include additional case studies, further analyses of Ibn al-‘Arabī's writings are found in Chapters 4 and 5.

pluralism (particularly the debate between Farid Esack and T. Winter), and includes an excursus that examines the extent to which the famous neo-revivalist Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) diverged from Riḍā.

I should note that in choosing to place Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah and Ibn Taymiyyah in the same chapter, I am in no way claiming that their approaches are identical (their teacher-student relationships notwithstanding). Nevertheless, as we shall see, regarding the topic at hand, such an arrangement is certainly justifiable, as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah works with and develops a number of the arguments put forth by his teacher.

As for my inclusion of the Andalusian mystic Ibn al-‘Arabī, this may seem out of place in light of his unique esoteric approach. In explaining why he chose to focus only on exoteric discussions on salvation, one contemporary scholar states:

Islamic mysticism has been excluded, not because it is less normatively Islamic than the [formal exoteric theology] but because of the difficulties posed by the elusive informality of much Sufi discourse, with its tropical and hyperbolic features of poetic license whose aim is typically to interpret or arouse transformative affective states rather than to chart fixed dogmatic positions.¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless, he rightfully implies in a footnote that were one to accept this challenge of examining the esoteric, Ibn al-‘Arabī would be a logical selection. To my mind, given his widespread influence, the inclusion of his writings (as well as an esoteric perspective) in this study only serves to provide a much-needed depth.

I should make it clear that my focus here is the discourse regarding the fate of sane adults who do not believe in Islam, particularly the content of its declaration of faith, the *Shahādah*, which affirms both the existence and oneness of God, as well as the

¹⁰⁶ Winter, “Trump Card,” 134.

Messengership of the Arabian prophet Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd-Allāh (d. 11/632).¹⁰⁷ Where relevant, however, I will make references to discussions on the line between Belief (*īmān*) and Unbelief (*kufr*), as well as the fate of those individuals who lived before the era of Muḥammad, during the ‘gaps’ between Messengers, and who were thus not exposed to God’s Message (at least in what is considered its ‘true,’ ‘unadulterated’ form) – a group often referred to simply as the ‘People of the Gap’ (*Ahl al-Fatrah*). (These latter discussions are particularly relevant in analyzing soteriological assessments of individuals living in a post-Muḥammadan world who have not been exposed to Muḥammad’s Message). And since my focus is on life beginning with the Day of Judgment, I will not be examining specific discussions on the nature of the period that immediately follows death and precedes the Day of Judgment, i.e. the period of the *barzakh*.

I will show that despite the fact that the main scholars examined here belong to different schools of thought, and respond very differently to the questions raised above regarding the fate of non-Muslims, they all seem to emphasize the same two themes: 1. the superiority of Muḥammad’s Message, which is often related to the notion of Divine justice and the idea that the way God deals with His servants is related to either their acceptance or rejection of His Message, and 2. the notion of Divine mercy (*rahmah*), which is often related to the notion of Divine omnipotence and the idea that God is not bound to punish those who may technically ‘deserve’ it. It is precisely these two themes that seem to dominate over all others in these discussions.

¹⁰⁷ As such, and for the sake of focus, I will generally not be addressing – at least in any thorough way – discussions on the intricacies of intercession (*shafā’ah*), the ‘free will/predestination’ debate, theodicy, gender-specific issues (e.g. the ratio of males to females in either Heaven or Hell); specific features of Heaven, Hell, and the Day of Judgment; or the fate of grave-sinning Muslims, those who pass away as children, animals, etc.

To my mind, it is significant that the five scholars examined here would tend to emphasize the relationship between Divine mercy and omnipotence, as the latter is often associated with Divine wrath. (This is certainly not to say that these scholars never made this connection, which they certainly did, al-Ghazālī being an obvious example). Indeed, the very nature of God is certainly relevant to any discussion on salvation, particularly in examining the oft-perceived tension between Divine mercy on one hand, and Divine justice and wrath on the other. And the fact that a number of the case studies explicitly describe mercy as being the Qur’anic God’s dominant attribute seems to challenge the conclusions of scholars such as Rahbar, Bouman, and Marshall, who instead reserve that description for God’s ‘strict’ justice. It also seems to challenge the notion that the emphasis on mercy – including those instances in which Divine mercy is simply deemed to be equal to Divine justice – is a modern hermeneutic phenomenon – even if one chooses to maintain that the emphasis on mercy is nevertheless made more apparent in modern times. (Although, it should be noted that, based on the present study, modernity appears to have produced conflicting trends: I hope to show that while someone like Riḍā may emphasize Divine mercy more than his medieval predecessors, the same certainly cannot be said of someone like Quṭb).

On the other hand, so long as one deems Divine mercy and justice as not being mutually exclusive, then an explicit Qur’anic emphasis on the latter may not be deemed a challenge to those seeking to accentuate mercy. For example, while arguments for a non-eternal Hell tend to emphasize mercy, they also often invoke the notion that it would be unjust for God to punish people *in aeternum*. As such, justice is seen as a reason for the

cessation of punishment. Conversely, some have seen Divine mercy as being an explanation for why God punishes in the first place. As Gardner explains,

The proffered mercy of God is twofold in its effects on mankind. It leads some, it hardens and thus misleads others. When accepted, it leads to light and truth and happiness; when rejected, it becomes the means of searing the conscience, of hardening the heart, of blinding the spiritual insight, and of causing to err. God does not act in one way with some, and in another way with others. The same 'act' of God leads some and causes others to err.¹⁰⁸

I also hope to demonstrate that most of the main case studies maintained – or, at the very least, leaned towards the view – that Hell's punishment will not be eternal, and that its inhabitants will eventually live a life of contentment once they have completely submitted themselves to God. This position is significant since it represents an attempt to challenge the common assumption that, according to the Qur'an, Divine mercy will never be granted to Unbelievers in the afterlife. I suspect that it was such high profile cases (e.g. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah) and their alleged connection to prominent contemporary movements (e.g. Salafism) that partly led Smith and Haddad to view Hell's non-eternality as being the dominant view. One additional factor that certainly contributed to this conclusion was Smith and Haddad's erroneous ascription of the view that punishment is of limited duration to the major Sunni theologians al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935), al-Ṭahāwī (d. 321/933), and al-Nasafī (d. 508/1114).¹⁰⁹ (In point of fact, their discussions on God pardoning Hell's inhabitants were strictly in reference to grave-sinning Believers, and should be thought of as responses to the position maintained by various Mu'tazilites and Khārijites of the eternal damnation of *all* grave sinners, Muslims or otherwise). In fact, I hope to show that, in light of the apologetics employed by those in favor of a non-eternal

¹⁰⁸ Gardner, *Qur'anic Doctrine*, 4. To illustrate this, Gardner goes on to cite Q. 5:68, 9:124-5, 2:26, 41:44, and 7:155. (Ibid., 4-5)

¹⁰⁹ Smith and Haddad, *Islamic Understanding*, 95, 220 (f.n. 98). Cf. Wensinck, *Muslim Creed*, 129-31.

Hell, we find support for Abrahamov's assessment that the dominant position among traditional scholars has been Hell's eternity. My only contention would be that, given the influence that the scholars examined here have continued to have, they serve as challenges to the assumption made by Abrahamov and others that the eternal Hell position represents 'orthodoxy.' To my mind, one would be justified to think of the matter as having been ultimately unresolved. It is anything but trivial that while most traditional scholars have been eternalists, the proportion of those who were not appears to increase among those who were most prominent.

In any case, because this discourse allows for both further insights into the mindset of influential scholars and a rereading of Islamic scripture itself, the implications are therefore potentially significant, especially for those of us in academia who seek to be conscious of the spectrum of readings.

As there is yet much more to be explored of Islamic soteriological discourse, I hope that the near future holds a place for further investigation so that other perspectives may be incorporated, and so that a more comprehensive understanding of Islamic thought (and perhaps even scripture) may be obtained.

Ammā ba'd...

Chapter 2

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī

1. *The Life and Times of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī*

Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), also known as ‘*Hujjat al-Islām*’ (‘the Proof of Islam’), was born in north-east Iran and grew up as an orphan. In his pursuit of knowledge, he studied in various cities, finally settling in Nishapur, where he was trained by Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), the well-known Ash‘arite theologian and Shāfi‘ī jurist. Al-Ghazālī was an intellectual genius who worked his way up the *madrasah* system, finally landing an endowed chair in 484/1091 at the famous Nizāmiyyah college in Baghdad.¹¹⁰ Four years later, and after a reassessment of his intentions, al-Ghazālī experienced a nervous breakdown, and believed he was bound for Hell. So he left everything behind and traveled for approximately ten years throughout the Muslim world as a mendicant Sufi.¹¹¹ He had spent so much time and effort establishing himself in a scholarly culture obsessed with reputation that he finally came to realize the limits of human reason and the

¹¹⁰ See ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd A. ‘Arwānī, “*al-Imām al-Ghazālī*,” *Kitāb al-arba ‘in fī uṣūl al-dīn* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2003), viii-x (I should note that the text itself uses Arabic [rather than Roman] numerals in numbering the pages of the editor’s introductory remarks).

¹¹¹ See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, ed. Maḥmūd Bījū (Damascus: Dār al-Taqwā, 1992), 64-71.

importance of Sufism, in its relatively ‘sober’ form.¹¹² He then returned to academic work as a lecturer at the Nizāmiyyah college in Nishapur, and finally retired and moved back to the very city in which he was born, Tūs.¹¹³

Al-Ghazālī wrote on a variety of topics, including law, philosophy, logic, Sufism, dogmatic theology, and his own intellectual evolution. From among the well-known works that may be safely ascribed to him, the most relevant for our purposes are the following: his magnum opus *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, *Fayṣal al-tafriqah bayna al-Islām wa al-zandaqah*, *al-Iqtisād fī al-i’tiqād*, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, *Mishkāt al-anwār*, *Kīmīyā-ī sa’ādāt*, *al-Mustaṣfā min ‘ilm al-uṣūl*, and *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*.

As will be made apparent, in his attempt to be at once ecumenical (both within and, to a certain extent, without Islam) and conscious of both God’s omnipotence and the significance of His Message, al-Ghazālī employs a methodology in which competing considerations lead to a variety of conclusions that do not always appear to be in complete harmony with one another. In the final analysis, however, al-Ghazālī maintains that Islam is, in principle, the only path to salvation, and that God’s mercy will nevertheless be granted to multitudes of non-Muslims not ‘properly’ exposed to the Message.

2. Analyzing Relevant Aspects of al-Ghazālī’s Writings

2.1. The Nature of Belief and Unbelief and the Hierarchy of Humanity

¹¹² See Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s Fayṣal al-Tafriqa*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 36.

¹¹³ ‘Arwānī, “*al-Imām al-Ghazālī*,” xi.

Why have numerous people chosen to reject belief in Islam? This was a question which initially troubled al-Ghazālī. Following a period of deep thought, his conclusion would ultimately be that the adoption of any belief other than Islam – once one has been ‘properly’ exposed to the faith – is the result of the corruption of the natural disposition (*al-fiṭrah*).

His evolution of thought on this issue is best illustrated in the introduction to his ‘autobiography’ *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (*Deliverer from Error*),¹¹⁴ which was composed during his later years (501-2/1108-9).¹¹⁵ In it, al-Ghazālī explains how early in his life his desire for knowledge was piqued by his observation that Christian children tended to remain Christian as they grew older, Jews tended to remain Jewish, and Muslims tended to remain Muslim.¹¹⁶ As he pondered the purported words of the Prophet that “[e]ach person is born with a (pure) natural disposition (*fiṭrah*), and it is his/her parents who make him/her Jewish, Christian, or Magian,”¹¹⁷ al-Ghazālī came to appreciate the extent to which people typically endow their parents and instructors with authority. These considerations also led him to seek a deeper understanding of the natural disposition (*al-fiṭrah*) endowed by God to humanity.

The fruits of his meditations on this issue may be found in *inter alia* his Persian work *Kīmīyā-ī sa‘ādat* (*The Alchemy of Happiness*), which was composed several years

¹¹⁴ See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*, ed. Maḥmūd Bījū (Damascus: Dār al-Taqwā, 1992), 29-32.

¹¹⁵ See ‘Abd al-Karīm al-‘Uthmān, *Sīrat al-Ghazālī wa aqwāl al-mutaqaddimīn fīh* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, [1960]), 205.

¹¹⁶ al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 29-32.

¹¹⁷ *Saḥīḥ Bukhārī* 1292, 1293, and 1319; *Saḥīḥ Muslim* 2658 (narrated by Abū Hurayrah) (Cited in al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh*, 31).

earlier (sometime between 490 and 495/1097 and 1102).¹¹⁸ Here, he states that all humans have affirmed in the depths of their consciousness their belief in God because of their natural disposition. Nevertheless, just as mirrors may become rusty and dirty, rendering them useless in providing accurate reflections, so too are the hearts of certain people.¹¹⁹

As al-Ghazālī explains further in *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Revivification of the Religious Sciences) (in *Kitāb al-‘ilm*)¹²⁰:

Every human (*ādami*) has been endowed with faith in God the Exalted... Humanity then split into groups: those who renounced and forgot (that faith), i.e. the Unbelievers (*al-Kuffār*), and those who pondered and remembered, similar to one who has a testimony (*shahādah*) which he/she forgets due to negligence, and then remembers it. For this reason the Exalted states, “So that they may remember”(Q. 2:221), “So that those possessed of understanding may remember” (Q. 38:29), “And remember God’s grace upon you and His covenant with which He bound you” (Q. 5:7), and “And We have made the Qur’an easy to remember; is there, then, anyone who will remember?” (Q. 54:17, 22, 32, 40). [And] remembrance is of two sorts: one is to recall an image which once existed in one’s heart (*qalb*) but then disappeared; the other is to remember an image which was ingrained in (one’s self) by way of the natural disposition (*al-fiṭrah*). And these truths are quite apparent to those who contemplate, but are disagreeable to those [used] to following authority (*taqlīd*), rather than investigating and observing (on their own).¹²¹

As such, although humans have been granted the potential to achieve righteousness, they fail when they cloud their natural disposition by endowing ‘false’ guides with authority and rejecting those sent by God as ‘true’ guides. Consequently, it is

¹¹⁸ Al-‘Uthmān, *Sīrat al-Ghazālī*, 204.

¹¹⁹ See Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-ī sa‘ādat*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abbāsī ([Tehran]: Ṭulū‘ va Zarrīn, [1982]), 61-2. This example of the mirror reappears elsewhere in al-Ghazālī’s writings. For example, it is found in *Ihyā’* in *Kitāb sharḥ ‘ajā’ib al-qalb*. See Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Cairo: Dār al-Bayān al-‘Arabī, [1990]), 3:13ff.

¹²⁰ The entire *Ihyā’* was completed sometime between 489 and 495/1096 and 1102. Al-‘Uthmān, *Sīrat al-Ghazālī*, 203.

¹²¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 1:80-1. “Hence,” al-Ghazālī continues, you will find the latter stumbling over such (Qur’anic) verses [cited above], and haphazard in various ways regarding the interpretation of remembrance (*al-tadhakkur*) and the acknowledgment of the souls. And (such individuals) imagine that (Prophetic) traditions and (Qur’anic) verses contain various kinds of contradictions. (Ibid.)

perhaps not surprising that in al-Ghazālī’s theological treatise *al-Iqtisād fī al-i’tiqād* (The Middle Path in Belief), he states point-blank that whoever denies (the prophethood and messengership of) Muḥammad is an Unbeliever (*Kāfir*) and will remain (*mukhallad*) in Hell ‘forever’ (*‘alā al-ta’bīd*). (Incidentally, it is worth noting that al-Ghazālī’s understanding of what constitutes *belief* is by no means rigid, as it need not entail a full comprehension of its object).¹²² He goes on to state that “the Jews, Christians, and the followers of all the religions, whether Zoroastrians, idol-worshippers or others, are all to be considered Unbelievers as is specified in the Qur’an and agreed upon (*mujma‘ ‘alayh*) by the Muslim community (*al-ummah*).”¹²³ Moreover, he argues that Unbelief (*Kufr*) is taken quite far by Hindus (*al-Barāhimah*) and especially atheists (*al-Dahriyyah*) since both groups deny prophethood, and the latter deny the Creator.¹²⁴

Even though *al-Iqtisād* is the oldest of his works examined here (having been composed in 488 or 9/1095 or 6),¹²⁵ al-Ghazālī never waivers on his stance towards non-Muslims, and, if anything, elaborates on his position further in later works. For example, in attempting to explain the ontological status of those who deny Islam, al-Ghazālī would argue that a relationship exists between *true* Unbelief and being veiled from God. This notion is developed in *Mishkāt al-anwār* (The Niche of Lights). Written shortly before 500/1107,¹²⁶ it is essentially an esoteric commentary on the Qur’an’s famous ‘light verse’ (24:35), and it provides a window into al-Ghazālī’s thought during his later years as a

¹²² For example, in *Kitāb sharḥ ‘ajā’ib al-qalb* of *Ihyā’*, he states, “While we believe in Prophethood and the Prophet, and accept his existence, the reality (*ḥaqīqah*) of Prophethood is nevertheless only known to the Prophet.” (Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 3:9)

¹²³ See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fī al-i’tiqād*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā Abū al-‘Ilā (Cairo: Maktabat al-Jindī, 1972), 207-9. Also see T. Winter, “The Last Trump Card: Islam and the Supersession of Other Faiths,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 9 (1999) 2, 135.

¹²⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād*, 209.

¹²⁵ Al-‘Uthmān, *Sīrat al-Ghazālī*, 203.

¹²⁶ Al-‘Uthmān, *Sīrat al-Ghazālī*, 205.

Sufi. Here al-Ghazālī's categorizes people who are veiled from God in various ways.¹²⁷ At bottom are those veiled by 'pure darkness.' Al-Ghazālī includes here 'the atheists' "who believe not in God, nor the Last Day" (Q. 4:37), and "who love this present life more than that which is to come" (Q. 14:3). These are further subdivided into two groups: those who deem Nature (as opposed to God) as being the cause of the Universe; and those who are consumed with themselves, "living the life of beasts."¹²⁸ Al-Ghazālī further subdivides this last group into four groups: those for whom "sensual delight (*al-ladhdhah*) is their god";¹²⁹ those who believe that the objective of life is "victory, conquest, killing, and taking captives" – a paradigm that al-Ghazālī ascribes to "the Bedouins (*al-'arab*), Kurds, and many fools"¹³⁰; those whose main goal is to acquire "much wealth and affluence"¹³¹; and those who suppose that happiness comes from the elevation of one's standing in society and the growth of his/her following and influence. Al-Ghazālī notes that those who publicly declare themselves to be Muslim but do not have true faith may be included among these groups. As such, what matters most according to this framework is the private belief of the individual and not his/her public associations.

Above all these are al-Ghazālī's second category of people, those 'veiled by a mixture of light and darkness.' These are subdivided into three groups: First are those veiled by the 'darkness of the senses.' According to al-Ghazālī, these are people who have gone beyond the 'self-absorption' characteristics of the first category, since they

¹²⁷ See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-anwār*, ed. Abū al-'Alā 'Affī (Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmiyyah li-l-Tibā'ah wa al-Nashr, 1964), 84-93.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

deify that which is other than the self. These include: ‘idolaters’; animists, particularly some of the remote Turks who worship as gods those things which are beautiful, including humans, trees, and horses; ‘fire-worshippers’ (Magians); ‘star-worshippers’ engaged in astrology; ‘sun-worshippers’; and dualistic ‘light-worshippers.’ Second are those veiled by the ‘darkness of the imagination.’ These include: corporealists; Karrāmites; and those who claim that God can have no accident except in terms of direction. Third are those veiled by the “darkness of the intellect’s false appraisals,” such as ‘anthropomorphists.’¹³²

Even higher are al-Ghazālī’s third category of people, those who are ‘veiled by pure light.’ Although not at the level of the major prophets, these are individuals who nevertheless properly comprehend the nature of God’s attributes (even if, for example, they avoid denoting God by those attributes altogether).¹³³ And even higher are those who are completely unveiled, such as the prophets Abraham and Muḥammad, whose comprehension of God and His nature is strongest of all.¹³⁴

Thus, to the mind of al-Ghazālī, Unbelief is the result of the corruption of the natural disposition and is correlated to being veiled (and thus disconnected) from God. This is significant because, as he notes in *Kīmīyā-ī sa’ādat*, the Qur’an makes it clear that only those who come to God ‘with a pure heart’ will be saved (Q. 26:89).¹³⁵ Also significant is the fact that Unbelief is also associated with the veil of excessive love of

¹³² Ibid., 87-90. Gairdner makes the insightful observation that Jews and Christians are never mentioned or explicitly referred to in this discussion. See W. H. T. Gairdner, *Al-Ghazzali’s Mishkat al-Anwar* (“*The Niche for Lights*”) (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1952), 14.

¹³³ According to Gairdner, this group includes “al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Shāfi‘ī, and others of the *bilā kaifa* [*sic*] school,” Sufi philosophers, including al-Ghazālī himself, and possibly al-Farābī. (Ibid., 12-3). To my mind, Gairdner’s inclusion of the *faylasūf* (‘Islamic philosopher’) al-Farābī in this category is highly questionable, as will be demonstrated below.

¹³⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār*, 90-3.

¹³⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-ī Sa’ādat*, 89.

this world, as al-Ghazālī states elsewhere in *Kīmīyā-tī sa ‘ādat* that all punishment in the afterlife is ultimately due to precisely that.¹³⁶

Even so, al-Ghazālī is careful to note in *al-Iqtiṣād* that, in society, the designation of Unbelief (*Kufr*) made by humans is generally a purely legal one. Indeed, he argues, it is possible for one designated by Islamic law as an Unbeliever to enter Heaven if he/she is unaware of his/her Unbelief.¹³⁷ Moreover, he states that the designation of Unbeliever is determined by way of Revelation (and presumed according to unmediated judgments based on Revelation [*al-ijtihād*]), and that there is no room here for proofs of the intellect (*al-‘aql*) (which are not based on Revelation).¹³⁸ Similarly, he states in *Iḥyā’* in *Kitāb qawā‘id al-‘aqā‘id*, the designation of Belief (*īmān*) made by humans is also a purely legal one, and need not reflect ontological reality, as is the case of one who professes the declaration of faith (*shahādah*) but completely rejects it in his/her heart.¹³⁹

The notion of one being an Unbeliever according to the law but not according to ontological reality (which is ultimately known only to God) – a distinction that may at times seem overlooked in much of contemporary Muslim scholarly discourse – is made clearer in al-Ghazālī’s ‘ecumenical’ treatise *Fayṣal al-tafriqah* (The Decisive Criterion), which was composed relatively late in his life (in 497/1104).¹⁴⁰ It was written during a period of intense intra-Muslim debates over what constitutes orthodoxy and what constitutes Unbelief. Ash‘arites such as ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037) would argue that, among Muslims, only certain Ash‘arites would be saved in the afterlife, and that all other Muslims were actually Unbelievers. In response, al-Ghazālī would argue the

¹³⁶ Ibid., 112-3.

¹³⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtiṣād*, 207-8.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 207-8.

¹³⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, 1:107-8.

¹⁴⁰ Al-‘Uthmān, *Sīrat al-Ghazālī*, 204.

following: True infidelity, or Unbelief, was in rejecting either a fundamental Islamic belief (i.e., belief in one God, the Prophet, and the Hereafter) or a secondary issue derived from either unanimous consensus (*ijmā‘*) or *mutawātir* (diffuse and congruent) sources, or deeming the Prophet to have lied, as the *falāsifah* (‘Islamic philosophers’) were said to have done.¹⁴¹ According to this standard, Shī‘ites, Traditionalists¹⁴², and Rationalists¹⁴³ (*mutakallimūn*) could all be considered true Muslims, whereas the ‘Islamic philosophers’ were to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.¹⁴⁴

Thus, we can see al-Ghazālī’s desire to be as inclusive as possible with regard to who qualifies as a ‘Muslim.’ In following the footsteps of other Ash‘arites, al-Ghazālī surely held the common belief that all Muslims – Crypto-infidels not included – will *eventually* go to Heaven, even if some have to suffer in Hell temporarily. And though al-Ghazālī could accept Shī‘ites, he could not tolerate some of the more prominent Islamic philosophers. Deeming the Prophet to have lied was, as far as al-Ghazālī was concerned, simply going too far. Al-Ghazālī’s obsession with this issue led him to claim that even if some believed that the Prophet was righteous, meant well, and only lied for the sake of some (putative) common good (*maṣlahah*), they would ultimately perish and would not be included among those who were punished in Hell for only a limited period of time.

¹⁴¹ Of course from the perspective of the *falāsifah*, we may say that, generally-speaking, they did not believe that the Prophet actually lied due to any ill-will on his part. Instead, many philosophers would argue, the Prophet made statements that were not *entirely* true ontologically since he simply sought to speak to his followers at an intellectual level that they could both understand and appreciate.

¹⁴² By ‘Traditionalists’ I mean theologians of the Ḥanbalite school of thought who did not formally partake in *kalām* (speculative theology).

¹⁴³ By ‘Rationalists’ I mean speculative theologians, and therefore scholars of *kalām*.

¹⁴⁴ Jackson, *Boundaries*, 5-7, 39-42, and 46-59. Incidentally, Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE), the philosopher who composed *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* as a response to al-Ghazālī’s critique of the philosophers (in *Tahāfut al-falāsifah*), argued that being a Muslim entailed that one believe in the existence of God, prophethood, and resurrection – standards that appear more flexible than those of al-Ghazālī, especially given the absence of *ijmā‘*. See Ahmed Fouad El-Ehwany, “Ibn Rushd,” *A History of Muslim Philosophy with short accounts of other disciplines and the modern renaissance in Muslim lands*, Vol. 1, ed. M. M. Sharif, (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963-66), 546-7.

(And as we observe in *Mishkāt al-anwār*, as far as al-Ghazālī is concerned, simply calling one's self a Muslim is meaningless in and of itself).

That al-Ghazālī takes issue with the *conscious* rejection of the truthfulness of the Prophet is an aspect of his soteriological vision that also figures prominently in his discussion on the fate of non-Muslims. With regard to the latter, al-Ghazālī argues that most Byzantine Christians and Turks “whose lands lie far beyond the lands of Islam,” and who have not been exposed to the Message of Islam will be covered by God's mercy.¹⁴⁵ In other words, such people may be Unbelievers according to the law, but not according to reality. Thus, in general, al-Ghazālī argues, non-Muslims may be classified as belonging to one of the following three categories: first, those who never even heard the name ‘Muḥammad’; second, ‘Blasphemous Unbelievers’ who lived near the lands of Islam and thus had contact with Muslims and knew of Muḥammad's true character; and third, Those who fall in between the first two groups:

These people knew the name ‘Muḥammad,’*¹⁴⁶ but nothing of his character and attributes. Instead, all they heard since childhood was that some arch-liar carrying the name ‘Muḥammad’ claimed to be a prophet, just as our children heard that an arch-liar and deceiver called al-Muqaffa¹⁴⁷ falsely claimed that God sent him (as a prophet) and then challenged people to disprove his claim.¹⁴⁸

According to al-Ghazālī, this third group is on equal footing with the first group since they were not provided with “enough incentive to compel them to investigate”

¹⁴⁵ See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa*, trans. Sherman A. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 126-8.

¹⁴⁶ Asterisks here represent the panegyric, ‘God's blessings and salutations be upon him (*ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallama*).’

¹⁴⁷ This is a reference to ‘Abd-Allāh ibn al-Muqaffa’ (d. ca. 139/756), a Persian literary genius who rose to power under the Umayyads and was executed by an ‘Abbasid governor, is said to have criticized the Prophet and Islamic Scripture, and claimed to have produced a scripture that could compete with the Qur'an. (Jackson, *Boundaries*, 140). Regarding the latter, see J. Van Ess, “Some Fragments of the *Mu'āraḍat al-Qur'ān* Attributed to Ibn al-Muqaffa,” *Studia Arabica et Islamica: Festschrift for Ihsan Abbas on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. W. al-Qādī (Beirut: American University in Beirut Press, 1981), 151-63.

¹⁴⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Boundaries*, 126.

Muḥammad’s true status. As such, both the first and third groups will be forgiven due to God’s mercy. Otherwise, if someone hears through diffuse and congruent reports (*al-tawātur*)¹⁴⁹ about

the Prophet, his advent, his character, his miracles that defied the laws of nature – such as his splitting the moon, his causing pebbles to celebrate the praises of God, the springing forth of water from his fingers, and the inimitable Qur’ān with which he challenged the masters of eloquence, all of whom failed to match it – whoever hears all of this and then turns away from it, ignores it, fails to investigate it, refuses to ponder it, and takes no initiative to confirm it, such a person is a cynical (self-) deceiver (*kādhīb*).¹⁵⁰

Such a person, according to al-Ghazālī, is a *true* Unbeliever (*Kāfir*), and either lacks the motivation or is too careless to investigate the reality of the Prophet’s Message. Otherwise, argues al-Ghazālī, so long as one (of any religious community) believes in God and the Last Day and is earnestly motivated to investigate the Prophet’s Message after receiving knowledge of it, he/she will receive God’s mercy and be forgiven, *even* if death overtakes him/her “before being able to confirm [the reality of Islam].” And this is because of God’s vast, ‘all-encompassing mercy.’¹⁵¹ It is one thing to be well aware of the Prophet’s nature and to claim that he lied, as some Islamic philosophers had done; it is quite another to claim that the Prophet lied on the basis of misinformation – the kind of misinformation that dissuades even the most sincere from further investigation. In other words, the rejection of Muḥammad’s Message occurs for various reasons, and God will judge each case on the basis of the information available to each rejecter and his/her degree of sincerity.

¹⁴⁹ It is worth noting that diffuse and congruent reports (*al-tawātur*), along with sensations (*al-ḥissiyāt*), the intellect (*al-‘aql*), analogy (*qiyās*), Revelation (*al-sam‘iyyāt*), and deductions (*mu‘taqadāt al-khaṣm*), all play integral roles in al-Ghazālī’s epistemology. (Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād*, 25-7)

¹⁵⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Boundaries*, 128. Incidentally, the miracles listed here are the same ones listed by al-Ghazālī’s predecessor ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī as being ‘evidentiary signs’ of Muḥammad’s prophethood. (Winter, “The Last Trump Card,” 149; cf. ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-dīn* [Istanbul: 1928], 161-2).

¹⁵¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Boundaries*, 128.

All in all, what is most unique about al-Ghazālī's discussion here, which I would characterize as being notably confident in tone, is his specific criterion for determining which non-Muslims are candidates for God's mercy – a criterion that, taken as a whole, is not *explicitly* supported by either the Qur'an or Sunnah.

2.2. *The Basis for Belief in the Prophet*

Despite his views of Divine mercy, it is an undeniable fact that al-Ghazālī posited a strong connection between salvation and prophethood. As he states in *Kitāb qawā'id al-'aqā'id of Ihya'*, it is not unguided reason which leads to salvation but rather the following of prophets whose authenticity is confirmed by way of miracles.¹⁵² He also asserts (in *al-Iqtisād*) that it is part of the nature of the intellect (*al-'aql*) to accept the Message of God's Messengers once it comes to know the supernatural elements associated with them by way of diffuse and congruent reports (*al-akhbār al-mutawātirah*).¹⁵³ As he explains,

The reason why miracles attest to the veracity of Messengers is because whatever is beyond human capabilities can only be the doing of God the Exalted. So whatever is associated with the Prophetic challenge is equivalent to that (regarding) which God (confirms by saying), "You are correct."¹⁵⁴

As al-Ghazālī notes in *Kīmīyā-ī sa'ādat*, however, the realization of the truthfulness of the Prophet is predicated on the incorruption of the soul. In fact, he states,

¹⁵² Al-Ghazālī, *Ihya'*, 1:103.

¹⁵³ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād*, 12.

¹⁵⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihya'*, 1:104. This argument is found elsewhere, including *al-Mustasfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl*. See Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustasfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl*, ed. Muḥammad Sulaymān al-Ashqar (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1997), 1:121-3. As al-Ghazālī further explains (in *al-Iqtisād*), it is precisely miracles that differentiate the feats performed by prophets and magicians, as the latter can *never* perform them. (Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād fī al-i'tiqād*, 167

if the soul is pure enough, it has the ability to see the truth in the Prophet's Message without the aid of miracles.¹⁵⁵

Moreover, continues al-Ghazālī (in *Kitāb qawā'id al-'aqā'id of Ihya'*), to deny the Prophet's Message after having been 'properly' exposed to it and the miracles associated with the Prophet would be comparable to one who is told that there is a wild lion standing right behind him/her, and that his/her only means of survival is to flee. If at this point he/she insists on not fleeing until the presence of the lion can be ascertained, then he/she would be making a foolish mistake, and could expect to be devoured.¹⁵⁶ In other words, because of the presence of miracles, Prophetic warnings must be taken seriously – even if only for practical considerations.

Even so, al-Ghazālī articulates what he believes to be are logical proofs for Muḥammad's prophethood.¹⁵⁷ And in recognizing that there are non-Muslims who have been exposed to the Message of Islam and have heard of the Prophet's miracles who nevertheless reject it on the grounds of logical arguments, al-Ghazālī responds by putting forth counterarguments in *al-Iqtiṣād*.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-i sa'ādāt*, 792.

¹⁵⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, 1:103.

¹⁵⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtiṣād*, 172ff.

¹⁵⁸ For example, al-Ghazālī examines an argument put forth by some Christians (*al-'isawīyyah*) that Muḥammad was a prophet sent to Arabs only. Al-Ghazālī responds to this by arguing that, since they confess that Muḥammad is a true prophet, and since prophets never lie, they would have to accept him as a universal prophet as he himself claimed to be a messenger to both humans and *jinn* (*al-thaqalayn*); he sent messengers to Khosraw (*Kisrā*) of Persia, Caesar (Qayṣar) of Byzantium, and other non-Arab kingdoms. (Ibid., 172)

Al-Ghazālī then looks at two arguments put forth by some Jews, namely that abrogation of God's law is impossible (since that would imply the alteration of God's perfect law), and that Moses declared himself to be the seal (*khātam*) of the prophets. (This presumably assumes a specific understanding of prophethood, as there were many well-known Biblical prophets after Moses; however, it was only Moses who presented the Israelite community with God's commandments). After first stating that the miracle of the Qur'an suffices as a counterargument, al-Ghazālī responds by arguing that abrogation is not problematic precisely because times and contexts do change. Hence, what is best for humanity also changes. (Of course, one could make the same argument against the universality of Islam, but al-Ghazālī certainly believed that Islam could be sustained as a source of law for all contexts for the rest of human existence). Al-Ghazālī then argues that whatever led people to believe in Moses (i.e. his miracles) should

On the surface, it would be perplexing if al-Ghazālī indeed intended for these counterarguments to be addressed to the very people arguing against Muḥammad’s prophethood. After all, based on his own criterion, they would probably be considered Unbelievers destined for Hell eternally since they had presumably met the requirement of having been ‘properly’ exposed to the Message and the miracles associated with the Prophet. Thus, to my mind, we are left with four possible explanations for al-Ghazālī’s decision to engage in this discussion: he intended this and similar discussions to assist Believers who might have their own doubts; he assumed it was his religious duty to argue for Islam’s legitimacy, even if he perceived his particular audience to be Hell-bound; he assumed that his non-Muslim audience included ‘sincere’ individuals who were still unsure about their own beliefs; or he sincerely believed that logical arguments could convince true Unbelievers. If the latter is true, al-Ghazālī’s designation of miracles as

lead people to believe in the prophethood of Jesus and Muḥammad as well, and that whoever transmitted the statement attributed to Moses of him being the seal of the prophets must have lied. Moreover, he notes, the Jews of the Prophet’s age never made this argument while he was amongst them. And the Prophet himself recognized the place of Moses, and judged the Jews according to the Torah. (Ibid., 172-4) (That this could actually be used as an argument against the claim that Muḥammad was meant to be a universal prophet is something that al-Ghazālī does not address).

Al-Ghazālī goes on to challenge the arguments put forth by those who may accept the possibility of abrogation but deny Muḥammad’s prophethood since they deny the miracle of the Qur’an and/or the establishment of prophethood by way of miracles. To this al-Ghazālī responds by first arguing that, as noted, miracles demonstrate (to the intellect) association with the Divine since they are, by definition, beyond the capabilities of creation, and stand as a challenge that cannot be met. Moreover, he argues, they succeeded in convincing the Arabs, whose belief in Muḥammad was firm to the point where they were willing to defend his prophethood with their own lives and all that they possessed. And as for those who claim that the Qur’an is not a miracle, al-Ghazālī responds by claiming that its miracle is to be found in its “purity (of style) and eloquence, with [its] wondrous arrangement and style, which is foreign to the manners of speech of the Arabs.” Furthermore, he argues, “the combination of this arrangement and this purity is a miracle that is beyond human capability[.]” (Ibid., 175)

Al-Ghazālī goes on to address those who deny the reports of the Prophet’s other miracles, such as the splitting of the moon and the springing forth of water from his fingers, etc., on the basis that these reports are not known by way of diffuse congruence (*tawātur*). According to al-Ghazālī, certainty can be attained regarding the Prophet’s performance of miracles if one simultaneously considers the numerous isolated (*aḥād*) reports of such events. And, he continues, if Christians argue otherwise, then on what basis can they claim to have knowledge of Jesus’ miracles, which are reported by way of transmissions that are no more reliable? (Ibid., 174-7)

being the basis upon which Belief or Unbelief is *definitively* determined appears to be placed into question.¹⁵⁹

The best possible explanation may lie in a statement found in *Ihyā'* (in *Kitāb qawā'id al-'aqā'id*):

The Qur'an, from beginning to end, is an argument with the Unbelievers... And the Messenger* did not cease to dispute and debate with the deniers. God states, "Debate with them in the best manner" (Q. 16:125). So the Companions (may God be pleased with them) also used to dispute the deniers and debate (with them), but only when there was a need (for it). And the need for it was small during their era... [Disputation] has only one benefit: to protect the [Islamic creed] for the common people and to guard it from the confusions of innovators by various kinds of argumentation, for the common person is weak and is agitated by the argument of the innovator, even if it is unsound.¹⁶⁰

Thus, if the Prophet's main miracle is itself "an argument with the Unbelievers," and if the Prophet "did not cease to dispute and debate" with them, then to put forth arguments as al-Ghazālī does may be interpreted as an extension of the miracle of the Qur'an, adherence to the Prophet's normative example, and/or the preservation of the Islamic creed among the 'common people.' As such, al-Ghazālī's writings appear to be at least partly geared towards assisting fellow Believers in their quest for salvation, and possibly guiding 'sincere' non-Muslims who are not *true* Unbelievers.

2.3. *The Significance of Faith in God and the Last Day*

¹⁵⁹ Of course, if one believes in the Message without the aid of miracles, then that would be irrelevant here, as al-Ghazālī's criterion designates Unbelief only after one comes to know of Muḥammad's miracles and fails to sincerely investigate the matter.

¹⁶⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, 1:88-90. Al-Ghazālī goes on to say that when a 'common person' adopts the belief in a certain innovation, he/she should be "called (back) to the truth with friendliness, not with fanaticism, and with pleasant speech which is convincing to the soul and moving to the heart, whose manner of proofs is similar to that utilized by the Qur'an and the hadith corpus, and which is mixed with the art of admonition and warning." (Ibid., 1:90)

As noted, to the mind of al-Ghazālī, there are potentially many non-Muslims who are ‘sincere,’ contain a pure natural disposition, and are relatively unveiled from the light of God (even if they are veiled from what al-Ghazālī would deem to be *true* knowledge of God’s Message). It is noteworthy that al-Ghazālī includes a very important restriction when discussing the potential for non-Muslims to be included as candidates for God’s mercy: They must believe in God and the Last Day. Thus, at least on the surface, al-Ghazālī’s criterion is not meant to be inclusive of *all* non-Muslims who have not heard of the true nature of the Prophet. Moreover, as far al-Ghazālī was concerned, regardless of whether belief in one God and the afterlife is to be reached by way of the independent intellect or some other non-Revelatory means, it must be adopted.

According to al-Ghazālī, belief in one God could be established on the basis of several considerations. In *Kīmīyā-ī sa’ādat*, he states that the intellect (‘*aql*’) has the capability to contemplate God and, by extension, His existence.¹⁶¹ In fact, al-Ghazālī was a strong advocate of the cosmological argument for God’s existence.¹⁶² Al-Ghazālī also employs teleological arguments.¹⁶³ Beyond these considerations, al-Ghazālī states that God may also be known (and thus the object of belief) by way of supernatural means that

¹⁶¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-ī sa’ādat*, 58.

¹⁶² Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*, 29ff. Al-Ghazālī puts forth cosmological arguments elsewhere, including *Iḥyā’* (in *Kitāb qawā’id al-‘aqā’id*). (Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, 1:97) His version of the cosmological argument is what Western philosophers today commonly refer to as the *kalam* cosmological argument.

¹⁶³ In *Kīmīyā-ī sa’ādat*, he states that knowledge of God may be attained through meditation on the nature of our bodies and soul, with emphasis on the latter. A simple consideration of each individual’s lowly origins and evolution would suffice. After all, al-Ghazālī argues, no human is able to create a single thread of hair, and even if the wisest of the wise all collaborated, they would be unable to make a single improvement to the human body. To the mind of al-Ghazālī, atheists, including those who are physicists and astronomers, are so deep in error that they are akin to those who come across a well-written letter and deem it to have either always existed or to have produced itself – an interesting precursor to the ‘Paley’s watch’ argument. He also argues that the nature of the soul cannot be explained away by way of materialism. It must be the product of the Divine. Both *Kitāb qawā’id al-‘aqā’id* and *Kitāb al-maḥabbah wa al-shawq of Iḥyā’* present alternative yet ultimately similar versions of this teleological argument. (Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, 1:96-7; 4:294-5)

are simply unexplainable.¹⁶⁴ And should one argue that there could be more than one god, al-Ghazālī argues (in *al-Iqtīṣād*) that this is illogical, for God must necessarily be indivisible, perfect, and unique.¹⁶⁵

With regard to belief in the Last Day and the afterlife more generally, al-Ghazālī argues (in *Kīmīyā-ī sa‘ādat*) that among those who deny it are those who are controlled by their corporeal desires, and who deem Hell to simply be the concoction of theologians. Such individuals, he continues, should be asked if they sincerely believe that they are right, and that 124,000 prophets and numerous saints were wrong.¹⁶⁶ If, however, they persist in disbelieving – and according to al-Ghazālī the probability that they will reconsider their belief is low – they are to be ignored (and the Muslim has done all that he/she is expected to do in conveying the Message). If, however, they reach a state where they are simply unsure of the reality of the Last Day, al-Ghazālī puts forth a practical argument against them – an argument that bears an uncanny resemblance to ‘Pascal’s wager’¹⁶⁷: Given what is at stake and the magnitude of the punishment of Hell, it is in the best interest of all individuals to believe in the Last Day. After all, al-Ghazālī argues, if one is about to enjoy a hearty meal and is then informed that poisonous snake venom is in it, it is to be expected that he/she will abstain from eating. Moreover, it is quite common, he notes, to find people embarking on hazardous voyages at sea for the sake of profit that is not promised. Thus, he argues, what is to be lost if one were to make small sacrifices in

¹⁶⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-ī sa‘ādat*, 68-88.

¹⁶⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*, 69-74.

¹⁶⁶ Moreover, according to al-Ghazālī, the world will never be devoid of the ‘people of God,’ for it is through them that God “preserves the proofs of His existence.” (Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 1:68)

¹⁶⁷ This is a reference to the philosophical argument put forth by the famous French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (d. 1662), namely, that believing in God is, in light of the consequences of unbelief should God exist, the most prudent option.

this life in the hopes of attaining eternal bliss in the afterlife?¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, al-Ghazālī argues (in *Kitāb qawā'id al-'aqā'id* of *Iḥyā'*) that belief in the Last Day “is obligatory because it is possible according to the intellect (*al-'aql*); “restoring life after death” is within the abilities of God, as was the “first creation.”¹⁶⁹ In other words, if God was able to create the first time, then what could possibly hinder a second creation? Thus, both reason and practical considerations are presumed to be reasons for which belief in the Last Day is to be expected of the ‘sincere.’

2.4. Heaven as the More Popular Destination

To the mind of al-Ghazālī, atheists, deniers of the Last Day, and those who either reject or fail to investigate the Message of Islam after being ‘properly’ exposed to it are, as we shall see more clearly below, small in number in relation to those who may be deemed sincere and worthy of God’s mercy, and who will thus find their way to Heaven at some point or other. At first blush, it would appear that al-Ghazālī is presenting an overly optimistic view of the afterlife which is unwarranted on the basis of certain hadiths, such as the one which states: [The Prophet] said, “God says to Adam on the Day of Judgment, ‘O Adam, send forth from your progeny the party of the Hellfire.’ To this Adam replies, ‘How many, my Lord?’ God responds, ‘Nine hundred and ninety-nine out of every one thousand.’”¹⁷⁰

In responding to his would-be interlocutor, al-Ghazālī states (in *Fayṣal al-tafriqah*) that while this hadith is authentic, it should not be understood to refer to

¹⁶⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-ī sa'ādat*, 126-7.

¹⁶⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 1:104.

¹⁷⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Boundaries*, 125.

“Unbelievers who will abide (*mukhalladūn*) in Hell (forever).”¹⁷¹ Instead, it refers to those who will enter Hell and will be punished according to the magnitude of their sins. In other words, there is only one in a thousand who will be Divinely protected from committing sins in the first place. This argument is supported by the following Qur’anic statement: “Every one of you will arrive in [Hell]” (19:71)¹⁷² Furthermore, according to al-Ghazālī, the expression “party of the Hellfire” (*ba‘th al-nār*)¹⁷³ refers to “those who *deserve* to be placed in [Hell]” because of their sins. Nevertheless, he continues, it is possible that, due to the well-attested “magnitude of God’s mercy,” these individuals will be “diverted from the path to Hell by an act of intercession,” as a number of hadiths indicate.¹⁷⁴

One *apparent* problem with this argument is that the very verse that al-Ghazālī cites, Q. 19:71, states that *every (kull)* individual – and not simply the majority – will arrive in Hell. As such, al-Ghazālī’s claim that one out of every one thousand will be spared this is dependent upon a linguistically possible interpretation of the word *kull* that does not include *every single* individual. Further complicating matters, however, is his statement (in *Kitāb qawā‘id al-‘aqā‘id of Ihyā’* in response to the Murji’ite position that Believers will never enter Hell) that Q. 19:71 is “almost explicit” in declaring that punishment is “definitely” the fate of “all, since no Believer has never committed a sin.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷¹ See Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-tafrīqah bayna al-Islām wa al-zandaqah*, ed. Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: Dār Ihyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah, 1961), 205. Whereas Jackson translates this as: “Unbelievers who will abide forever in Hell” (Al-Ghazālī, *Boundaries*, 125), I treat the eternity of the stay in Hell as being implied.

¹⁷² The next verse states, “Then, We shall deliver the righteous and leave the wrongdoers therein on their knees” (19:72).

¹⁷³ Al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-tafrīqah*, 205.

¹⁷⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Boundaries*, 125.

¹⁷⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 1:108.

Al-Ghazālī continues his discussion in *Fayṣal al-tafriqah* by citing a hadith narrated by ‘Ā’isha which states:

One night I noticed that the Prophet* was missing. So I searched for him and found him in a vestibule, praying. Upon his head I saw three lights. When he completed his prayer he said, “Who’s there?” I replied, “‘Ā’isha, O messenger of God.” “Did you see the three lights?” he asked. “Yes, messenger of God.” Thereupon he said, “A visitor came to me from my Lord bearing the good news that God will cause seventy thousand people from my community to enter Paradise with no account of their deeds being taken and no punishment exacted from them. Then another visitor came in the second light and informed me that for every one of this seventy thousand God will cause seventy thousand from my community to enter Paradise with no account of their deeds being taken and no punishment exacted from them. Then another visitor from my Lord came in the third light and informed me that for every one of this seventy thousand God will cause another seventy thousand from my community to enter Paradise with no account of their deeds being taken and no punishment exacted from them.” To this I replied, “O messenger of God, your community will not reach this number.” To this he answered, “It will be reached by including bedouin who neither fasted nor prayed.”¹⁷⁶

While these reports are in reference to ‘the community of Muḥammad,’ according to al-Ghazālī, “God’s mercy will encompass many bygone communities as well, even if most of them may be briefly exposed to the Hellfire for a second or an hour or some period of time, by virtue of which they earn the title, ‘party of the Hellfire’.”¹⁷⁷ (One can only wonder if the Qur’an truly intended for the expression ‘the party of the Hellfire’ to include individuals whose stay in Hell is extremely short – unless, of course, one makes the plausible assumption that Hell is so dreadful that even an instant spent in it is significant enough).

In a different section of the treatise, al-Ghazālī also refers to the hadith which states that the Prophet’s “community will divide into seventy-odd sects, only one of

¹⁷⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Boundaries*, 125-6. As Jackson notes, slightly different versions of this hadith do exist, several of which do not include the phrase ‘bedouin who neither fasted nor prayed.’ (Jackson, *Boundaries*, 140, f.n. 63)

¹⁷⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Boundaries*, 126.

which will be saved.”¹⁷⁸ According to al-Ghazālī, what is meant by ‘saved’ is that they will never encounter Hell and will not require intercession. Furthermore, as al-Ghazālī notes, there are different, less popular versions of this hadith, one of which states that “only one of them will perish.” Another one states that “all of them are in Paradise except the Crypto-infidels (*al-zanādiqah*),” which al-Ghazālī identifies as being a sect within the Muslim community. Thus, if all of these reports are sound, this would mean that ‘those who perish’ (*al-hālikah*) refers to those who will dwell in Hell. On the other hand, those considered ‘saved’ are those who will enter Heaven without being taken to account for their deeds and who will not require intercession. For if one was taken to account for his/her deeds, or required intercession, then that person could not be considered entirely ‘saved’ due to the punishment and/or humiliation experienced.¹⁷⁹

Furthermore, according to al-Ghazālī there are innumerable examples that could be cited regarding God’s mercy, as revealed to “the people of spiritual insight through various means and illustrations.” Thus, he argues, it is because of God’s mercy that one will likely¹⁸⁰ receive ‘unconditional salvation’ if he/she combines faith with good deeds. If both these elements are absent, however, then he/she will likely have ‘unmitigated perdition.’ Between these two are those who have conviction of faith in the ‘basic tenets of faith’ but err in their interpretations, have doubts regarding either the ‘basic tenets’ or the correct interpretations, or “combine good deeds with evil ones.” This middle group

¹⁷⁸ See A. J. Wensinck, *al-Mu‘jam al-mufahras li alfāz al-ḥadīth al-nabawī (Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane)*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 5:135-6.

¹⁷⁹ Al-Ghazālī, *Boundaries*, 127.

¹⁸⁰ The use of the word “likely” here appears to be a reflection of al-Ghazālī’s Ash‘arite position that God is not bound to punish or reward. This cautious attitude, however, is, as we shall see below, absent elsewhere in his discussion in *Fayṣal al-tafriqah*.

stands between being saved by way of intercession and being punished for a set period of time in Hell.¹⁸¹

Thus, according to al-Ghazālī, for everyone else who is between the two extremes of perishing and being saved, some will only be punished by being taken to account for their deeds, some will be brought towards the Fire before being saved by intercession, and some will spend time in Hell proportionate to the “extent of the erroneousness of their beliefs and unsanctioned innovations, as well as the plentitude or paucity of their sins.” On the other hand, those who will perish are those who deemed the Prophet to be a liar “and affirm[ed] the possibility that he may lie in pursuit of some (putative) common good (*maṣlahah*).”¹⁸² (In making this declaration, al-Ghazālī has the ‘Islamic philosophers’ [the *falāsifah*] in mind).

In assessing the breadth of God’s compassion, al-Ghazālī states that one should not use ‘formal reasoning’ in trying to conceptualize these Divine issues. And given how the afterlife is “ever so close to this world,” as noted in Q. 31:28 (“Both the creation and the resurrection of all of you are as that of a single soul”), al-Ghazālī states the following:

Just as most people in the world enjoy health and material well-being or live in enviable circumstances, inasmuch as, given the choice, they would choose life over death and annihilation, and just as it is rare for even a tormented person to wish for death, so too will it be rare for one to dwell in the Hellfire[,] compared to (the number of) those who will be saved outright and those who will ultimately be taken out of the Hellfire. And none of this, it should be noted, is a function of God’s attribute of mercy having changed in any way due to changes in our circumstances. It is simply the fact of our being in this world or in the Hereafter that changes.¹⁸³

Al-Ghazālī goes on to cite the hadith which states: “The first thing God inscribed in the First Book was, ‘I am God. There is no god but Me. My mercy outstrips my wrath.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 129.

¹⁸² Ibid., 127-8.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 129.

Thus, whoever says, “There is no god but God and Muḥammad is His servant and messenger,” for him is Heaven.””¹⁸⁴

2.5. Critically Reassessing al-Ghazālī’s Arguments

Al-Ghazālī’s scriptural argument for most of humanity attaining salvation, directly by way of intercession and indirectly by way of God’s mercy, is a relatively strong one, though it is not without its faults. In analyzing the hadith about the Muslim community dividing into over seventy sects, al-Ghazālī must take into account ostensibly contradictory versions of the report (including less popular versions), all of which he claims to be authentic, in order to support his claims regarding God’s mercy towards all but the Crypto-infidels. One can imagine al-Ghazālī’s exclusivist opponents not finding this strategy to be particularly convincing, especially when the ostensibly more ‘authentic’ version seems to support their vision.

Another apparent problem is related to al-Ghazālī’s ostensibly unwavering confidence in the salvation of ‘sincere’ non-Muslims and the means by which this is said to occur. Al-Ghazālī’s assurance is seemingly unwarranted in light of his other views. For example, in his attempts to emphasize God’s omnipotence, he makes a common Ash‘arite argument in *Ihyā’* and *al-Iqtisād* that God is not bound to reward His obedient servants and punish those who are disobedient.¹⁸⁵ Accordingly, one would be unable to make any sort of confident assessment regarding God’s decisions on the Day of Judgment. Nevertheless, given what we know of al-Ghazālī, it may be safe to assume that he did not

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 129.

¹⁸⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād*, 157-9; al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 1:96.

necessarily believe that God would *actually* punish His obedient servants. (On the other hand, the rewarding of the disobedient would not be problematic, given al-Ghazālī's belief in intercession). Perhaps, then, al-Ghazālī's statements in *Fayṣal al-tafriqah* may be read as an example of what Claud Field describes as being one of his distinguishing characteristics: “[H]e expounds the religious argument from probability.”¹⁸⁶ In other words, although al-Ghazālī recognizes that the possibilities are endless with regard to what God may do, we can think of his confidence as stemming from his belief that it is at least *probable* that God will grant salvation to numerous non-Muslims.

Another question that arises from al-Ghazālī's discussion is, Why did God not simply guide ‘sincere’ non-Muslims to the Message in the first place? In other words, Is not the very fact that such individuals were not ‘properly’ guided an indication of their position with God? Such a question becomes all the more complicated when we take into consideration al-Ghazālī's statements elsewhere. These include: his declaration in *Iqtiṣād* that it is because of God's will that people disobey Him (and, by extension, are not guided to the Message)¹⁸⁷; his statements in *Ihyā'* about God granting religious knowledge and guidance to those whom He loves,¹⁸⁸ and how one can only attain eternal bliss through “knowledge and good deeds,” the former being the only means of recognizing the proper manner of performing the latter¹⁸⁹; and his discussion in *Kīmīyā-ī sa'ādat* of how those who are ignorant of God in this life will be miserable in the hereafter, and how those who are “blind in this life will be blind in the hereafter, and will

¹⁸⁶ See Claud Field, “Preface,” *The Alchemy of Happiness* (London: J. Murray, 1909), xiii-xiv (I should note that the text itself uses Arabic [rather than Roman] numerals in numbering the pages of the editor's introductory remarks).

¹⁸⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtiṣād*, 27.

¹⁸⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, 1:10ff.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:16-7.

stray even more from the right path” (Q. 17:72).¹⁹⁰ And finally, unresolved is the question, How would such non-Muslims be tested and judged, if at all, without a Messenger and a Message in the picture?

Resolving these particular dilemmas would involve making the assumption that God did not intend for the Message – at least in its ‘pure,’ ‘unadulterated’ form – to reach all who may be considered righteous,¹⁹¹ and that those who are ‘sincere’ but not exposed to the Message are nevertheless deemed to be aware of God to some extent as a result of their natural dispositions. Both assumptions, however, are not without their problems. In both cases, the question that is then raised is, What exactly is the significance of the Message? In other words, for all of al-Ghazālī’s emphasis on the importance of following the Prophet, and of maintaining correct belief and a conception of God’s nature that is unproblematic according to Islamic Scripture, his vision of the fate of ‘sincere’ non-Muslims demonstrates what appears to be a tension in his *Weltanschauung*: The Message is at once significant and insignificant.

In any case, it is significant that al-Ghazālī’s ecumenical spirit stems largely from his emphasis on Divine mercy, as opposed to a pluralistic rereading of Islamic Scripture. Absent from his writings is the employment of Qur’anic verses such as the following: “The Believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is good, shall receive their reward from their Lord. They shall have nothing to fear and they shall not grieve” (2:62). Moreover, his declaration that all who follow any religion other than Islam are Unbelievers signifies that he is

¹⁹⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-ī sa’ādat*, 106.

¹⁹¹ Interestingly, such an assumption would appear to be at least somewhat consistent with al-Ghazālī’s statement in the introduction to *Ihyā’*: “Traveling along the path to the afterlife is tiresome and troublesome, with (its) numerous calamities, and with neither guidebook nor companion (to assist you).” (Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 8)

advocating anything but perennialism.¹⁹² Instead, he is essentially interpreting what he considers to be the only true faith of Islam as *islām* (submission) so as to be inclusive of those who, if given the right opportunity, would willfully take the initiative in accepting the Message brought forth by the Prophet. Otherwise, as he explains in *Ihyā'* (in *Kitāb qawā'id al-'aqā'id*):

[God] sent the unlettered (*ummī*) Qurayshite prophet Muḥammad with His Message to all Arabs and non-Arabs, to *Jinn* and humans. And by his law (*sharī'ah*), He abrogated all other laws except for whatever He confirmed from among them. And He preferred [Muḥammad] over all other prophets and made him master of humanity. And He made faith in the attestation (*shahādah*) of the Unity of God (*Tawḥīd*) (and it is the statement 'there is no god but God') imperfect (if) the attestation of the Messenger (and it is [the] statement 'Muḥammad is the Messenger of God') is not conjoined to it. And He obligated humanity to believe in all that (the Messenger) related regarding matters of this world and the Hereafter."¹⁹³

I should pause here to note that there is nothing unique about the notion that those not exposed to the Message will be forgiven for not believing in it. The 'high' view of Revelation adopted by many Ash'arites entailed the belief that such individuals were

¹⁹² Thus, it should come as no surprise that at the very conclusion of *Ihyā'*, al-Ghazālī cites and demonstrates his implicit approval of the following hadith: "Whenever a Muslim male dies, God the Exalted consigns a Jew or a Christian to Hell in his place." (Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, 4:498)

Interestingly, such statements did not stop early 20th century Western authors from presenting al-Ghazālī as a pseudo-Christian. For example, the American missionary Samuel M. Zwemer states in his monograph *A Moslem Seeker after God: Showing Islam at Its Best in the Life and Teaching of al-Ghazālī, Mystic and Theologian of the Eleventh Century*:

There is a real sense in which al-Ghazālī may be used as a schoolmaster to lead Moslems to Christ. His books were full of references to the teaching of Christ. He was a true seeker after God... No one can read the story of al-Ghazālī's life, so near and yet so far from the Kingdom of God, eager to enter and yet always groping for the doorway, without fervently wishing that al-Ghazālī could have met a true ambassador of Christ. Then surely this great champion of the Moslem faith would have become an apostle of Christianity in his own day and generation. By striving to understand al-Ghazālī we may at least better fit ourselves to help those who, like him, are earnest seekers after God amid the twilight shadows of Islam. See Samuel M. Zwemer, *A Moslem Seeker after God* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1920), 12-3 (quoted in Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination* [Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005]), 17.

¹⁹³ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, 1:84-5.

candidates for salvation because of the fact that they were under no obligation to know God's law.¹⁹⁴

At any rate, it is significant that he only explicitly mentions Byzantine Christians and Turks residing outside Muslim lands (during his time) as being recipients of Divine mercy as a dispensation for not being 'properly' exposed to the Message. One can only wonder, might al-Ghazālī have somehow had a meaningful encounter with a Byzantine Christian monk, for example, during his travels? And which Turks did he have in mind? Is he including here the remote Turkish tribes who, as noted, worship "animate objects of physical beauty" and who are thus 'veiled' from God by 'mixed light and darkness'?

More importantly, the implication of the above is that, at least to the mind of al-Ghazālī, non-Muslims living in the Muslim world must have been adequately exposed to the 'true' nature of the Prophet.

One can only wonder how accurate such an assessment would be, given what one would expect of the intensity of polemical discourse produced by a non-Muslim minority community directed against the Muslim majority. While it is certain that many non-Muslims living in predominately Muslim lands must have qualified as having been 'properly' exposed to the Message, it is not inconceivable that others never were. It is certainly possible that non-Muslims residing in relatively isolated communities within these regions habitually heard that the Prophet was an arch-liar, hence the unlikelihood of

¹⁹⁴ Winter, "The Last Trump Card," 149. Thus, in referring to the position maintained by 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037), an Ash'arite contemporary of al-Juwaynī, Winter describes the logical conclusion of this being that those

who infer the unity and justice of God but are ignorant of revealed law 'have the status of Muslims' and can achieve success in the next world. Those who die in a condition of unbelief (*kufr*) because of a failure to make this deduction may expect neither reward nor punishment, although God may admit them to Paradise 'through His sheer grace, not as a reward,' just as [He] does for children who die before maturity. (Winter, "The Last Trump Card," 148; *cf.* 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-dīn*, 263).

being exposed in any meaningful way to Muslim claims of the Prophet's miracles. As

Albert Hourani explains:

However easy and close relations between Muslims, Jews, and Christians might be, there remained a gulf of ignorance and prejudice between them. They worshipped separately and had their own high places of worship and pilgrimage: Jerusalem for the Jews, another Jerusalem for Christians, and local shrines of saints.¹⁹⁵

Nevertheless, al-Ghazālī leads us to assume that non-Muslims 'properly' exposed to the Message must be significantly worse in the eyes of God than most other non-Muslims – an inference that would certainly be difficult for anyone to demonstrate.

Moreover, al-Ghazālī's framework appears to contain a problematic double standard. As noted, al-Ghazālī criticizes non-Muslims who reject the Message due to their blind adherence to authority (*taqlīd*). Nevertheless, in *Iḥyā'* (in *Kitāb qawā'id al-'aqā'id*), he seems to contradict this sentiment by stating that if one were raised in a household which adhered to the Message, and if he/she simply adhered to this belief without any investigation or contemplation (because of blind adherence to authority), then he/she would be saved in the Hereafter, for "the Law (*al-shar'*) did not obligate the uncivilized Bedouins (to do) anything more than maintain firm faith in the literal meaning of [the articles of faith]."¹⁹⁶ Later in *Iḥyā'* (in *Kitāb sharḥ 'ajā'ib al-qalb*), al-Ghazālī states:

The hearts of Jews and Christians are also assured by what they hear from their fathers and mothers; however, they believe in that which is erroneous (simply) because error was presented to them. Muslims (on the other hand) believe in that

¹⁹⁵ See Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 188. Hourani goes on to note that the differences may have been greater in the cities than in the countryside, however. Communities dwelling close to each other, in particular in regions where the hand of the urban government was not felt directly, might live in a close symbiosis based upon mutual need, or common obedience and loyalty to a local lord. (Ibid.)

¹⁹⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 1:87.

which is true, not because of their examination (into the matter), but because the true word was presented to them.¹⁹⁷

That al-Ghazālī's paradigm leads to the conclusion that simply being raised in a non-Muslim household is therefore, practically-speaking, disadvantageous is something that is not thoroughly addressed.¹⁹⁸ One could argue that God's guidance or misguidance is manifested through the religious orientations of parents and households. But what does that tell us about 'sincere' non-Muslims? We therefore find ourselves asking a familiar question: Why did God not simply guide all 'sincere' non-Muslims to the Message in the first place?

Confusion also arises when we compare al-Ghazālī's analysis of non-Muslim motivations to embrace, reject, or ponder belief in God, and the Last Day, with his response to the Mu'tazilite doctrine of *al-ḥusn wa al-qubḥ al-'aqliyān*, or the intellect's ability to comprehend the goodness or detestability of a particular act, independent of Revelation. This is found in his voluminous work *al-Mustaṣfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl* (The Essentials of Legal Theory).¹⁹⁹ Here, al-Ghazālī states that all moral judgments that are not based on Scripture are affected by subjective biases and preferences. Moreover, following in the footsteps of al-Juwaynī²⁰⁰ and other Ash'arites,²⁰¹ he argues that there

¹⁹⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, 3:16.

¹⁹⁸ Also disadvantageous according to this model would simply be being raised speaking Hebrew, for example, instead of Arabic.

¹⁹⁹ This work was composed relatively late in al-Ghazālī's life (in 503/1109). (Al-'Uthmān, *Sīrat al-Ghazālī*, 205)

²⁰⁰ See Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-irshād ilā qawāṭi' al-adillah fī uṣūl al-i'tiqād*, Eds. Muḥammad Yūsuf Mūsā and 'Alī A. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanjī, 1950), 258ff. This point is also noted by Jackson. See Sherman A. Jackson, "The Alchemy of Domination? Some Ash'arite Responses to Mu'tazilite Ethics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (31) 1999, 190, 199.

²⁰¹ According to A. Kevin Reinhart, the idea that no moral assessment can be made in the absence of Revelation was maintained by, among others, al-Ash'arī (d. 324/935) himself, al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), and Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī (d. 514/1120). See A. Kevin Reinhart, *Before Revelation: the boundaries of Muslim moral thought* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995), 25-6.

are no intelligible moral essences as the Baghdādī Mu‘tazilites had argued.²⁰² For example, if one argues that killing is inherently evil, then would it not be problematic to justify execution as a consequence for certain crimes? If one argues that lying is inherently evil, how could one justify a lie that saved the Prophet’s life? Furthermore, the argument that humans have *a priori* knowledge of good and evil is weak, he argues, given the widespread disagreement that exists among intellectuals over numerous moral issues. Even in the case of those issues for which there is widespread agreement, it can hardly be said that there is only one explanation for this agreement, as moral convictions are based on considerations that vary significantly from person to person. In the final analysis, al-Ghazālī states that there are two explanations for moral action: religious devotion (*al-tadayyun bi al-sharā’i’*) and self-interest (*al-aghrāḍ*).²⁰³ As Sherman Jackson observes, al-Ghazālī’s ‘seminal contribution’ was his redirection of “ethical discourse away from ontology toward psychology” such that later Ash‘arites would conceive of the appetitive self (*al-ṭab’*), rather than the intellect (*al-‘aql*), as being “the instrument of moral judgment.”²⁰⁴

While this discussion may help us to understand al-Ghazālī’s linking of punishment with the denial of the Message of Islam once it has been conveyed, a problem arises when one considers the case of a non-Muslim not exposed to the Message who denies the existence of God and/or the Last Day: Based on al-Ghazālī’s dismissal of the intellect as a source of moral truths, he appears at first glance to be inconsistent in his insistence that *all* must – as a moral matter – believe in God and the Last Day. Despite al-

²⁰² Interestingly, while al-Ghazālī composes an entire chapter (in *Iḥyā’*) on thanking God, he also argues that the act of thanking God “is not an absolute good.” (Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, 119)

²⁰³ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustasfā*, 1:112-19; Jackson, “The Alchemy of Domination?,” 187ff.

²⁰⁴ Jackson, “The Alchemy of Domination?,” 190-1.

Ghazālī’s emphasis on psychology (as demonstrated in *al-Mustasfā*), and his observations on the manner in which humans tend to adopt the very core beliefs with which they are raised (as found in *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*), according to al-Ghazālī’s framework, the intellect is still expected to play an important role in arriving at a baseline belief. This is to be contrasted with al-Ghazālī’s declaration elsewhere that, in the absence of Revelation, one should not be expected to either truly know God or thank Him.²⁰⁵ One could admittedly argue that it is precisely because of an emphasis on psychology that al-Ghazālī expected belief in God and the Last Day to be a bare minimum. Nevertheless, it is also precisely because of this emphasis that one could potentially argue that thanking God should also be expected (which the Mu‘tazilites are known for having argued, but for different reasons).

This apparent dilemma can be at least partially resolved by recalling al-Ghazālī’s view of the natural disposition (*al-fiṭrah*). As he elaborates in *Ihyā’* (in *Kitāb al-‘ilm*):

God states, “And [remember] when your Lord brought forth from the loins of the Children of Adam their posterity and made them testify against themselves. [God said]: ‘Am I not your Lord?’ They said: ‘Yes’ (Q. 7:172). [And] God states, “If you ask them who created them, they will say God” (Q. 43: 87). This means that if they consider their state, their souls and their inner selves they will testify regarding ‘the natural disposition according to which God fashioned humankind.’ (Q. 30:30). That is to say that every human (*ādamī*) is endowed (*fuṭira*) with faith in God the Exalted.²⁰⁶

Thus, to the mind of al-Ghazālī, belief in God is a serious matter that defines the very nature of humanity. This helps to explain why, as noted, al-Ghazālī views atheists as being the lowest of the low, being veiled from God by ‘pure darkness’ due to their naturalist and/or egoistic worldview. And even though al-Ghazālī puts forth various arguments for God’s existence, after all is said and done, no proofs are necessary, he

²⁰⁵ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtīṣād*, 157-8; Al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustasfā*, 1:120.

²⁰⁶ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 1:80.

argues, given the reality described by Qur’anic statements such as those quoted in the preceding paragraph.²⁰⁷

Unresolved, then, is the question, What about belief in the Last Day? Is that too an intrinsic part of humanity? Why should humanity be expected to believe in it? It is not inconceivable that al-Ghazālī would assume that all of humanity must have at some point heard about the Last Day in some way or another. Thus, given the psychological motivations described above, al-Ghazālī believed that the cautious would choose to *prepare* for it. This, however, does not fully explain why anyone would be motivated to *believe sincerely* in it. Further complicating matters is al-Ghazālī’s statement in *Ihyā’* that a new Muslim who has not yet been informed about the afterlife should be told about it so that he/she may believe in it.²⁰⁸ How, then, could all those who have never been exposed to the Message in the first place be expected to believe in the Last Day?

Another apparent problem arises when we consider that, according to al-Ghazālī (in *Kitāb al-‘ilm of Ihyā’*), the Trinitarianism adopted by Christians does not qualify as *Tawḥīd*.²⁰⁹ Thus, if Trinitarianism does not constitute an ‘adequate’ belief in one God, is not al-Ghazālī being inconsistent in speaking of the salvation of the overwhelming majority of Christians not exposed to the Message, particularly those of Byzantium and other lands that “lie far beyond the lands of Islam”?

That al-Ghazālī’s writings appear at times to be disharmonious is to be at least partially expected on account of the fact that he was writing to different audiences and had to negotiate between a variety of competing notions. This observation is perhaps best captured by T. J. Gianotti, who states:

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 1:97.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 1:19.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 1:35.

[A] basic problem that every student of al-Ghazālī must ultimately face [is] the characteristically varied and sometimes conflicting content one finds in al-Ghazālī's writings. This is further complicated by al-Ghazālī's employment of a wide variety of genres and techniques, from dogmatic explications and allegorical representations (intended for the generality of believers) to brief flashings of mystical disclosure (intended for a more restricted, more advanced audience).²¹⁰

Leaving aside such considerations, one can only wonder how different al-Ghazālī's discussion would be were he alive today, especially in light of his assertion that most of humanity is Heaven-bound. For example, in stating that one would be taken to account if he/she heard about the Prophet and his miracles, and then turned away from it, ignored it, failed to investigate it, refused to ponder it, and took no initiative to confirm it, al-Ghazālī makes his medieval context quite apparent. For, in a post-Enlightenment secular society, it may be argued that a general apathy with regard to religion has become, at least for many, the norm rather than the exception. And what of the many who have no faith in God given the popularization of theories that challenge some of the very arguments put forth by al-Ghazālī? For example, Darwinian evolution has stood as a formidable challenge to the teleological argument, and Western philosophers have produced popular counter-arguments to 'Pascal's Wager.'²¹¹ Moreover, as we proceed through the 'information age' we find that more and more people now have the potential to be 'properly' exposed to the Message (without necessarily being exposed to the

²¹⁰ See Timothy J. Gianotti, *Al-Ghazālī's Unspeakable Doctrine of the Soul: Unveiling the Esoteric Psychology and Eschatology of the Iḥyā'* (Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 2001), 19-20. As Gianotti notes, that al-Ghazālī's writings considered collectively are not uniform is something that was recognized by medieval Muslim scholars, including the Andalusians Ibn Rushd (d. 1198 CE) and Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185 CE) (Ibid., 19-20).

Ebrahim Moosa interprets al-Ghazālī's apparent inconsistencies more optimistically, stating that al-Ghazālī was working "within a maelstrom" and was thus "forced to negotiate multiple antithetical positions. And if he appears tentative and undecided from time to time, it suggests that he did not entirely subscribe to a totalitarian epistemology, but one that was partly open to reconstruction." (Moosa, *Ghazālī*, 140)

²¹¹ For example, there is the 'Atheist's Wager,' a relatively popular philosophical argument which maintains that if God truly is benevolent, the most prudent decision one could make would be to live a meaningful and virtuous life without necessarily worrying about God's existence, for God could not then punish one who was morally upright.

cultural and political dominance of Islam). Yet, Islam remains a minority religion. Accordingly, most of humanity would be Hell-bound based on al-Ghazālī's medieval criterion.

Perhaps because al-Ghazālī was living in a time in which Islam had succeeded in converting the majority of the population living in the 'Abode of Islam,' he failed to either appreciate or articulate the true extent to which the dominant culture, as well as political power and authority, influence the phenomena of religious conversion and belief formation. (As Emile Durkheim once observed, "Religion is an eminently social thing").²¹² Otherwise, according to al-Ghazālī's framework, simple knowledge of the Message becomes potentially dangerous.²¹³

2.7. The Purpose(s) and Duration of Punishment in Hell

So much for salvation on the Last Day. What then can be said of Hell's inhabitants? What is the purpose and duration of their punishment? Do they have any hope of eventually attaining salvation? Interestingly, in at least one of his works, the treatise *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā' Allāh al-ḥusnā* (The Noblest Aim in Explaining the Ninety-Nine Most Beautiful Names of God),²¹⁴ al-Ghazālī makes statements which, at first blush, seem to point towards the eventual salvation of all.

²¹² See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 9.

²¹³ The notion that some forms of knowledge are potentially dangerous is, in point of fact, explicitly espoused by al-Ghazālī in the context of Muslim scholars: "Knowledge...either destroys [its possessor] eternally or grants him/her eternal life. For this reason, the Prophet* said, 'The person who will be most severely punished on the Day of Resurrection will be a learned person whose knowledge God has not made useful.'" (Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'*, 1:47)

²¹⁴ This work was composed sometime from 490-5/1097-1102. (Al-'Uthmān, *Sīrat al-Ghazālī*, 204)

In his explanation of the Divine names *al-Raḥmān* (the Compassionate) and *al-Raḥīm* (the Caring), we find a relevant discussion on the purpose of Divine punishment – a discussion incidentally not found in his teacher al-Juwaynī’s discussion of those same names.²¹⁵ Al-Ghazālī’s approach is to say that compassion and punishment may be reconciled if we think of a small child who is ill: Though his/her mother may prohibit him/her from being cupped due to her apparent compassion, it is actually the father’s decision to have the child cupped that is more prudent and thus most compassionate. Similarly, God is most caring and seeks what is best for those upon whom He bestows mercy. And “there is no evil (*sharr*) in existence but that it has good (*khayr*) within it” – even if that good is not apparent. For example, he states, the amputation of a corroded hand appears to be an evil act, but is in reality extremely beneficial for the well-being of the body. Otherwise, the whole body would become ruined.²¹⁶

Thus, according to al-Ghazālī, one must not confuse objectives: In the above example, the preservation of the well-being of the body is the essential concern, while the amputation itself is simply the means of achieving that end. It is in this context that al-Ghazālī quotes the hadith which states, “My mercy outstrips my wrath.” As al-Ghazālī explains, God’s wrath is His will (*irādah*) for evil (*sharr*), while His compassion is His will for good (*khayr*). Nevertheless, while He wills good for the sake of good, He wills evil for the sake of the good within it. In this light, there is nothing in that which is either good or evil that negates the reality of God’s compassion.

But what if one does not see the good within an evil act? Moreover, one is tempted to ask the classic philosophical question, Could not all good have been

²¹⁵ Al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-Irshād*, 145.

²¹⁶ See al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Khosht (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qur’ān, 1985), 62.

obtainable without the presence of evil? As for the first question, al-Ghazālī states that such is the result of the intellect’s limitations. These same limitations lead a child to see cupping as evil, and lead an ignoramus to see retaliatory execution (*al-qatl qiṣāṣan*) as ‘pure evil,’ whereas in reality, both are ‘pure good.’ Thus, the intellect often fails to recognize the general good associated with a specific evil. As for the second question, al-Ghazālī implores the holder of such a view not to think that all that is conceivable is indeed *actually* possible, and not to doubt God’s compassion.²¹⁷

While al-Ghazālī makes it clear that God’s wrath is actually full of compassion, and that it serves as a ‘treatment,’ the question becomes, What if Hell’s inhabitants are completely ‘treated’ and ‘cleansed’ of all their personal ills? What if they are no longer evil in any way? Why should they continue to suffer? Where is the compassion in that? Thus, to my mind, there are at least three possible explanations that would help one to make sense of al-Ghazālī’s statements in *al-Maqṣad*: he believed that all would eventually be relieved of their punishment somehow (even if some remained in Hell, albeit without punishment); he thought that Hell’s inhabitants would perish and cease to exist after their treatment was complete; or he held that those among Hell’s inhabitants who would remain in Hell to be punished forever were beyond repair (with no ‘treatment’ possible), and that the notion of God’s mercy outweighing His wrath is not absolute and inclusive of all of God’s creation (as indeed the hadith cited above from which this notion is derived could be read in reference to Believers only). In light of the available evidence, it is the latter that appears to be the most logical possibility, as we would expect al-Ghazālī to present his justification for either one of the first two possibilities were he to go against the popular Ash‘arite belief of an eternal Hell and punishment. Furthermore,

²¹⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Maqṣad*, 62-3.

he frequently refers to Unbelievers remaining in Hell ‘forever’ (*‘alā al-ta’bīd*), and since al-Ghazālī gives no indication otherwise, we have no reason to assume that expressions such as *‘alā al-ta’bīd* mean anything other than ‘forever,’ which is the more common understanding in Muslim theological discourse.

Confirmation of this supposition is to be found in *Ihyā’* in *Kitāb al-tawbah*,²¹⁸ where al-Ghazālī speaks of four groups of people in the afterlife: “those who will perish” (*al-hālikūn*); “those who will be punished” (*al-mu’adhdhabūn*); “those who will attain salvation” (*al-nājūn*); and “those who will [not only attain salvation but will also] have accomplished (true) success” (*al-fā’izūn*). Relevant for our purposes are the first two groups. According to al-Ghazālī, the first group, i.e. “those who will perish,” will be forever deprived of God’s compassion, and will be unhappy, since “happiness in the afterlife is (the result of) nearness to God.”²¹⁹ They include “Unbelievers (*al-jāhidūn*) and those who have turned away (from faith) (*al-mu’ridūn*) and devoted themselves to this life, disbelieving in God, His Prophets, and His Books.”²²⁰ According to al-Ghazālī, the pieces of evidence from the Qur’an and Sunnah regarding their destruction are too numerous to cite. Thus, ontological Unbelief (*Kufr*) is seen as only leading to destruction, despite the fact that al-Ghazālī himself recognizes the existence of different levels of Unbelief.²²¹ Furthermore, al-Ghazālī states in *Fayṣal al-tafriqah* that destruction awaits the Unbelievers “whom there is no hope of reforming. For no good can be expected of

²¹⁸ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 4:22-9.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 4:24. A similar statement may be found in *Kīmīyā-ī sa’ādat*. (Al-Ghazālī, *Kīmīyā-ī Sa’ādat*, 791-2)

²²⁰ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 4:24.

²²¹ Al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustaṣfā*, 1:171-4. As he notes, for example, there is a difference between an Unbeliever (*kāfir*) who kills prophets and saints and fornicates and one who simply lives an uneventful, day-to-day life. (Ibid., 171-3)

[them] after [they perish].”²²² As for the second group, “those who will be punished,” they include transgressors with a minimal level of faith. They will eventually be taken out of Hellfire after spending a certain amount of time there.²²³ As al-Ghazālī explains elsewhere (in *Ihyā’* in *Kitāb qawā’id al-‘aqā’id*), one should believe that “(true) monotheists (*al-muwahḥidūn*) will be taken out of Hellfire after vengeance has been obtained, until, by the grace of God the Exalted, no (true) monotheist will remain in Hell (*Jahannam*).”²²⁴

Given al-Ghazālī’s distinction between those who will remain eternally in Hell and those whose stay is temporal, it may be safe to assume that his discussion in *al-Maqṣad* of punishment being a corrective is only in reference to “those who will be punished” (*al-mu‘adhdhabūn*). “Those who will perish” (*al-hālikūn*), on the other hand, have, by al-Ghazālī’s standard, forever disqualified themselves from benefiting from Divine compassion.²²⁵ Accordingly, the greater good inherent in eternal punishment is to be found in establishing God’s justice and omnipotence, as opposed to benefiting the recipient of that punishment.

3. *Excursus: Beyond al-Ghazālī: Shāh Walī Allāh as an Example of Convergent Evolution?*

²²² Al-Ghazālī, *Boundaries*, 127.

²²³ According to al-Ghazālī, this could last between a single moment and 7,000 years. (Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 4:26)

²²⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’*, 1:86. A variation of this quote may be found elsewhere, including *Kitāb al-tawbah*. (Ibid., 4:28)

²²⁵ In light of the confusion associated with this discussion on punishment, one is reminded of al-Ghazālī’s words in *al-Iqtisād*: “[Most mistakes] are the result of errors derived in the quest for the meanings of phrases.” (Al-Ghazālī, *al-Iqtisād*, 24)

A critical analysis of al-Ghazālī's soteriological views may lead one to probe further to see if prominent theologians not directly influenced by al-Ghazālī (at least regarding the issue at hand), living in significantly different contexts arrived at similar conclusions. If so, then this may serve as indirect support for al-Ghazālī's reading of Scripture. We now examine the case of one prominent scholar who, seemingly independently, arrived at conclusions that are to some extent comparable to those of al-Ghazālī.

Quṭb al-Dīn Aḥmad Abū al-Fayyād, more commonly known as Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (d. 1176/1762), was a prominent Indian reformer, theologian, and traditionist, and is widely considered the founder of Indian Islamic modernism. He was trained in the traditional and rational Islamic sciences by his father, and succeeded the latter as principle of the *Madrasah Raḥīmiyyah* at Delhi. Besides translating the Qur'an into Persian, he authored over 40 works and was known for his conciliatory doctrine, which was applied to various tensions, including that between dogmatic theology and Sufism. His *magnum opus* was *Hujjat Allāh al-bālighah* (The Conclusive Argument from God)²²⁶, which deals with the 'secrets of religion' (*asrār al-dīn*), metaphysics, politics, finance, and political economy, and which promulgates his theory of "*fakk kull niẓām* (down with all systems!)."²²⁷ Relevant for our purposes is a work written later in his life, his treatise *al-Budūr al-bāziḡah* (Full Moon Appearing on the Horizon)²²⁸. This is a work on '*ilm al-asrār*, which deals with the realities and secrets of Sufism (*taṣawwuf*).

²²⁶ This is the translation adopted by M. K. Hermansen in *The Conclusive Argument from God: Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi's Hujjat Allāh al-Bāligha* (Leiden; New York: E. J. Brill, 1996).

²²⁷ See A. S. Bazmee Ansari, "al-Dihlawī, Shāh Walī Allāh," *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition*, Vol. 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), 254.

²²⁸ This is the translation adopted by J. M. S. Baljon. See Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī, *Full Moon Appearing on the Horizon (al-Budūr al-bāziḡah)*, trans. J. M. S. Baljon (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1990).

Both al-Ghazālī and Shāh Walī Allāh reached conclusions that are somewhat similar regarding the fate of those non-Muslims who were not ‘adequately’ exposed to the Message of Islam – a fact that has been recognized by other scholars.²²⁹ This, despite the fact that Shāh Walī Allāh neither cites nor sponsors al-Ghazālī’s opinion in presenting his own soteriological views, and despite the significant differences in both scholars’ backgrounds and hermeneutic strategies. And while Shāh Walī Allāh is also associated with the ever-broad Ash‘arite school of thought,²³⁰ the differences between the two regarding the issue at hand are significant enough for us to rule out any direct influence by al-Ghazālī. As such, to my mind, both seem to represent an example of convergent, rather than divergent, evolution.

Briefly surveying Shāh Walī Allāh’s discussion in *al-Budūr*, we find that, in discussing the fate of humanity, Shāh Walī Allāh categorizes people into three groups: ‘Companions of the Right’ (*ṣāhib al-yamīn*), ‘Companions of the Limbo’ (*ṣāhib al-a‘rāf*),²³¹ and ‘Companions of the Left’ (*ṣāhib al-shimāl*). While the ‘Companions of the Right’ include Believers of various degrees who will ultimately find their way to Heaven, the ‘Companions of the Left’ include Unbelievers and Hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*) who will be eternally damned to Hell.²³² And in between are the ‘Companions of the Limbo.’

The notion of the Limbo is based on a Qur’anic reference to the ‘Heights’:

Between [the people of Heaven and the people of Hell] is a veil, and on the Heights (*al-a‘rāf*) [separating Heaven and Hell] are men who know everyone by his mark. And they will call out to the people of Paradise: “Peace be upon you.” That is before they enter it, though they hope to do so. And when their eyes are

²²⁹ Winter, “The Last Trump Card,” 150-1.

²³⁰ This is articulated by Shāh Walī Allāh himself in his work *al-Khayr al-kathīr*. See Hafiz A. Ghaffar Khan, “Shah Wali Allah,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 8:734.

²³¹ Literally, *al-a‘rāf* means the ‘heights.’

²³² Baljon translates *munāfiqūn* (or, to be exact, *munāfiq*) as ‘People of little faith’ – a justified translation given Shāh Walī Allāh’s full description of them. (Shāh Walī Allāh, *Full Moon*, 196)

turned towards the people of the Fire, they will say: “Lord, do not place us among the wrongdoing people. (7:46-7)

According to Shāh Walī Allāh, these are:

(a) people of a wicked disposition, ignorant, performing their good deeds always perfunctorily, not purposefully; (b) people of a strong disposition, but who did not receive the opportunity either to devote themselves to God or to the present world, overcome as they were with [the sleep of] heedlessness (*ghaflah*).²³³

As Shāh Walī Allāh later elaborates, this group includes people of ‘limited intelligence,’ such as young children, the insane, farmers, and slaves. It also includes

people who have not received the message of Islam at all as, for instance, dwellers of high and inaccessible mountains. They do not attribute associates to their Lord, nor do they deny Him or believe in Him. They are like animals who do not concentrate their being upon God...[T]hey are merely interested in things by which profit is gained. And if they receive the message of Islam, they do not derive benefit from it on account of their stupidity. They are like people who neither understand the language nor the argument of Islam. Or they grow up without paying attention to reflection [upon religious values]. They only learn that Muslims are people whose turbans are like this and whose shirts are like that, who eat these things and consider those forbidden [food]. Still, if these people attack us to capture our country, we have to fight them, notwithstanding the fact that they do not associate anyone with God. They behave like animals, though they have a sound mental disposition.²³⁴

In light of their ‘earnestness,’ as well as God’s mercy and justice, Shāh Walī Allāh asserts (without further elaboration) that these people will all be admitted into Heaven.²³⁵

In comparing Shāh Walī Allāh and al-Ghazālī, it is obvious that both were aware that the environment in which one is raised affects the probability that he/she will ever embrace Islam. And even though there is good reason to believe that both were deriving conclusions based on their reading of Scripture (even though both selectively cite from it to support their specific suppositions), there is a certain extent to which one imagines that

²³³ Shāh Walī Allāh, *Full Moon*, 193-6.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 203ff.

their own environments played a crucial role in their thinking. (This is besides the fact that it is arguably a natural human inclination to find it difficult to believe that God would punish ‘sincere’ non-coreligionists eternally, especially in those circumstances in which conversion to the ‘right’ path is ostensibly unrealistic). Indeed, an examination of their differences seems to bear this out.

For example, Shāh Walī Allāh’s criterion for admission into Heaven does not require belief in one God and the Last Day. Might this ultimately stem from the fact that while the communities surrounding al-Ghazālī were mostly monotheistic, those surrounding Shāh Walī Allāh were quite varied (and were more likely to include polytheistic Hindus, Zoroastrian dualists, and Buddhist polytheists and atheists)? Another significant difference is that while al-Ghazālī cites Byzantine Christians and Turks living beyond the lands of Islam as potential candidates for receiving God’s mercy, Shāh Walī Allāh refers to the “dwellers of high and inaccessible mountains.” Thus, for Shāh Walī Allāh, who lived under Muslim rule but among a Hindu majority, simply residing in the lands of Islam does not suffice for being taken to account. Finally, another significant difference is that while for al-Ghazālī one cannot be lazy in seeking the truth once he/she has been adequately exposed to the Message, Shāh Walī Allāh argues that even when one is exposed to the Message, he/she may be justified in not pursuing the matter further on account of his/her ‘stupidity.’

As an aside, one can only wonder why al-Ghazālī never refers to the notion of a limbo in his discussion of the fate of those not ‘properly’ exposed to the Message. Indeed, it would seem to resolve the question of how such non-Muslims would be judged in the afterlife vis-à-vis those ‘properly’ exposed. It may be that al-Ghazālī simply found

no need to discuss the details, as it were. Or it may be that he did not believe in such a notion to begin with. (I should note that while the ‘Heights’ appear to represent a limbo of sorts, scholars did not reach a consensus on how exactly to interpret these verses).²³⁶

Thus, we find interesting similarities and differences between two very different scholars living in very different contexts. Both emphasize God’s compassion towards certain non-Muslims, yet their respective milieus inform their vision of how such compassion will actually be demonstrated in the afterlife. Nevertheless, the very fact that we find corroboration for this kind of Divine compassion despite hermeneutic and background differences seems only to support al-Ghazālī’s *general* reading of Scripture.

4. Conclusion

In sum, we find that al-Ghazālī’s various theological paradigms, such as Divine mercy and omnipotence, lead to surface contradictions that are not always easily resolvable. And even though he rehashes various Ash‘arite viewpoints, and speaks of the kind of Divine compassion that would be recognized by scholars of radically different backgrounds living in radically different contexts (e.g. Shāh Walī Allāh), it would appear that al-Ghazālī’s real contribution is most evident in his specific categorization of non-Muslims, including those not ‘properly’ exposed to the Message. Finally, I will conclude by once again noting that al-Ghazālī discourages the use of ‘formal reasoning’ in trying

²³⁶ Winter, “The Last Trump Card,” 150. Those in favor of the Limbo interpretation, which would come to be considered a ‘legitimate interpretation,’ tended to ascribe this view to the Companion Hudhayfah ibn al-Yamān. The famous exegete al-Ṭabarī stated the following in his commentary on Q. 7:46-7: “Some say they are a group of Adam’s descendents whose good and evil actions are equivalent, so that they are set in that place until God decides their fate as He will, and then brings them into Paradise by His goodness and grace.” (Ibid.)

to conceptualize issues that are ultimately of the Divine. As will become apparent in the next chapter, that is something that Ibn al-‘Arabī would take very seriously.

Chapter 3

Ibn al-‘Arabī

1. The Life and Times of Ibn al-‘Arabī

Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥātimī al-Ṭā’ī al-Andalusī, also known as Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī,²³⁷ or *al-Shaykh al-Akbar* (d. 638/1240) was one of, if not the, most prominent Sufi figures of all time. Born in 560/1165 in Spain,²³⁸ he was raised in Seville from the age of eight, and would move throughout Spain and North Africa during his early life. He enjoyed the company of prominent religious, political, and philosophical figures, including the philosopher and *qāḍī* (judge) Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198).

At a young age, he claimed to have experienced a vision during an illness that changed his life and brought him *ma‘rifah* (gnosis). He later traveled to Mecca and was greatly affected by his experience at the Ka‘ba. It would be there that in 598/1202 he would begin to write one of his masterpieces, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah* (The Meccan Revelations), which contains an extensive explanation of his Sufi doctrine. After moving

²³⁷ In order to avoid confusing him with another Ibn al-‘Arabī (Abū Bakr Ibn al-‘Arabī), he is often simply referred to as simply Ibn ‘Arabī. Nevertheless, his *kunya* is sometimes given as Abū Bakr, and he refers to himself as Abū ‘Abd-Allāh.

²³⁸ See Muḥammad M. al-Khawālī, “*Muqaddimah*,” *Muḥāḍarat al-Abrār wa musāmarat al-akhyār*, ed. Muḥammad M. al-Khawālī (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1972), 1:ج.

about, he finally settled in Damascus, where he completed and revised *al-Futūḥāt*, and where he composed his most influential work *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (The Seals of Wisdom)²³⁹ in 630/1232-3, before passing away in 638/1240.²⁴⁰ The latter text is composed of twenty-eight chapters, twenty-seven of which claim to discern the wisdom in the teachings of prophets, beginning with Adam and concluding with Muḥammad.²⁴¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī makes the claim that this book was dictated to him by the last Prophet in a dream.²⁴²

Ibn al-‘Arabī was, as A. Ateş observes, “certainly the most prolific of all Şūfī writers,” with at least 239 works ascribed to him.²⁴³ (There are additional spurious works ascribed to him, including *Tafsīr al-Shaykh al-Akbar*).²⁴⁴ And though he wrote on a variety of topics, it is mainly his Sufi writings that have survived – writings that were, and continue to be, controversial among various orthodox scholars.

Before proceeding to the matter of salvation, I should (briefly) make reference to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s epistemology and ontology. According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, there are three ways of attaining knowledge: Reason (*al-‘aql*), Revelation (*al-shar‘*), and ‘unveiling’ (*kashf*), which signifies direct access to the Divine. Each of these three is to be considered on its own terms. Thus, in explaining the relationship between the three, he writes:

²³⁹ This is the translation adopted by ‘Aisha ‘Abd al-Rahman at-Tarjumana in *The Seals of Wisdom* (Norwich, England: Diwan Press, 1980).

²⁴⁰ See A. Ateş, “Ibn al-‘Arabī,” *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition*, Vol. 3 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), 707-9.

²⁴¹ Interestingly, Ibn al-‘Arabī includes as a prophet Khālid ibn Sinān, who passed away shortly before the era of Muḥammad.

²⁴² See Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Abū al-‘Alā ‘Affī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 1946), 47.

²⁴³ Ates, “Ibn al-‘Arabī,” 708. Ateş notes here that he probably authored approximately 400 works. Al-Khawli has the number at approximately 289. (Al-Khawli, “*Muqaddimah*,” 1:.)

²⁴⁴ It appears that the *tafsīr* was actually the work of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Qāshānī, a student of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s student al-Qunawī. See Pierre Lory, *Les Commentaires Ésotériques du Coran d’après ‘Abd al-Razzāq Qāshānī* (Paris: Les Deux Océans, 1980).

Revealed religion has a power whose reality does not allow it to be overstepped, just as reason has such a power...I live with the present moment. With reason I deny what reason denies, since then my present moment is reason, but I do not deny it by unveiling or revealed religion. With revealed religion I deny what revealed religion denies, since my present moment is revealed religion, but I do not deny it by unveiling or reason. As for unveiling, it denies nothing. On the contrary, it establishes everything in its proper level.²⁴⁵

To the mind of Ibn al-‘Arabī, humans progress by way of three major ‘journeys’ (*asfār*): 1. the ‘journey’ away from God (*al-sayr min Allāh*), and this occurs when one is born into this world; 2. the ‘journey’ towards God (*al-sayr ilā Allāh*), which occurs under the supervision of a guide; and 3. the ‘journey’ ‘in’ God (*al-sayr fī Allāh*) – the only one of the three journeys which is eternal. Perhaps the most controversial notion derived from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teachings was his apparent monism which would come to be called the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (‘Oneness of Being’).²⁴⁶ It has been argued, however, that even though Ibn al-‘Arabī was claiming that God is ‘all,’ this was never meant to be understood in a “pantheistic sense, because God’s incomparability demands that He remain infinitely beyond every limitation that defines the things.”²⁴⁷

In any case, Ibn al-‘Arabī would maintain that the path towards understanding God is most successful when one reflects on His attributes and names, as each name is said to have an effect (*athar*) or property (*ḥukm*) which can be perceived within existence (at least by those endowed with understanding and intuition). And it is precisely this *attempt* to analyze all the properties of the Divine names that defines *al-Futūḥāt*. (And it can only be an *attempt* given God’s unlimited nature).²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ See Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyyah* (Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, [1968]), 2:605. Also see William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994), 10.

²⁴⁶ Ates, “Ibn al-‘Arabi,” 710-1.

²⁴⁷ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 169.

²⁴⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 4:3. Also see William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989), 8ff. As

What follows is an analysis of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s relevant views on salvation, as deduced from *al-Futūḥāt* and *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. As will become apparent, while Ibn al-‘Arabī asserts the superiority of Muḥammad’s Message, because of his emphasis on Divine mercy and nobility, and because of the notion that all paths lead to God, he attempts to portray all of humanity, Muslim or otherwise, as ultimately moving towards happiness, such that even those who are ‘insincere’ may experience at least *some* level of contentment while still remaining in Hellfire.

2. Relevant Aspects of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Writings

2.1. The ‘Straight Path’ to God

In relation to the other case studies, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s view of the fate of non-Muslims has been the most discussed among Western scholars, the most prominent of whom is William C. Chittick. What has made Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion on this issue particularly interesting is its uniqueness, which has simultaneously led to admiration and denigration by other Muslim scholars. As Chittick observes,

[Ibn al-‘Arabī] has been perceived with hostility by many Muslim theologians and jurists...He threatens all the easy certainties. Theologians love to establish their catechisms and creeds, which offer in seemingly unambiguous language a firm ground on which believers can stand. [Ibn al-‘Arabī], in contrast, launches a massive assault on straightforward assertions.

[Ibn al-‘Arabī] does not deny the relative validity and usefulness of dogma, and he often reaffirms the standard formulations...But, the moment he begins to meditate on the meanings explicit and implicit in the sources of the tradition, he destabilizes unreflective minds. All the stark black and white

Chittick observes, “the divine names are the single most important concept to be found in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s works. Everything divine or cosmic, is related back to them.” (Ibid., 10)

distinctions that are the stock-in-trade of dogma – not to mention ideology – are shown to be illusory shadows.²⁴⁹

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings were considered radical because of his atypical conclusions, and yet presumed by many to be in-line with the basic Islamic message of the Unity of God (*Tawḥīd*). This is because of his well-known belief that all that is other than God, including ideas derived from human reason that appear to be on solid ground, are to be discarded because of their limitations.²⁵⁰ Accordingly, Ibn al-‘Arabī states in *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, “Neither your heart nor your eye ever witnesses anything but the form of your own belief concerning God.”²⁵¹ This corroborates his statement in *al-Futūḥāt* that “[c]reated beings are bound to worship only what they believe regarding the Truth [i.e. God], so they only worship that which is created.”²⁵² After all, he notes, “God is the greatest” and is thus beyond our conceptualizations of Him.²⁵³ These observations lead Ibn al-‘Arabī to boldly proclaim that everyone is an “idol-worshiper.”²⁵⁴ (As will be made apparent, however, Ibn al-‘Arabī is in no way speaking of the same kind of ‘idol-worshippers’ that most have in mind).

In light of these declarations, and in an attempt to demonstrate God’s mercy, Ibn al-‘Arabī states:

If God were to take people to account for error, He would take every possessor of a belief to account. Every believer has delimited his Lord with his reason and consideration and has thereby restricted Him. But nothing is worthy of God except nondelimitation. “In His hand is the dominion of each thing” (Q. 23:88), so

²⁴⁹ See William C. Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 111.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 111-2.

²⁵¹ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 150; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 121. This is notably similar to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s statement in *al-Futūḥāt* that “no one has (ever) seen anything except his/her own belief.” (Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:132)

²⁵² Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 4:386.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4:386.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:386.

He delimits, but He does not become delimited. Nevertheless, God pardons everyone.²⁵⁵

How, then, does one reach God? The ‘straight path’ of Islam? Are there multiple routes? According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, *everything* ultimately leads to God. This includes all Divinely revealed religions, as well as all products of the mind.²⁵⁶ As such, both the dejected and the fortunate tread on the path to God,²⁵⁷ who is ultimately “the only true and real actor.”²⁵⁸ This assessment is presumed to be fully in line with the Qur’anic declaration that “We belong to God and to Him we shall return” (2:156), as well as numerous Qur’anic and Hadith references to God as the Creator of all and the One to whom all matters will return. But even if all paths to God are to be deemed ‘real’ or ‘true,’ this certainly need not mean that all paths are equally virtuous, lead to what is best for the individual, and allow for the attainment of excellence.

As such, Ibn al-‘Arabī argues that achieving perfection can only be obtained by way of the ideal ‘Path of Muḥammad,’ which is derivable from the Qur’anic guidance given specifically to the Prophet. One step below that is the ‘straight path’ taught by all the Prophets. Certainly not included in this category are those followers who follow a path quite different from the ‘original’ Message taught by the Prophets. Although Ibn al-‘Arabī is often portrayed as a soteriological religious pluralist, T. Winter is absolutely correct when stating that claims of pluralism “need to be tempered by a survey of his less [i]renic statements.”²⁵⁹ After all, Ibn al-‘Arabī elsewhere deems Christians to be

²⁵⁵ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 153; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:309.

²⁵⁶ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:410.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:410.

²⁵⁸ See Alexander Knysh, “The Realms of Responsibility in Ibn ‘Arabi’s *al-Futuhāt al-makkiya*,” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society* 31 (2002) 93.

²⁵⁹ See T. Winter, “The Last Trump Card: Islam and the Supersession of Other Faiths,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 9 (1999) 2, 134.

polytheists (*mushrikūn*).²⁶⁰ Indeed, Ibn al-‘Arabī was not a pluralist, at least in the John Hick sense. To his mind, even though all paths and mental states lead to God, it is only the way determined by Revelation that may be characterized as felicitous.²⁶¹

Accordingly, Ibn al-‘Arabī states:

Among the paths is the path of blessings. It is referred to in God’s words: “To every one of you Messengers We have appointed a right way and a revealed law” (Q. 5:48). The Muḥammadan leader chooses the path of Muḥammad and leaves aside the other paths, even though he acknowledges them and has faith in them. However, he does not make himself a servant except through the path of Muḥammad, nor does he have his followers make themselves servants except through it. He traces the attributes of all paths back to it, because Muḥammad’s revealed religion is all-inclusive. Hence the property of all the revealed religions has been transferred to his revealed religion. His revealed religion embraces them, but they do not embrace it.²⁶²

In further emphasizing the Prophet’s significance, he states elsewhere:

God gives to His servants from Himself, and also on the hands of His Messengers. As for what comes to you on the hand of the Messenger, take it without employing any scale. But as for what comes to you from the hand of God, take it with a scale. For God is identical to every giver, but He has forbidden you from taking every gift. Thus He says, “Whatever the Messenger gives you, take; whatever he forbids you, forgo” (Q. 59:7). Thus your taking from the Messenger is more profitable for you and better able to actualize your felicity.

Your taking from the Messenger is nondelimited, but your taking from God is delimited. The Messenger himself is delimited, but taking from him is nondelimited. God is not delimited by any delimitation, but taking from Him is delimited. So consider how wonderful this affair is!²⁶³

As such, even though one must look only to God, one must make a distinction between God’s ontological will and His deontological will, which can only be determined by way of Revelation. And even though Islam does not abrogate the *truth* of the previous Messengers and revealed religions, it arrives as the supreme faith, and abrogates *rulings*

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 134; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Muḥāḍarat al-abrār wa-musāmarat al-akhyār fi’l-adabīyāt wa’l-nawādir wa’l-akhbār*, II (1906), 284; *Tadhkirat al-khawāṣṣ*, trans. by Roger Deladrière as *Ibn ‘Arabī: La Profession de Foi (Tadhkirat al-khawāṣṣ wa’aqīdat ahl al-ikhtīcāḥ)* (Paris: 1978), 274.

²⁶¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2:148.

²⁶² Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 145-6; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:410.

²⁶³ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 146; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 4:186.

of the previous religious laws,²⁶⁴ thus becoming the path to salvation and perfection for those who recognize it for what it is. And if following the Messenger of God leads to perfection, abandoning his path leads to the lowest prospects.²⁶⁵ (Interestingly, it would *seem* that the famous Sufi poet Jalāluddīn al-Dīn Rūmī [d. 672/1273] adopted the same line of reasoning – despite John Hick’s portrayal of Rūmī as a religious pluralist).²⁶⁶ In fact, Ibn al-‘Arabī argues, it is only because Revelation exists in the first place that we find disbelief in God leading to dejection.²⁶⁷ Elsewhere, he states, “Prescription alone makes the entity of evil manifest from Satan.”²⁶⁸

2.2. *Salvation on the Day of Judgment*

²⁶⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:153. Ibn al-‘Arabī states here that all revealed religions are like lights. While Islam is like the light of the sun, all other faiths are like the lights of the stars. As such, with the appearance of the sun, the lights of the (other) stars disappear, and their lights, if anything, only contribute to the light of the sun. (Ibid.)

²⁶⁵ As Chittick notes, this imperfection is presumed to develop from the inability of the human to attain the ‘proper balance’ of Divine attributes found in his/her natural disposition, where mercy reigns supreme over wrath. (Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 148)

²⁶⁶ See Muhammad Legenhausen, “Islam and Religious Pluralism,” *Al-Tawhid: A Quarterly Journal of Islamic Thought and Culture*, 14, 134ff. Legenhausen goes on to note an incident in which a Christian named al-Jarrāḥ attempts to justify his adherence to Christianity, only to be rebuked by Rūmī, who precedes his declaration of the superiority of following Muḥammad by stating:

That is not the action or the words of an intelligent man possessed of sound senses. God gave you an intelligence of your own other than your father’s intelligence, a sight of your own other than your father’s sight, a discrimination of your own. Why do you nullify your sight and your intelligence, following an intelligence which will destroy you and not guide you? (Ibid.; cf. Jalāluddīn al-Dīn Rūmī, *Discourses of Rumi*, trans. Arthur J. Arberry [Richmond: Curzon, 1993], 135ff.)

²⁶⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2:248. In explaining and assessing the multiplicity of religions and worldviews, Ibn al-‘Arabī states:

God entrusts His affair to them in speech. Hence their utterances about Him become diverse. Then God explains to them His actual situation on the tongue of His [M]essengers so that He will have an argument against those who contradict His speech and who say about Him things that oppose what He has said about Himself. Once the utterances are diverse, He discloses Himself to the possessor of each utterance in accordance with or in the form of his utterance. The reason for this is that He has entrusted His affair to them, for He has bestowed upon them rational faculties and powers of reflection. (Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 150; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 4:100)

²⁶⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 4:223.

The next question becomes, How does all this relate to the salvation of those who do not adhere to Muḥammad’s Message? Ibn al-‘Arabī certainly does speak of responsibility and consequences, i.e. Heaven and Hell, whereby the former is the abode of righteous Believers (i.e. *al-mukallafūn*, or “those burdened with Divine Command or those for whom the Divine Law is prescribed”²⁶⁹), and the latter is the destination of those who turn their backs on God’s Message. But what of those who do not recognize the very best of what God provides, i.e. His Message, as such? And what of those who are simply not convinced of the proofs provided by His Messengers? Like al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-‘Arabī does not conceive of the supremacy of Muḥammad’s Message as being a justification for the eternal damnation of ‘sincere’ non-Muslims. Thus, invoking a theme that is oft-repeated in his discussion on salvation, namely mercy, he states:

God says, “We do not punish until We send a Messenger” (Q. 17:15). Note that He did not say, “until We send forth a person.” Hence the *Message* of the one who is sent must be established for the one to whom it is directed. There must be clear and manifest proofs established for each person to whom the Messenger is sent, for many a sign [*āyah*] has within it obscurity or equivocality such that some people do not perceive what it proves. The clarity of the proof must be such that it establishes the person’s Messengerhood for each person to whom he is sent. Only then, if the person refuses it, will he be taken to account. Hence, this verse has within it a tremendous mercy, because of the diversity of human dispositions that lead to a diversity of views. He who knows the all-inclusiveness of the Divine mercy, which God reports, “encompasses all things” (Q. 7:156), knows that God did this only because of mercy toward His servants.²⁷⁰

As such, those who can recognize that Muḥammad was indeed a Messenger of God, and yet choose to reject his Message, will be punished, while those who sincerely do not find Muḥammad’s Message convincing may still be considered among those who submit to God. This perhaps helps to explain why in referring to the Qur’anic statement,

²⁶⁹ Knysh, “Realms,” 87.

²⁷⁰ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 156-7; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:469.

“The [true] religion (*al-dīn*) with God is ‘Islam’ (*al-islām*)” (3:19), Ibn al-‘Arabī states that what is meant by *islām* is the general notion of ‘submission’ (*inqiyād*).²⁷¹

The notion that ‘earnest’ individuals who are not convinced by the ‘proofs’ of the Messengers will be spared from God’s chastisement altogether is not without its problems. For example, one question that naturally arises is, Does this indicate a weakness in such individuals or a weakness in the ‘proofs’? Moreover, as noted, Ibn al-‘Arabī justifies this position by citing Q. 17:15, which speaks of God only punishing those who have received a Messenger – which, in light of the Arabic phrasing,²⁷² many have argued to be a reference to punishment in *this* life – , and Q. 7:156, which speaks of God’s mercy encompassing all things. With such limited Qur’anic references, Ibn al-‘Arabī, like al-Ghazālī, appears to engage in hermeneutics in a manner that demonstrates an independent component, and is thus unlikely to convince the skeptic – unless one accepts Ibn al-‘Arabī’s presumed special connection to the Divine.

Ibn al-‘Arabī is on firmer Scriptural ground when discussing the fate of those who lived during the ‘gaps’ between Prophets, children, and the insane. Ibn al-‘Arabī states that, in light of what is reported in the Hadith literature, they will be distinguished from the rest of humanity, and will be assigned a Messenger (on the ‘Day of Resurrection’) who will test them by commanding them to enter a fire. This test will be a confirmation of God’s justice to His creation. Those who obey will find the fire to be cool, just as Abraham found his fire to be cool, and they will be sent to Heaven. Those who disobey

²⁷¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 95.

²⁷² “We do not punish” (*wa mā kunnā mu‘adhdhibīn*) could also be translated as “We did not punish.”

will enter Hellfire.²⁷³ (This notion of the Messenger-of-Resurrection is examined in the next chapter in light of Ibn Taymiyyah’s writings on the matter).

2.3. *The Fate of Hell’s Inhabitants*

As for those who are ‘insincere’ and *completely* fail either the test of this life or that of the Resurrection, make no mistake, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Hell is an eternal Hell – even if not everyone who enters it will remain in it eternally. And the four groups of sinners (*mujrimūn*) who will forever remain in Hell (and are thus considered the ‘People of the Hellfire who are its [true] inhabitants’ [*ahl al-nār alladhīna hum ahluhā*]) are: the arrogant (*al-mutakabbirūn*), polytheists (*al-mushrikūn*), atheists (*al-mu‘aṭṭilah*), and hypocrites (*al-munāfiqūn*).²⁷⁴

And though these four groups are presumed to be guilty of having committed grave errors, Ibn al-‘Arabī argues that Divine mercy will be granted even to them. As Chittick notes, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s most oft-cited “proof text for [God’s] all-pervasive mercy” is the statement found in Q. 7:156: “My mercy encompasses all things.”²⁷⁵ In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s words: “How could there be everlasting wretchedness? Far be it from God that His wrath should take precedence over His mercy...or that He should make the embrace of His mercy specific after He had called it general!”²⁷⁶ As such, if God is as the Qur’an states, ‘the Most Merciful of merciful beings (*Arḥam al-rāḥimīn*)’ (7:151, 12:64, 12:92, and 21:83), then we should expect Him to be more compassionate and caring than any

²⁷³ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 137.

²⁷⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 1:301-4.

²⁷⁵ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 130.

²⁷⁶ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 137; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:466.

created being.²⁷⁷ But what about God’s other names, particularly those that indicate “subjugation, domination, and severity”?²⁷⁸ These, Ibn al-‘Arabī argues, are to be considered together with all of God’s names that indicate “mercy, forgiveness, clemency, and pardon,” and after that, what remains are the names ‘the Compassionate (*al-Raḥmān*), the Caring (*al-Raḥīm*)’ (Q. 12:64).²⁷⁹ Moreover, he argues, the Divine threats mentioned in each surah should be considered alongside the *basmalah* formula (“In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Caring”)²⁸⁰ that begins all but one *sūrah*.²⁸¹ And this mercy is to be found in God’s creation, Ibn al-‘Arabī argues, meaning that “the Universe is the same as mercy, and nothing else.”²⁸²

Accordingly, Ibn al-‘Arabī states, “the (final) outcome will be at mercy.”²⁸³ Reality, therefore, may be described as a circle: The beginning of the circle was the result of mercy, and the end of the circle meets up with its beginning. As for wrath, it is simply an ephemeral accident.²⁸⁴ And because God’s wrath is a thing, His mercy encompasses it, limits it, and dominates it. “Therefore,” he states, “wrath disposes itself only through mercy’s ruling property. Mercy sends out wrath as it will.”²⁸⁵

And lest one think that this is all impossible because the ‘People of Hellfire’ can never attain God’s mercy, especially in light of the notion of Divine justice, Ibn al-‘Arabī refers to the following Qur’anic statement: “O My servants who have been excessive

²⁷⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:25.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:9.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 3:9.

²⁸⁰ I have here chosen to look to Michael Sells’ translation of the *basmalah*. See Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999), 20-1.

²⁸¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:147.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 2:437.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 4:405.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 4:405. Elsewhere he states, “Good-pleasure is the unfolding of mercy without end, but wrath will be cut off.” (Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 113; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:382)

²⁸⁵ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 132; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:9.

against themselves: Do not despair of God’s mercy; God surely forgives all sins” (Q. 39: 53). He then states:

[God] brought forgiveness and mercy for the repentant and those who do good deeds, and He also brought it for those who are “immoderate,” those who do not repent. The latter He forbids to despair, and He confirms the point with His word ‘all.’ Nothing could be greater in Divine eloquence concerning the final issue of the servants at mercy.²⁸⁶

The most noticeable problem with this interpretation is that the very next verse (39:54) seems to indicate that Q. 39:53 is in reference to one who actually seeks forgiveness in this life, as it states: “Turn to your Lord. Submit to Him before the punishment overtakes you and you can no longer be helped.” In support of Ibn al-‘Arabī, however, one could argue that Q. 39:53 could be read as a general statement, whereby the forgiveness described will be granted to the unrepentant ‘immoderates’ only after having been punished for their sins. Another apparent problem with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reading here is that it seems to contradict the Qur’anic declaration that God does not forgive *Shirk* (associating partners with God) (4:48, 4:116). Ibn al-‘Arabī, however, was well-aware of this pronouncement, and ultimately does not deem it to be a threat to his vision of compassion being granted to those eternally bound to remain in Hell, for their eternal stay in Hell is, at least in the case of some, precisely the result of their polytheism.²⁸⁷

The logical conclusion of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s argument for Divine mercy being granted to Hell’s inhabitants is that their punishment will eventually come to an end:

I have found in myself – who am among those whom God has innately disposed toward mercy – that I have mercy toward all God’s servants, even if God has decreed in His creating them that the attribute of chastisement will remain forever with them in the cosmos. This is because the ruling property of mercy has taken possession of my heart.

²⁸⁶ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 137; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:353.

²⁸⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:382.

The possessors of this attribute are I and my peers, and we are creatures, possessors of fancy and personal desire. God has said about Himself that He is “the most Merciful of the merciful,” and we have no doubt that He is more merciful than we are toward His creatures. Yet we have known from ourselves this extravagant mercy. How could chastisement be everlasting for them, when He has this attribute of all-pervading mercy? God is more noble than that!²⁸⁸

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s vision of a forgiving God is based on the conception of God as both the ‘Necessary Being (*wujūd*)’ and the Compassionate (*al-Rahmān*). Considered together, they are intimately related to the notion of Divine nobility. As Chittick aptly observes, nobility (*karam*) is a recurring theme in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion of Hell, and God’s nobility is to be found in His ability to forgive those dependent on Him. Consequently, it is to be expected that He will do what is best for His creation.²⁸⁹

Accordingly, and considering God’s nobility, Ibn al-‘Arabī maintains that God’s mercy should be expected to encompass *all* of His creatures, *all* of whom are ultimately weak.²⁹⁰ In this regard, he cites the Qur’anic declaration that the “the blind, the lame, and the sick will not be blamed” (48:17). Ibn al-‘Arabī considers this to be a declaration of God’s general kindness to the weak (and not simply a declaration of concessions made by *Sharī‘ah*). And since everything in the Universe is ultimately ‘blind, lame, and sick,’ he declares that the last stage of the Universe will be one of mercy, “even if (those stricken with a disease) occupy Hellfire and are among its people.”²⁹¹

Elsewhere in *al-Futūḥāt*, Ibn al-‘Arabī cites a hadith which states that God’s right (*haqq*) over His servants is the belief in God’s oneness (*Tawḥīd*), while the servants’ right is to be rewarded with Heaven if they maintain God’s right. He then cites Q. 42:40, which states: “The reward of evil is an evil like it, but he who pardons and makes

²⁸⁸ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 128-9; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:25.

²⁸⁹ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 129-30.

²⁹⁰ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:255.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4:434-5.

amends, his wage is with God.” And in light of God’s superiority over His creation, Ibn al-‘Arabī argues that God “will pardon, show forbearance, and make things well. Hence the final issue will be at God’s mercy in the two abodes. Mercy will embrace them wherever they may be.”²⁹² Accordingly, one should expect that Divine threats would be overruled by forgiveness.

And because all that is disconnected from God (the ‘Necessary Being’) is an ephemeral ‘deviation,’ occurring as an accident, everything that is not connected to God’s entity must necessarily “dwindle and become nonexistent.” Thus, Ibn al-‘Arabī argues, we should expect that “falsehood, Unbelief, and ignorance” will eventually disappear, while “faith, truth, and knowledge” will continue to exist eternally.²⁹³ Why, then, would sinners be granted eternal life? According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, as beings with essences, they will continue to exist because of their connection with the existence, or ‘Being’ (*wujūd*), of the Divine.²⁹⁴ Their evil accidents, on the other hand, must accordingly come to an ignominious end.

This is in some way related to another justification for God’s mercy towards Hell’s inhabitants: The injunction to worship God, against which Hell’s inhabitants rebelled, is itself an accident. Ibn al-‘Arabī classifies this as “worship based on commands” (*‘ibādat al-amr*), that is, worship based on the precepts presented by Prophets. In the Afterlife, Ibn al-‘Arabī argues, because “every accident comes to an end,” the ‘wretched’ will lose their freedom to reject all accidents related to worship. Hence, the ‘wretched,’ (along with Heaven’s inhabitants) will have no choice but to engage in nothing other than the very worship they had always been doing, consciously

²⁹² Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 129-30; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:478.

²⁹³ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:418.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:312.

or unconsciously: “worship based on essences” (*al-‘ibādah al-dhātiyyah*).²⁹⁵ And because humans have always been under God’s control to begin with, Ibn al-‘Arabī argues that this explains why God would be merciful to all of His servants in the end.²⁹⁶ (We are thus left with the theodicean question of why God would allow for evil [and the punishment that it warrants] in the first place).

Elaborating further on why “the (final) outcome for the wretched will be at mercy,” Ibn al-‘Arabī notes that because the ‘essential’ is superior to the ‘accidental,’ which will eventually disappear, ‘essential worship’ must be superior to ‘accidental wretchedness.’²⁹⁷ Given the ‘accidental’ nature of sin, this discussion of a non-eternal punishment is ultimately an attempted resolution to the problem encountered in the previous chapter of assessing whether it would be justified for God to punish His servants eternally for having committed temporal sins. Ibn al-‘Arabī does not seem to find his vision to be at odds with either Divine justice or Divine omnipotence. (If anything, the latter is referenced as a means of demonstrating God’s nobility, as He forgives those not endowed with power). Moreover, given God’s ultimate control over the will of His creatures, Ibn al-‘Arabī later states: “Since the excuse of the world is accepted in actual fact – because they are compelled in their free choice – God placed the final issue of everything at mercy.”²⁹⁸

Support for Ibn al-‘Arabī’s emphasis on Divine mercy being granted to Hell’s inhabitants is to be found in Q. 11:106-8: The ‘blessed’ are described as remaining in Paradise forever, as “a gift, uninterrupted (*‘aṭā’an ghayr majdhūdh*).” As for the

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 3:402.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 3:433.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 3:402.

²⁹⁸ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 135; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūhāt*, 3:433.

‘wretched,’ they will remain in Hell forever, though “the *state* within which they will dwell” is not explicitly described as being ‘uninterrupted.’ The difference in these descriptions, Ibn al-‘Arabī explains, is a result of God’s mercy. “For *wujūd* [existence] is mercy for all existent things, even if some of them suffer chastisement through others.”²⁹⁹ (As we shall see in the next chapter, these very verses would be heavily relied upon by Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah in making a seemingly more radical argument regarding the duration of not simply punishment in Hell, but Hell itself).

So what then about Qur’anic statements, such as: “Those who annoy God and His Messenger, God has cursed them in this life and the life to come and has prepared for them a demeaning punishment” (33: 57)? According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, God is described in the Qur’an as being patient (*Ṣabūr*) because it is only in the Afterlife that He will take disobedient servants to task. Nevertheless, with the cessation of this life comes the cessation of God’s annoyance (*adhā*), as well as the property of related Divine names, such as the Avenger (*al-Muntaqim*) and the Strict in Punishment (*Shadīd al-‘Iqāb*). In his words: “One of the causes of punishment is annoyance, but annoyance has disappeared, so there is no escape from mercy and the removal of wrath. Inescapably, mercy will include everything, through God’s bounty, God willing.”³⁰⁰

Even so, Ibn al-‘Arabī argues that Hell has to exist in order to manifest the Divine attribute of wrath.³⁰¹ How then does Ibn al-‘Arabī rationalize this while maintaining that wrath will eventually come to an end? In his words:

No chastisement will remain in the Fire except imaginal chastisement within the presence of imagination, in order that the properties of the Divine names may

²⁹⁹ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 131-2; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2:281.

³⁰⁰ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 138-9; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2:206.

³⁰¹ As Chittick notes, Divine wrath is not pure wrath, which does not exist. (Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 112)

subsist. A name necessitates only the manifestation of the property that its reality demands. It does not specify the presence nor the individual...Hence, whenever the property of the Avenger becomes manifest within an imaginal body or a corporeal body or in anything else, its rights are fulfilled through the manifestation of its property and effectivity. So the Divine names continue to exercise effectivity and determine properties for all eternity in the two abodes, and the inhabitants of the two abodes never leave them.³⁰²

As such, “[t]he property of mutual contradictoriness [of God’s names] remains forever in the names, but not in us.”³⁰³ The question then becomes, When will God cease to be wrathful towards His servants in Hell? To the mind of Ibn al-‘Arabī, this will occur at the conclusion of the ‘Day of Resurrection,’ which will likely last fifty thousand years.³⁰⁴ After that, Divine mercy will completely manifest itself, in its full glory. And since Divine mercy requires both a subject and an object, it is most appreciated when the latter can recognize it.

With that in mind, Ibn al-‘Arabī refers to the natural disposition (*al-fiṭrah*) of humans, as well as the primordial covenant taken by God, as indicated by Q. 7:172:

And [remember] when your Lord brought forth from the loins of the Children of Adam their posterity and made them testify against themselves. [He said]: “Am I not your Lord?” They said: “Yes, we testify.” [This] lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection: “We were in fact unaware of this.”

Accordingly, Ibn al-‘Arabī states, “Every infant is simply born in the state of the natural disposition (*al-fiṭrah*), and the natural disposition is acknowledged by God the Exalted through servitude. It is an obedience upon an obedience.”³⁰⁵ Therefore, he argues, the ‘People of Hellfire’ will suffer until they finally recognize that they are servants of God. For, in the first place, the chastisement of the ‘wretched’ results only

³⁰² Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 115; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:119.

³⁰³ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 116; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:346.

³⁰⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:346. Fifty thousand years is also the duration of the ‘Day’ (*yawm*) referred to in Q. 70:4 in reference to of the journey of angels and the Spirit to God.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:296.

from themselves as they protest and inquire about the reasons for God's actions.³⁰⁶

Eventually, however, their 'wretchedness' (*shaqā'*) will cease because they will end their discord (*shiqāq*) and deviation from God.³⁰⁷ Thus, he states:

They will pluck the fruit of their words [at the primordial covenant], "Yes, [we bear witness]" [Q. 7: 172]. They will be like those who submit to God after apostasy. The authority of "Yes" will rule over everything and finally give rise to their felicity, after the wretchedness that had touched them in the measure in which they had made claims. The property of "Yes" will never leave them from its own moment ad infinitum – in this world, in the isthmus, and in the afterworld.³⁰⁸

Moreover, because of God's justice, Hell's inhabitants will come to appreciate their situation because it is God Himself who determined where they would reside. In the final analysis, what comes to matter is not in which abode one resides, but rather, "what is accepted by the constitution and desired by the soul. [Thus, wherever] agreeableness of nature and attainment of desire are found, that is the person's bliss."³⁰⁹

As further support for this assertion, Ibn al-'Arabī looks to the Qur'an's reference to Hell's 'bitter cold' (*zamharīr*), as it points to God's wisdom of bringing about equilibrium in the 'constitutions' of Hell's inhabitants:

So, wisdom is not inoperative, for God keeps the bitter cold of Gehenna [*Jahannam*] for those with hot constitutions and the fire for those with cold constitutions. They enjoy themselves in Gehenna. If they were to enter the Garden with the constitutions that they have, they would suffer chastisement, because of the Garden's equilibrium.³¹⁰

On the other hand, Ibn al-'Arabī notes that that Heaven's inhabitants will gain pleasure by climbing a wall separating Heaven and Hell, gazing at the latter, and

³⁰⁶ The 'wretched' ask, "Why did such and such happen?," and claim, "If such and such had been, it would have been better and more appropriate." (Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi*, 141; cf. Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2:447)

³⁰⁷ Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2:447.

³⁰⁸ Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi*, 135-6; cf. Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2:213.

³⁰⁹ Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi*, 140; cf. Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:387.

³¹⁰ Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi*, 140; cf. Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2:207.

appreciating their own abode's peace and security, which are taken for granted.³¹¹

Interestingly, that very wall is described by Ibn al-‘Arabī as being yet another indication of chastisement's non-eternality, on the basis of its description in the Qur'an:

On the same Day, the hypocrites, both men and women, will say to the Believers, “Wait for us! Let us have some of your light!” They will be told, “Go back and look for a light.” A wall with a door will be erected between them: inside it lies mercy, outside lies torment (57:13).

According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, the very presence of mercy on the inside of the wall indicates that punishment cannot be eternal. After all, he argues, mercy is the essence of the wall, and since that which is inside (*al-bāṭin*) must conquer that which is on the outside (*al-zāhir*), mercy must eventually conquer chastisement in the very wall that is accessible to Hell's inhabitants.³¹²

Moreover, God's mercy will encompass Hell's inhabitants because *everyone* in the Afterlife will be obedient to God and submit to Him through only ‘essential worship’ (without the distractions of ‘accidental worship’). Thus, God will be pleased with *everyone*.³¹³

Accordingly, Ibn al-‘Arabī interprets the Qur'anic statement, “God is pleased with them, and they with Him” (5:119, 58:22, 98:8), as referring to all, and not simply Heaven's inhabitants. This state of pleasure, however, is not obtained until after the ‘People of Hellfire’ and the ‘People of Heaven’ assume their place of permanent residence. Only at that time will God make them pleased with what they have been given, and their respective abodes, which they will prefer over the other.³¹⁴

³¹¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 4:14.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 4:14.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 3:495.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:244.

Interestingly, and in light of his well-known belief that each Qur’anic statement can have multiple valid interpretations, Ibn al-‘Arabī asserts that one additional hint of God’s mercy towards the ‘wretched’ in the afterlife is to be found in the most oft-cited Qur’anic word for chastisement, *‘adhāb*. Ibn al-‘Arabī defines *‘adhāb* as “the absence of mercy.”³¹⁵ (Incidentally, this is notably different from al-Ghazālī’s declaration that all evil [*sharr*] has mercy within it). Even so, the root of this word (*‘-dh-b*) actually connotes sweetness, pleasantness, and agreeableness. As such, he states in *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, “[Hell] is called a chastisement (*‘adhāb*) due to the sweetness (*‘udhūbah*) of its food.”³¹⁶ As he elaborates in *al-Futūḥāt*, “That which causes pain is named ‘chastisement’ as a good news from God: Inescapably, you will find that everything through which you suffer is sweet when mercy envelops you in the Fire.”³¹⁷ According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, this transformation from ‘chastisement’ to ‘sweetness’ will begin to occur when the ‘wretched’ resign themselves to their fate, and surrender any hope of leaving Hell. At that point, the fire will become cool (as it was cooled for Abraham), and they will become happy. After this first bliss, their pains will vanish, and they will begin to find their perpetual chastisement to be sweet and pleasant.³¹⁸ And this enjoyment will become “tremendous... There is no surprise if roses are found in rose gardens. The surprise comes when roses grow up in the pit of the Fire.”³¹⁹

In interpreting Q. 20:74 (“For him who comes to his Lord, as a wicked sinner, is Hell, where he neither dies nor lives”), Ibn al-‘Arabī states that the ‘People of Hellfire’ will not die since they will “find relief through the removal of pain,” and they will not

³¹⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 211.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

³¹⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2:207.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:463.

³¹⁹ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 141; *cf.* Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 4:307.

live since they will not enjoy the same bliss enjoyed by the ‘People of Heaven’ – “a bliss that would be something in addition to the fact that He has relieved them in the abode of wretchedness.”³²⁰ Thus, Ibn al-‘Arabī interprets the Qur’anic statement “each party [of idolaters] rejoicing in what is theirs” (30:32) as referring to the *next* life. This is because such rejoicing is “not known in this life, or rather, it occurs for many but not all.”³²¹

Therefore, according to Ibn al-‘Arabī, because the Qur’an is never explicit regarding threats of eternal suffering in Hell, eternal chastisement would be an unjust requital for sin that is non-eternal,³²² and God is most noble (and should thus not be expected to actually follow through with His threats),

[t]he ultimate end of the affair will be that “with God is the most beautiful place of return” (Q. 3: 14). God does not explicitly link any ugliness whatsoever to the place of returning to Him. Things of that sort that have come to us play the role of threats in the first understanding...For His mercy is all-embracing, and His blessing is abundant and all-comprehensive[.]³²³

Despite the uniqueness of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion overall, he was not the first to articulate the viewpoint that the ‘People of Hellfire’ will not be eternally punished. For example, according to the well-known Ash‘arite heresiographer Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153), this was also the view of the famous Mu‘tazilite Abū ‘Uthmān ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255 or 6/868 or 9), who is said to have argued that the ‘People of Hellfire’ will eventually become transformed so that their nature will become fire-like such that they will enjoy their encounters with Hell’s Fire.³²⁴ Whether or not al-

³²⁰ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 140; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:245.

³²¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:471.

³²² As Chittick observes, Ibn al-‘Arabī makes this argument by employing Qur’anic verses like 78:26 (“a fitting requital”). (Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 113)

³²³ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 143-4; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:390.

³²⁴ See Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa al-niḥal*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Wakīl (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), 75.

Jāḥiẓ actually held this view is an issue of debate,³²⁵ but this reference in a text that dates to before Ibn al-‘Arabī was born is one indication that, at the very least, this position was, in some form or another, in circulation early on. To my mind, however, it would be safe to assume that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s particular elucidation of this position was all his own.

Ibn al-‘Arabī himself confesses that he knows of no other person who has ever portrayed God’s contentment with His creation in such a positive light. Even if Ibn al-‘Arabī had been exposed to the view of Hell ascribed to al-Jāḥiẓ, the former’s version seems to place more emphasis on the state of happiness attained by Hell’s inhabitants, such that not only will they be spared of punishment, but they will also attain Divine approval. Explaining the significance of this vision, Ibn al-‘Arabī states, “I have called attention to it here only because mercy has overcome me at this moment. Those who understand will be felicitous, and those who do not understand will not be wretched because of their lack of understanding, even if they are deprived.”³²⁶

And lest he be criticized for maintaining an overly optimistic, unwarranted position – a problem that, as we shall see in the next two chapters, all advocates for a non-eternal punishment have to both recognize and confront – Ibn al-‘Arabī defends his position by stating:

[When you reach this understanding] you will come to know the difference between him who desires the spreading of God’s mercy among His servants – whether they be obedient or disobedient – and him who desires to take God’s mercy away from some of His servants. This second person is the one who prohibits the mercy of God that embraces all things, but he does not prohibit it to himself. Were it not for the fact that God’s mercy takes precedence over His wrath, the possessor of this attribute would never attain to God’s mercy.³²⁷

³²⁵ See Sa‘īd Ḥ. Maṣṣūr, *The World-View of al-Jāḥiẓ in Kitāb al-Ḥayawān* (Alexandria: Dar el-Maareff, 1977), 123ff.

³²⁶ Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi*, 138; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2:244.

³²⁷ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 114-5; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:370.

A question remains: What exactly is the role of Divine justice in all this? In other words, what will specifically distinguish the life enjoyed by the ‘People of Heaven’ from that enjoyed by the ‘People of Hellfire’? According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, the key difference is that while the former will be given a vision (*ru’yah*) of God, the latter will continue to be veiled (*mahjūb*) from Him.³²⁸ This veil is represented by a mysterious ‘eighth gate’ of Hell that is always closed.³²⁹ But even in this veil we find mercy:

Were God to disclose Himself to them in the Fire, given their precedent evildoing and their worthiness for punishment, that benevolent self-disclosure would yield nothing but shame before God for what they had done, and shame is chastisement – but chastisement’s period has come to an end. Hence they will not know the joy of witnessing and vision, so they will have bliss while being veiled. The goal is bliss, and it has been achieved with the veil – but for whom? How can the bliss of the vision of God be compared to bliss with the veil? “For on that day they are veiled from their Lord” (Q. 83:15).³³⁰

2.4. Critically Reassessing Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Writings on the Fate of ‘Others’

All in all, if there is one word to describe Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion on salvation, it is ‘mercy’ (*rahmah*). Indeed, it is precisely Ibn al-‘Arabī’s vision of a merciful God that leads him to think optimistically of the fate of all his fellow human beings – even those who are most rebellious against God Himself. This is a conclusion that arguably

³²⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 2:335.

³²⁹ Ibid., 1:299. The customary image is of Heaven’s eight gates and Hell’s seven. (Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 117)

³³⁰ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 117; cf. Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:119.

arises naturally from the belief that God is the cause of everything, that is, every inclination, every thought, etc. But to maintain that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s conclusions are ‘natural’ is a tough sell, especially in light of his esoteric analyses.

In that vein, it is worth noting that one problem associated with analyzing any esoteric analysis critically is attempting to understand the reasoning behind the apparent selectivity of the evidence utilized. For example, in arguing that Hell’s inhabitants will be veiled from God in the afterlife, Ibn al-‘Arabī cites the Qur’anic statement “For on that Day they are veiled from their Lord” (83:15). And even though the verse explicitly states that the veiling will exist ‘on that Day,’ Ibn al-‘Arabī stretches the meaning to include all of eternity. But with regard to the chastisement in the afterlife, he notes that the Qur’an is not explicit with regard to its duration. Again, however, by considering the esoteric nature of the discussion, it is to be expected that some conclusions will be deemed selective.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s esotericism is perhaps most obvious in both his radical re-interpretation of certain Qur’anic verses (e.g. 5:119, 58:22, 98:8, and 30:32), as well as his play on words, such as those containing the root ‘-dh-b. This latter tactic, which appears in both *al-Futūḥāt* and *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, appears at times to play a more prominent role in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion than do certain Qur’anic statements taken at face value – this, despite the fact that his arguments generally employ numerous references to the Qur’an.

Ibn al-‘Arabī himself declares that any interpretation that differs from the ‘literal meaning’ of Scripture is a “most wondrous” error. This is because there is no justification in one overlooking God’s authority in order to “follow the authority of his [own]

reflection and consideration, whereas these are temporally originated things like himself, faculties created by God within him.”³³¹ Given Ibn al-‘Arabī’s unique interpretations, it would not be surprising to find the same accusation leveled against him. To the mind of Ibn al-‘Arabī, however, his conclusions are justified as being approximations of Divine intent, precisely because of the insights he could acquire through his ‘unveiling’ (*kashf*).

It is true that Ibn al-‘Arabī does not appear to incorporate outside systems of thought into his discussion, as was the way of the ‘Islamic philosophers’ (*faylasūf*) and speculative theologians (*al-mutakallimūn*) before and after him. Nevertheless, the claim made by Chittick that he “places himself squarely in the mainstream of Islam by basing all his teachings upon the Koran and the Hadith”³³² must either be qualified or interpreted so as to take into account his personal esoteric considerations.

3. Conclusion

In sum, we find that, like al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-‘Arabī is concerned with the low estimations made by many scholars regarding the extent of God’s mercy. Also like al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-‘Arabī does not conceive of salvation as being attainable only by those who call themselves ‘Muslims’ in this life. (As for the proportion of humanity that will constitute the inhabitants of both afterlife abodes, Ibn al-‘Arabī is not as clear here as is al-Ghazālī, although given their similar views on Divine mercy and the salvation of the ‘sincere,’ it would not be unreasonable to assume that the former deems most of humanity as being ultimately Heaven-bounded). Unlike al-Ghazālī, or at least what we

³³¹ Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, 118-9; Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 1:288.

³³² Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, xv.

know of him, Ibn al-‘Arabī is willing to conceive of God’s mercy as being inclusive of Hell’s eternal inhabitants. (This is particularly interesting if one considers that al-Ghazālī, who speaks of the eternal damnation of a select group, views ‘evils’ such as chastisement in a relatively more positive light, as being depositories of mercy, as opposed to “the absence of mercy”). As such, while all will eventually attain felicity as they proceed on the ‘path of God,’ it is they who follow the ‘Path of Muḥammad’ and attain perfection who will not have to deal with the “deserts, perils, hostile predators, and harmful serpents” found along the way.³³³

One noteworthy criticism of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s conclusions, particularly with regard to the fate of Hell’s inhabitants, comes from the Traditionalist Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, whose views, along with those of Ibn Taymiyyah, are considered in the next chapter.

³³³ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt*, 3:418.

Chapter 4

Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah

1. *The Life and Times of Ibn Taymiyyah*

Taqiyaddīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328) would be remembered as history's most prominent representative of Ḥanbalism,³³⁴ a *madhhab* that serves as both a theological and juridical school of thought. Its eponym, the great jurist Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), went to great lengths to oppose the Mu'tazilites, even if it meant being persecuted, as was the case during the era of the infamous *Miḥna*. He eventually declared his disapproval of all speculative theology (*kalām*) since he considered it to be a distortion of what was perfectly expressed in the Book of God.³³⁵

Nevertheless, while it has often been assumed that the Ḥanbalites were opposed to the use of reason, they actually engaged in it quite a bit, and it should come as no surprise that they frequently espoused doctrines very similar to those of the Mu'tazilites.³³⁶ In fact, a number of Ḥanbalites engaged in some of the same rationalist discourse found

³³⁴ In the words of Henri Laoust, Ibn Taymiyyah was Hanbalism's "most celebrated representative." See Henri Laoust, "Hanābila," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd Ed. (CD-ROM) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990).

³³⁵ See George F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7.

³³⁶ Reinhart notes that this was the case between Baghdādī Mu'tazilites and central Ḥanbalite figures, such as Abū Ya'lā. See A. Kevin Reinhart, *Before Revelation: The Boundaries of Muslim Moral Thought* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1995), 34.

among Mu‘tazilites.³³⁷ And there were perhaps few scholars as skilled in the use of reason as Ibn Taymiyyah. As A.J. Arberry put it, “[He] displays in his polemical broadsides a superb mastery of the methods of dialectical reasoning.”³³⁸ (A perfect example of this is to be found in the account of his trial in Damascus, where Ibn Taymiyyah appears to outsmart the leading rationalist of his day, Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Hindī).³³⁹

Born in Ḥarrān in 661/1263, Ibn Taymiyyah and his family would abandon the city seven years later due to the onslaught of invading Mongols³⁴⁰ – an episode that would be etched in the memory of the young Ibn Taymiyyah. He was raised into a family of scholars,³⁴¹ and was quite the student of the Islamic sciences. And even though he engaged in the study of *kalām*, as a Ḥanbalite jurist and theologian, he earned a reputation of being a reviver of Traditionalism.³⁴² A producer of numerous works, Ibn Taymiyyah (and his ‘conservative’ Traditionalist ideology) was championed by both Ḥanbalites and ‘reformed’ Ash‘arites because of a perceived need for “a more aggressive ideological attitude” in response to the Mongol invasion of the Mamluk state, as well as the Mongol-Christian Crusader alliance.³⁴³ Indeed, Ibn Taymiyyah was quite the polemicist, writing treatises that openly criticized various groups, including Christians,

³³⁷ This was the case in the Ḥanbalite *Uṣūl al-Dīn* discourse. (Jackson, “Alchemy,” 218) As Jackson argues elsewhere, what separates the Mu‘tazilites and other “Rationalists” from Traditionalists is that the latter “use *reason* – even aspects of Aristotelian reason – but they do not recognize the tradition of Aristotelian reason as an ultimate authority.” See Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s Fayṣal al-Tafriqa*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19-20.

³³⁸ See A. J. Arberry, *Revelation and Reason in Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin. Ltd, 1957), 18.

³³⁹ See Sherman A. Jackson, “Ibn Taymiyyah on Trial in Damascus” (*Journal of Semitic Studies* 39/1, Spring 1994: pp. 41-85), 47.

³⁴⁰ See ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Hāshimī, *Ibn Taymiyyah: al-‘ālim al-jarī* (Damascus; Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 1993), 12.

³⁴¹ Al-Hāshimī, *Ibn Taymiyyah*, 13.

³⁴² See Richard C. Martin and Mark R. Woodward, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu‘tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997), 123-6.

³⁴³ See Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbāsī Society* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 170-1.

Ismā‘īlīs, Mongol Muslims, and Ibn al-‘Arabī-inspired Sufi monists (*al-Ittiḥādiyyah*).³⁴⁴

He was also frequently persecuted and imprisoned,³⁴⁵ and passed away while incarcerated in the Citadel of Damascus.³⁴⁶

Ibn Taymiyyah’s works, including his well-known and extensive *Fatāwā* (Fatwas), cover a wide array of topics. As a Traditionalist, Ibn Taymiyyah was vocal about the primacy of Revelation. As Binyamin Abrahamov aptly puts it, when it comes to the tension between Reason and Revelation, Ibn Taymiyyah believed that

since revelation is true and is expressed through both traditional and rational arguments, it cannot be contradicted by true reason. In the case of contradiction of reason and revelation, either a tradition is weak or apocryphal or a rational argument is false...His general law is that the basis of reason is revelation, and that hence there can be no disagreement between the two elements.³⁴⁷

What follows is an examination of Ibn Taymiyyah’s views regarding salvation and the fate of ‘others,’ as can be deduced from his two most relevant works, *Fatāwā* and *al-Radd ‘alā man qāla bi-fanā’ al-jannah wa al-nār* (The Rejoinder to those who Maintain the Annihilation of Both Heaven and Hell).³⁴⁸ We shall see that while Ibn Taymiyyah views the ‘proper’ acceptance of the Prophetic Message as being the main path to salvation, reports of God’s *unlimited* mercy (*raḥmah*) (and the presence of Scriptural ‘loopholes’, as it were) lead him to seriously consider – while remaining within

³⁴⁴ See Ronald L. Netter, “Ibn Taymīyah,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 2, ed. John L. Esposito (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 165-6.

³⁴⁵ Laoust, “Hanābila.”

³⁴⁶ Al-Hāshimī, *Ibn Taymiyyah*, 116-7. Also see Henri Laoust, “Ibn Taymiyya,” *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd Ed. (CD-ROM) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990).

³⁴⁷ See Binyamin Abrahamov, “Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition,” *The Muslim World* LXXXII (1992) 3-4, 271-2.

³⁴⁸ It is worth noting that the title of this work has been an issue of debate, and that both opponents and defenders of the work emphasize the discussion on the ‘annihilation of Hell’: Whereas the former see it as a defense, the latter see it as a rebuttal. See Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd-Allāh al-Simharī, “*Tasmiyat al-Kitāb*” *al-Radd ‘alā man qāla bi-fanā’ al-Jannah wa al-Nār*, ed. Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd-Allāh al-Simharī (Riyadh: 1995), ix-xi (I should note that the text itself uses Arabic [rather than Roman] numerals in numbering the pages of the editor’s introductory remarks).

his Traditionalist framework – the possibility (and likelihood) that *all* will eventually be saved.

2. Analyzing Relevant Aspects of Ibn Taymiyyah's Writings

2.1. Messengers and Salvation

As noted, Muḥammad's Message figures prominently in Ibn Taymiyyah's discourse on salvation. In his *Fatāwā*, he states:

God the Exalted sent the Messengers and revealed the Books, so that religion (*al-dīn*) can be entirely for God...God sent Muḥammad*. He does not accept (a religion) from anyone whom the invitation (to Islam) (*al-da'wah*) has reached, except the religion with which He sent (Muḥammad), for his invitation is, in general, for all created beings...So it is upon all of creation to follow Muḥammad*.³⁴⁹

Elsewhere he states:

It is obligatory upon every human to know that God the Exalted sent Muḥammad* to all...humans and *jinn*. And He made obligatory belief in (Muḥammad) and what he brought, and obedience to him. [And] for all for whom proof (*al-ḥujjah*) in Muḥammad's* Messengership has been established, from among humans and *jinn*, and (who) do not believe in him, they deserve the punishment of God the Exalted[.]³⁵⁰

Indeed, Ibn Taymiyyah was of the opinion that disbelieving in Muḥammad is a transgression that disqualifies one from: a. receiving intercession on the Day of Judgment (a possibility only for Believers),³⁵¹ b. being forgiven,³⁵² and c. being admitted into

³⁴⁹ See Taqiyaddīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū' fatāwā Shaykh al-Islām Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya* (Cairo: al-Shurafā' li-al-Ṭibā'ah wa Taṣwīr al-Mustanadāt, 1399/1979), 11:522-3.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 19:9.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1:149.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 4:325.

Heaven.³⁵³ (Even so, it is worth noting that he does not consider all Unbelievers to be equal: Unbelievers who committed numerous sins, such as Abū Lahab, are said to receive a greater punishment than Unbelievers such as Abū Ṭālib).³⁵⁴

As such, Ibn Taymiyyah was not a soteriological religious pluralist. As far as he was concerned, Muḥammad’s prophethood was recognizable to anyone who is *compos mentis* (*‘āqil*). He even goes so far as to claim that those who are *compos mentis* among the Jews and the Christians “admit that the religion of Muslims is authentic,” and that it is “superior to their religion.”³⁵⁵ (Like al-Ghazālī, Ibn Taymiyyah goes on to argue against Jews and Christians who argue that Muḥammad was sent as a Messenger to the Arabs alone, and that the different religions simply represent different schools of thought [*madhāhib*]).³⁵⁶ To the mind of Ibn Taymiyyah, the veracity of the claims made by the Messengers may be known by the intellect (*al-‘aql*), and by reflecting upon the genuineness of the Messengers, the content of their Messages, and their miracles, which are known via diffuse and congruent reports (*al-tawātur*).³⁵⁷

At any rate, from the statements above, we find Ibn Taymiyyah making one noteworthy yet unsurprising qualification in describing the necessity of following Muḥammad: Before being taken to task, the ‘invitation’ (*da‘wah*) to the faith of Muḥammad must have reached the individual. What, then, can be said of the status of those not exposed to the ‘invitation’?

³⁵³ Ibid., 4:305.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 4:305-6.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 4:203.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 4:203-8.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 4:210-5. Incidentally, in relation to al-Ghazālī, Ibn Taymiyyah appears to be somewhat less intent on focusing on the role played by miracles in establishing Prophetic truth claims.

To the mind of Ibn Taymiyyah, such individuals cannot be punished until the Message somehow reaches them. This position is made clear in a relevant discussion in the *Fatāwā* where Ibn Taymiyyah discusses the case of a sinful act being committed in a state of ignorance, i.e., when the actor is unaware of the *detestable* (*qabīh*) nature of the act, when a Messenger has not arrived, and/or before any proof can be used against the actor.³⁵⁸ The question raised is essentially the following: What exactly warrants punishment? To this, Ibn Taymiyyah cites the Qur’ānic statement, “We do not punish until We send a messenger” (17:15). He then cites two popular opinions regarding whether God can punish someone who had never received a messenger: a. the doctrine commonly attributed to the Mu‘tazilites which states that God can indeed punish an actor for committing actions known to be *detestable* by the intellect (*‘aql*) *before* having received a messenger; and b. the doctrine commonly attributed to the Ash‘arites which states that, because of His omnipotence, God can punish as He wills, i.e., with or without sin as a basis. Thus, a child could conceivably be punished *in aeternum* without having committed a single sin. In response, the Mu‘tazilites generally maintained that such a scenario would never occur because that would violate God’s characteristic of being just. While noting the strengths of both arguments, in the final analysis, Ibn Taymiyyah argues that both sides seem to ignore Revelation itself, specifically the Qur’anic verse mentioned above (17:15).³⁵⁹ “Indeed,” he states, “no one will be punished until (the Message of) a Messenger comes to him/her, even if a religious leader (*imām*) or someone similar had

³⁵⁸ As was the case with Abū Ya‘lā, this focus on the actor may have been the product of a general Ḥanbalite trend. As Reinhart puts it, “non-Mu‘tazil[ite]s and especially the Ḥanbal[ite]s urged that assessments [be] applied not to the thing, but to the activity associated with it, not to the act, but the actor”). (Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, 172)

³⁵⁹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Fatāwā*, 11: 675-6. It is noteworthy that Ibn Taymiyyah chooses to interpret the Qur’anic verse (17:15) as being inclusive of punishment *after* death.

(already) come to him/her.”³⁶⁰ Unlike Ibn al-‘Arabī, however, Ibn Taymiyyah is not willing to argue that this verse also entails the absolution of those who do not find the Message convincing (since he deems it to be inherently compelling in the first place).

To support his position, Ibn Taymiyyah notes the example of the *Salaf* (‘Pious Ancestors’) who claimed that by engaging in polytheism (*Shirk*) before the arrival of the Messenger, they were engaging in an act that was *detestable*. Nevertheless, it was understood that none were liable for punishment until after the arrival of the Messenger. As such, from that point on, *detestable* acts acquired the additional characteristic of being punishable. All in all, according to Ibn Taymiyyah’s framework, punishment is predicated on the following conditions: the actor has received (the Message of) a Messenger, is *mukallaf* (made-responsible), and is aware of the evil nature of his/her act.³⁶¹

On the other hand, the view of many Mu‘tazilites was that even if (the Message of) a Messenger has not arrived, the *detestable* nature of various acts can be known by way of Reason (*al-‘aql*), and that such knowledge justifies punishment for transgressions in the Hereafter.³⁶² As such, the Messenger merely informs people of religion’s particular stipulations. As far as Ibn Taymiyyah was concerned, however, the human intellect does have the *potential* to independently know what is *good* and *detestable* according to Revelation (*al-Shar‘*),³⁶³ and it is even possible to describe as *detestable* an act made by an actor who has not yet received Revelation. For example, the Qur’an states that Pharaoh had “exceeded the proper bounds” (*innahu ṭaghā*) (79:17) before the arrival of

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 19:68.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 11: 675ff.

³⁶² Ibid., 11: 676-7.

³⁶³ He also affirms that those acts which *Sharī‘ah* deems to be *good* are actually beneficial for the actor, while those deemed *detestable* are actually detrimental. (Ibid., 8:90).

Moses, and that the people of Šālih, Thamūd, were told to repent for actions that were apparently committed before having received the Divine threat (*wa'īd*) (11:61-5). Ibn Taymiyyah concludes that it is only following the arrival of a Messenger that the *detestable* deeds that took place prior to that time are deemed to be potentially punishable, and so the failure to repent at that point would, in essence, be a form of acceptance of those *detestable* acts in their now potentially punishable state. As for those who never come to know of the *detestable* nature of their evil deeds, there would be no obligation upon them to seek forgiveness. To support this relatively nuanced position, Ibn Taymiyyah cites the statement attributed to al-Thawrī that “innovation is more beloved to Iblīs than disobedience.” Whereas the latter is normally recognized as requiring repentance, the former is not (assuming, of course, that the innovator is unaware of the *detestable* nature of his/her innovation).³⁶⁴

Ibn Taymiyyah’s position is an ostensibly strong one. By recognizing Reason’s ability to independently recognize a *general* category of *good* and *evil*, Ibn Taymiyyah is able to avoid the problematic claims made by various critics of the Mu‘tazilites, including many Ash‘arites. Otherwise, our confidence in the intellect’s moral compass would be terribly shaken. On the other hand, by *ultimately* privileging Revelation’s statement that punishment comes only after the arrival of a Messenger, Ibn Taymiyyah is able to avoid

³⁶⁴ Ibn Taymiyya, *Fatāwā*, 11:684. Needless to say, Ibn Taymiyyah was clearly no supporter of the Mu‘tazilite notion of moral essentialism, which he believed led to problematic conclusions. For example, if acts have essential attributes that are unalterable, as the Baghdādī Mu‘tazilites would have it, then that seems to go against the omnipotence of God, as He would then be bound to follow certain acts and avoid others if He were to be deemed just – a classic example of making God to resemble His creation. (Ibid., 8:431) To the mind of Ibn Taymiyyah it is only God who dictates what is *good* and *detestable*, and once He commands something, it acquires the characteristic (*sifah*) of being *good*, and when He proscribes something, it acquires the characteristic of being *detestable*. (Ibid., 8:435-6) Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyyah asserts that the general acts that God engages in are based on both a ‘general sense’ of wisdom and a general sense of mercy. (Ibid., 8:91) (This emphasis on mercy will become significant when we examine Ibn Taymiyyah’s views on Hell’s duration). Accordingly, Ibn Taymiyyah argues that those who claim that God could command and engage in wickedness (*fahshā’*) are opposing Revelation, particularly Scriptural statements such as: “Verily God does not command wickedness (*fahshā’*)” [Q. 7:28]. (Ibid., 8:433)

the perceived weaknesses of the Mu‘tazilite position. (And if Divine justice is perceived to have some sense of consistency, then even if the punishments addressed in Q. 17:15 are interpreted as pertaining primarily to this life, Ibn Taymiyyah’s argument would remain a formidable one).³⁶⁵

As for those who do not receive (the Message of) a Messenger in this life, Ibn Taymiyyah cites certain reports (*āthār*) that state that such individuals will receive one in the afterlife, in the “courtyards of the Resurrection” (*‘araṣāt al-qiyyāmah*).³⁶⁶ As such, God will have sent a Messenger to everyone as a means of differentiating the righteous from the disobedient. (One problem with this position, however, is that it does not seem to be consistent with those reports that speak of Muḥammad’s parents being in Hellfire – reports that Ibn Taymiyyah acknowledges and defends.³⁶⁷ The apparent tension is somewhat resolved, however, if one somehow interprets the reports as merely being indications of Muḥammad’s parents’ future status as disbelievers in the Messenger-of-Resurrection).

At any rate, such a Messenger-of-Resurrection solution, which, as noted in the previous chapter, was similarly adopted by Ibn al-‘Arabī, would seem to fill the gaps left by al-Ghazālī’s discussion on those non-Muslims not ‘properly’ exposed to the Message – even if the *modus operandi* of such a test is somewhat difficult to conceptualize. After all, one of the major tasks of the Messengers was to convince their peoples of the reality

³⁶⁵ Furthermore, the position of Ibn Taymiyyah (and the Ḥanbalites in general) is sophisticated for one final reason: Unlike others engaged in the discourse of *al-taḥsīn wa-al-taqbīḥ* [i.e. determining what is *good* and *detestable*], Ibn Taymiyyah chose to focus the application of moral assessments on actors as opposed to actions, which seems quite logical when one notes that it is only a *mukallaf* (one-made-responsible) whose acts are deemed *good* or *detestable*. Thus, A. Kevin Reinhart makes the insightful observation that this approach appears to be “more consistent with the kerygmatic tone of the Qur’ān.” (Reinhart, *Before Revelation*, 172)

³⁶⁶ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Fatāwā*, 11:686; 17:308-10.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4:324-7.

of Resurrection, and the significance of being among the righteous during this life, before it is too late. The test described by Ibn al-‘Arabī and many others (based on the hadith literature) is relatively intense yet brief: the Messenger-of-Resurrection will simply command people to enter a fire. (Despite the differences, such a command would at least be symbolically similar to the commands of the other Messengers). In any case, Ibn Taymiyyah affirms that, before entering either Heaven or Hell, people will continue to experience tests and tribulations, and will continue to be assigned responsibility (*taklīf*) (as evidenced by the tests of the grave, for example).³⁶⁸ This, however, in no way signifies that *bona fide* Unbelievers will be given a second chance, as, he notes, the Qur’an makes it clear that repentance when death is foreseeable is not accepted.³⁶⁹ (As we shall see, however, this need not entail eternal damnation).

Who then may qualify as having been either exposed or unexposed to the Messengers? Ibn Taymiyyah speaks of three kinds of people: followers of the Prophets, i.e. Believing Muslims; deniers of the Prophets, i.e. the ‘people of error’ (*ahl al-ḍalāl*); and the ‘people of ignorance’ (*ahl al-jāhiliyyah*).³⁷⁰ And while the latter is a common reference to pre-Islamic Arabians, in light of this categorization, as well as his claim that only those who are aware of the evil nature of their acts will be punished, Ibn Taymiyyah is also referring to anyone living in a post-Muḥammadan world who has never heard of Muḥammad (as these could not be considered ‘deniers’ of someone of whom they have never heard). Thus, unlike al-Ghazālī’s detailed classification of non-Muslims, Ibn Taymiyyah does not elaborate on and differentiate between the various types of exposure to Muḥammad’s Message.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 17:308-10.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 4:325.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 17:308.

One may then ask, Is not the arrival of a Messenger detrimental inasmuch as it provides a means for human punishment? Ibn Taymiyyah responds to his would-be interlocutor by arguing that just as rain may lead to destruction, it also provides benefits, and indeed the arrival of a Messenger brings with it much that is beneficial since it indicates exactly what is *good* and what is *detestable*, thus leading the one who submits to live a greater, more fulfilling life that is in line with God's will.³⁷¹

In comparing Ibn Taymiyyah's vision with that of al-Ghazālī, we observe that the notion of a Messenger-of-Resurrection would seem to make concerns of maintaining a baseline belief in God and the Last Day if not 'properly' exposed to the Message in this life effectively superfluous, as the state of one's faith would become established with certainty following the arrival of the Messenger(s) of the Resurrection.

Even so, it is worth noting that Ibn Taymiyyah believed that the existence of God is 'self-evident,' and that knowledge of His existence (and oneness) can be deduced by those who possess a sound natural disposition (*fiṭrah*), without resorting to reasoning³⁷² – even if Reason (including the rational arguments found in the Qur'an) can also lead to such knowledge.³⁷³ Moreover, Ibn Taymiyyah states that God's lordship is established for all to confirm by way of Prophetic miracles that ascertain the veracity of the

³⁷¹ Ibid., 8: 93-4. This emphasis on the role played by the Messenger leads Ibn Taymiyyah to consider the ostensibly mystifying philosophical question of why an all-powerful God would command and proscribe to begin with. The purpose of it all, Ibn Taymiyyah argues, is simply to test humans to see if they will be obedient or disobedient. Thus, if one were to disregard this aspect of examination, there is nothing in the actions in and of themselves ontologically that would entail that humans must engage in some and avoid others. To support this argument, he cites the story of Abraham who was commanded to kill his son. Once it was clear that Abraham was being obedient to God's will, the action itself was no longer necessary. (Ibid., 8:436)

³⁷² Ibid., 1: 47-9, 2: 6, 15-7, 19, 39, 5: 62-5, 6: 68, 72-3, 479, 7: 282-5, 528-9, 10: 134-5, 14: 108-14, 16: 324, 334, 345-8, 445, 22: 608-9. Also see Wael B. Hallaq, "Ibn Taymiyya on the Existence of God," *Acta Orientalia* (Copenhagen) 52 (1991), 49.

³⁷³ Ibn Taymiyya, *Fatāwā*, 1: 46-9, 2: 2, 9-12, 18, 3: 8-9, 5: 307, 356-9, 9: 141-3, 147, 13: 151, 16: 324, 339-40, 597, 18: 236-7,

Messengers and the One sending the Messages.³⁷⁴ As for atheism, Ibn Taymiyyah declares it the greatest of sins.³⁷⁵

2.2. *The Fate of Hell's Inhabitants*

Having noted Ibn Taymiyyah's general views on salvation – views that are seemingly stricter in comparison to that of either al-Ghazālī or Ibn al-‘Arabī – we turn to Ibn Taymiyyah's discourse on the fate of Hell's inhabitants and the duration and purpose of Hell. As will become apparent, it is with regard to this aspect of salvation that Ibn Taymiyyah's relative stringency becomes less apparent.

At first glance, however, Ibn Taymiyyah seems to proceed along the same path. In his *Fatāwā*, for example, he states that, unlike grave-sinning Believers, Unbelievers (including Muḥammad's parents) will not leave Hellfire.³⁷⁶ The latter, he argues, will endure 'unrestricted burning' (*al-ṣalī al-muṭlaq*) as a continual form of punishment.³⁷⁷ Elsewhere, he states that the *Salaf*, the leaders (*a'immaḥ/s. imām*) of the *Ummah* (Muslim community), and the rest of the Sunnis (*Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*), are in agreement that Heaven and Hell – "taken as a whole" (*bi-al-kulliyyah*) – will not perish, and that it is only a group of innovative Rationalists (*mutakallimūn*), such as Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 128/745 CE) and some Mu'tazilites, who have argued that all of creation will perish. He immediately follows this by stating that the *Salaf* and the leaders of the *Ummah* are in

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 11: 377-80.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 8: 218-29, 14: 323. As for the presumed pantheism of *al-Ittiḥādiyyah*, represented by *inter alios* Ibn al-‘Arabī, Ibn Taymiyyah declares it to be a form of Unbelief that is worse than that of Jews, Christian, and even idolaters. (Ibid., 2:172-3, 11: 129-30, 227)

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 4:326.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 16:197.

unanimous consensus (*ijmā'*) that Heaven and its inhabitants, as well as “other than that” will never cease to exist.³⁷⁸ As I demonstrate below, Ibn Taymiyyah’s wording is intentional.³⁷⁹

If the preceding were all that Ibn Taymiyyah wrote on the matter, then his soteriological *Weltanschauung* would have probably been significantly misconstrued. Indeed, there is much more to be said on the matter in *al-Radd*. (As noted below, the question of whether Ibn Taymiyyah actually authored this treatise is a matter of debate, although not necessarily for good reason).

This treatise is, as the title suggests, a response to those who maintain the eventual annihilation (*fanā'*) of both Heaven and Hell. Even so, according to Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, it would appear that the reason why Ibn Taymiyyah wrote *al-Radd* in the first place was because the former had presented the latter with the *tafsīr* of ‘Abd ibn Ḥamīd, which contains reports (some of which are noted below) that seem to point to Hell’s eventual demise (and Heaven’s continuity).³⁸⁰ In any case, Ibn Taymiyyah begins by noting that there are three different camps regarding the duration both afterlife abodes: those who maintain the annihilation of both Heaven and Hell, those who maintain the annihilation of Hell and the eternity of Heaven, and those who maintain the eternity of both Heaven and Hell.³⁸¹ As the uniqueness of Ibn Taymiyyah’s thoughts on salvation is perhaps most apparent in this particular discussion, and since this text remains obscure

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 18:307.

³⁷⁹ In this regard, it is noteworthy that this discussion is in the context of Ibn Taymiyyah’s denial of a hadith that quotes Muḥammad as stating that “Hell and its inhabitants” will never perish.

³⁸⁰ The details of this report are to be found in Ibn al-Qayyim’s *Shifā’ al-‘alīl*. As Ibn al-Qayyim notes, Ibn Taymiyyah initially did not give a response when asked about Hell’s duration. However, after coming across ‘Abd ibn Ḥamīd’s *tafsīr*, Ibn al-Qayyim brought it to the attention of his teacher, who then composed his treatise on the matter. (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Shifā’ al-‘alīl*, 2:245)

³⁸¹ See Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd ‘alā man qāla bi-fanā’ al-Jannah wa al-Nār*, ed. Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd-Allāh al-Simharī (Riyadh: 1995), 41.

to most Islamicists, I will here summarize and analyze his treatment of these three viewpoints.

1. Those who maintain the annihilation of both Heaven and Hell

Ibn Taymiyyah takes issue with this first position precisely because of the claim that Heaven is not eternal. He begins by noting that this view was never maintained by anyone from among the *Salaf*, the Companions (*al-Ṣaḥābah*), or the Successors (*al-Tābi‘ūn*). Instead, this was the doctrine of Jahm ibn Ṣafwān and his followers, the Jahmites (*al-Jahmiyyah*). And, Ibn Taymiyyah notes, not only was this doctrine disavowed by the leaders of Islam, it was used as grounds for *takfīr*. And this charge of Unbelief (*Kufr*) is made on the basis of at least four Qur’anic statements: 1. “[Heaven’s] produce is permanent (*akluhā dā’im*)” (13:35); 2. “This [Heaven and its rewards] is Our provision which will not end (*mā lahu min nafād*)” (38:54); 3. “[Heaven’s provisions will be] neither withheld nor forbidden (*lā maqtū‘atin wa lā mamnū‘ah*)” (56:33); 4. “[Paradise will be] a gift, uninterrupted (*‘aṭā’an ghayr majdhūdh*)” (11:108).³⁸²

To the mind of Ibn Taymiyyah, these four Scriptural expressions are unambiguous indicators of Heaven’s eternity. As he explains, Jahm’s position is based on the notion that since Heaven and Hell are both *accidents* (*ḥawādith*) that have a beginning, they must have an end. Ibn Taymiyyah then notes the position of one Mu‘tazilite founding father, Abū al-Hudhayl (d. 226/840), who adopted a similar position, namely, that all movements (*ḥarakāt*) would eventually cease, meaning that all of Heaven and Hell’s inhabitants would eventually be unable to move.³⁸³ According to

³⁸² Ibid., 41-4.

³⁸³ According to J. Van Ess, this conception ultimately developed from a similar notion found among certain Christians (e.g. Gnostics). See J. Van Ess, “Das Begrenzte Paradies,” *Mélanges D’Islamologie*,

Ibn Taymiyyah, this viewpoint is simply untenable on the basis of both Revelation (*al-naql*) and Reason (*al-'aql*). Moreover, he maintains that there is no reason why something that had a beginning *must* have an end. Just as God is unlimited in His words (*kalimāt*),³⁸⁴ so too is He unlimited in His abilities. Thus, for the afterlife to last eternally, the only consideration should be God's will.³⁸⁵

Having ruled out Jahm's opinion, as well as the possibility that Heaven is not eternal, we are left with the issue of Hell's eternity. And it is here where observe a change in tone. Ibn Taymiyyah notes that, unlike the issue of Heaven's duration, differences of opinion may be found amongst both the *Salaf* and the *Khalaf* ('Later Generations') regarding Hell's duration.³⁸⁶

2. Those who maintain the annihilation of Hell and the eternity of Heaven

This view, which Ibn Taymiyyah goes to great lengths to support, entails that the punishment in Hell will eventually cease to exist, and that everyone will leave it at some point. This, it is argued, is a viewpoint that has been conveyed on the authority of Companions such as 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, Ibn Mas'ūd, Abū Hurayrah, Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī, and others. For example, according to one reliable report, 'Umar is quoted as saying, "If the 'People of the Fire' (*Ahl al-Nār*) were to remain [in the Fire] to the extent of (the number of) stones in a mountain, then theirs would be a day in which they would leave it."³⁸⁷ This particular report, which has more than one *isnād* (support; chain of authority), is found in the *tafsīr* of 'Abd ibn Ḥamīd (d. 249/823), in his discussion of Q.

Volume dédié à la mémoire de Armand Abel par ses collègues, ses élèves et ses amis, ed. Pierre Salmon (Leiden: 1974), 121.

³⁸⁴ This is according to Qur'anic passages such as 31:27 and 18:109.

³⁸⁵ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd*, 44-52. Ibn Taymiyyah states that such heretical opinions are to be expected from those who denied God's attributes and argued that the Qur'an was created. (Ibid.)

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 52.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 53.

78:23, a verse that speaks of the ‘transgressors’ (*al-ṭāghūn*) “tarrying in [Gehenna] for ages (*aḥqāban*).” As such, Ibn Taymiyyah maintains that this and other reports indicate that there was indeed no unanimous consensus that punishment in Hell will be eternal, and that this was an issue of debate among leading figures, and not something innovative like the doctrines of the Khārijites, Mu‘tazilites, Murji’ites, and Jahmites.³⁸⁸

Ibn Taymiyyah is careful to note the response by his would-be interlocutor: ‘Umar’s statement should not be interpreted to refer to *all* of Hell’s inhabitants, rather, it is limited only to those who will actually leave it, i.e. *Ahl al-Tawḥīd* (Those who profess God’s Unity). Such a position, so goes the argument, would be in harmony with what one finds in other hadith reports, such as those in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. To this, Ibn Taymiyyah responds by arguing that the expression ‘People of the Fire’ (*Ahl al-Nār*) could not refer to those who profess the Unity of God (*al-Muwaḥḥidūn*), rather, it refers to those who were opposed to them. In support of this assertion, he cites a hadith in which the Prophet states, “As for the ‘People of the Fire’ (*Ahl al-Nār*) who are its (true) inhabitants (*alladhīna hum ahluhā*), they will neither die in it nor will they live.” Having established the link between the ‘People of the Fire’ and Unbelievers, ‘Umar’s statement is thus taken to mean that once Hell (and its punishment) ceases to exist, *only then* will the ‘People of the Fire’ leave it, which is unlike the case of grave-sinning Believers who will leave before that time. And since Gehenna (*Jahannam*) will be located in this earth, and since the earth will transform from one state to another, we find a precedent for Hell: While earth’s inhabitants will perish,³⁸⁹ they will not cease to exist. Similarly, Hell’s

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 53-5.

³⁸⁹ Ibn Taymiyyah here cites two Qur’anic passages from 55:26 and 16:96 that speak of the cessation of life in this world.

inhabitants will simply transform from one state to another following the cessation of Hell.³⁹⁰

According to Ibn Taymiyyah, further support for Hell’s annihilation may be found by looking to the exegetical reports associated with Q. 6:128 – a verse that concludes with, “[God] will say: ‘The Fire is your resting-place, abiding therein (*khālidīna fīhā*), except as God wills (*illā mā shā’a Allāh*). Your Lord is truly wise, all-knowing.’” Ibn Taymiyyah goes on to cite a report found in the *tafsīr* of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah al-Wālibī (d. 143/626) in reference to this verse. It quotes Ibn ‘Abbās as saying that it is improper for any human to pass a judgment on behalf of God, and that no one can determine who the inhabitants of either Heaven or Hell will be. Ibn Taymiyyah then puts forth the argument that the Divine threat and exception (“except as God wills”) found in Q. 6:128 refers not to the ‘People of the *Qibla*,’ since the beginning of the verse seems to indicate that it is in reference to both the *jinn* who “misled a great many men” and “their supporters (*awliyā’uhum*) among men” who “profited much from each other.” The latter, it is thus argued, must certainly include the Unbelievers, as this is what is indicated by Qur’anic statements such as, “[K]ill the supporters of Satan” (4:76), and “We have made the devils supporters (*awliyā’*) of those who do not believe” (7:27).³⁹¹

Once again anticipating a response by his would-be interlocutor, Ibn Taymiyyah then notes al-Ḥusayn ibn Mas‘ūd al-Baghawī’s (d. 516/1122) view that 6:128 should be interpreted as referring to the ‘People of Faith’ (*Ahl al-Īmān*), as is stated in a report attributed to the Companion Ibn ‘Abbās. Ibn Taymiyyah, however, dismisses the report because of the deficiency of its *isnād*, as its narrators are not listed. Moreover, Ibn

³⁹⁰ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd*, 55-7.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 57-60. Other Qur’anic verses supporting this link to Unbelievers include 6:121, 7:201-2, 16:99-100, 18:50, and 58:19.

Taymiyyah cites a statement attributed to Ibn Mas‘ūd that states that there will come a time in which no one will remain in Hell, and that that will take place after its inhabitants will have remained in it for ‘ages’ (*aḥqāban*) (as Q. 78:23 indicates). After having noted that there is a similar report transmitted on the authority of Abū Hurayrah, Ibn Taymiyyah cites al-Baghawī’s view that, according to Sunnis (*Ahl al-Sunnah*), even these two reports should be interpreted so as to refer to the ‘People of Faith.’ To the mind of Ibn Taymiyyah, however, the problem with al-Baghawī’s opinion is that it does not take into account the fact that verses 21-8 of *Sūrat al-Naba’* (78) demonstrate that the punishment described in verse 23 is in reference to Unbelievers³⁹²:

Gehenna (*Jahannam*) is, indeed, lying in ambush; a refuge for the Transgressors (*al-Ṭāghīn*); Tarrying therein for ages (*aḥqāban*); wherein, they do not taste any coolness or fresh drinks, except for boiling water and freezing hail; as an appropriate reward. Indeed, they did not expect any reckoning; and denounced Our signs as lies.

And lest one think that the term ‘ages’ (*aḥqāb*) is a reference to eternity, Ibn Taymiyyah notes that, according to a number of the *Salaf*, each ‘age’ (*ḥuqb*) is of limited duration, though how long exactly is an issue of debate. According to different perspectives, it could last forty, eighty, seventy, or seventy thousand years – with some or possibly all of these referring to years “wherein each day is like one thousand years” –, or an amount known only to God.³⁹³ But if what is meant by ‘ages’ is not eternity, why did the Qur’an not simply provide a stated limit, e.g. 10 ‘ages’?³⁹⁴ To this, Ibn Taymiyyah responds by arguing that, even if the precise duration is not stated, there must be a limitation because of the very limitation of ‘ages’ themselves. As for the view that after

³⁹² Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd*, 60-2.

³⁹³ As such, Ibn Taymiyyah states that the statement attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī that the length of Hell’s duration “does not have an amount except for permanence” is true so long as Hell exists. (Ibid., 63)

³⁹⁴ This was the argument made by Ibn Qutaybah and others.

the ‘ages’ have passed, Hell’s inhabitants will be punished not with boiling water, but with other forms of punishment, Ibn Taymiyyah asserts the baseless nature of such an assertion, as the reference to ‘ages’ is in connection to ‘tarrying’ in Gehenna and not a specific punishment. And, Ibn Taymiyyah keenly notes, even if one were to follow that line of reasoning, it might very well be that if Hell’s inhabitants were to “taste coolness and fresh drinks” (after having consumed boiling water for ‘ages’), that would be a blessing, not a punishment.³⁹⁵

To the mind of Ibn Taymiyyah, one of the strongest arguments for Hell’s non-eternality is to be found in Q. 11:107-8. As for Q. 11:107, he notes its ambiguity regarding God’s will: “[The wretched shall be] abiding [in Hell] (*khālidīna fīhā*), so long as the heavens and earth endure, except as your Lord pleases (*illā mā shā’a rabbuka*); Your Lord does indeed what He wants.” Ibn Taymiyyah cites the view attributed to various Companions that the qualification of this verse (“except as your Lord pleases”) is to be applied to *every* Divine threat (*wa’id*) in the Qur’an. Interestingly, unlike Ibn al-‘Arabī, Ibn Taymiyyah considers the qualification to be a reference to the stay in Hellfire, and not simply the state of Hell’s inhabitants. Q. 11:108, on the other hand, is seemingly less ambiguous in referring to the stay in Heaven: “[The blessed shall be] abiding [in Heaven] (*khālidīna fīhā*) as long as the heavens and the earth shall endure; except as your Lord pleases (*illā mā shā’a rabbuka*), a gift, uninterrupted (*‘aṭā’an ghayr majdhūdh*).” That the qualification in Q. 11:108 (“except as your Lord pleases”) is to be applied similarly to every promise (*wa’d*) in the Qur’an is surprisingly not seriously considered by Ibn Taymiyyah. But there is something different about Q. 11:108: it concludes with

³⁹⁵ Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd*, 62-6. Ibn Taymiyyah also cites the opinion of ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq ibn ‘Aṭīyyah (d. 541/1147) that Q. 78:23 is not abrogated by verse 30 of that same surah (“So taste. We will only increase your punishment”) so long as the notion of abrogation is limited to matters of law. (Ibid., 64)

the expression “a gift, uninterrupted,” which ultimately confirms Heaven’s eternity. Ibn Taymiyyah highlights this difference, arguing that the ending of Q. 11:107 (“Your Lord does indeed what He wants”) does not confirm Hell’s eternity, rather, it leaves the matter unresolved.³⁹⁶

Ibn Taymiyyah goes on to cite more reports that seem to bolster the argument for a temporal Hell. The Companion ‘Abd-Allāh ibn ‘Umar, for example, is quoted as saying that “there will come a time upon Hell in which its gates will be shut, and no one will remain in it.”³⁹⁷ The Successor al-Sha‘bī (d. 103/721) is quoted as saying that “Hell is the fastest of the two abodes (i.e. Heaven and Hell) in being inhabited, and the fastest in becoming desolate.”³⁹⁸

And even though Ibn Taymiyyah presents evidence for the eventual salvation of all (e.g. ‘Umar’s statement), one of his main goals in this section of *al-Radd* is simply to establish the non-eternity of punishment in Hell. As such, he also cites a report from al-Ṭabarī’s (d. 310/923) *tafsīr* that states that Q. 11:107 refers to a period in which God will command Hell to consume its inhabitants.³⁹⁹

In examining Ibn Taymiyyah’s analysis of the more widely recognized opinion, i.e. the eternity of both Heaven and Hell, one can readily discern even more signs for his preference for a non-eternal Hell.

3. Those who maintain the eternity of both Heaven and Hell.

According to Ibn Taymiyyah, those who maintain the eternity of Hell have four central arguments: First, it is something agreed upon by unanimous consensus among the

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 66-8.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 69.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 69.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 68.

Salaf, and any opposing, innovative viewpoint was developed only among later generations. Second, the numerous Qur’anic indications of an eternal Hell are clear and definitive (*qat’ī*). Third, the Sunnah, which is quite extensive, indicates that those with an atom’s weight of faith will be taken out of Hell, whereas the Unbelievers will never leave. Fourth, it is what the Messenger taught, and it is something that is known by necessity – with or without a particular report as support, as it is in accordance with Reason.⁴⁰⁰

Ibn Taymiyyah then presents two responses to these arguments: First, that there was unanimous consensus regarding this issue is something unknown. And, he reiterates, while we know of the different viewpoints among the Companions, not one is known to have ever explicitly stated that Hell will never perish. The idea that there was unanimous consensus is merely presumed by those who are unfamiliar with this old dispute. Second, the Qur’an and hadith literature do not state that Hell will never perish; instead, both indicate that Hell’s inhabitants will remain in it ‘continually’ (*abadan*), receiving its decreed punishments, with no way out, as indicated by numerous Qur’anic verses and authentic hadiths.⁴⁰¹ And such passages simply refer to the inability of Unbelievers to leave Hell *while Hell exists*, which is unlike the situation of those in Hell who uphold the ‘Unity of God’ (*Tawhīd*), who will be able to leave Hell during that time by way of intercession (*shafā’ah*).⁴⁰²

Ibn Taymiyyah then proceeds with a discussion on the distinction between the eternality (*baqā’*) of Heaven and that of Hell. The existence of such a distinction, it is argued, is supported by both Revelation (*al-Shar’*) and Reason (*al-‘aql*). Ibn Taymiyyah

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁰¹ E.g. Q. 2:161-2, 6:27-8, 23:107-8, 35:36-7, 40:49-50, 43:74-8, 69:25-7.

⁴⁰² Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Radd*, 71-9.

then presents eight arguments in favor of this distinction, while further making the case for Hell's non-eternality. These eight arguments may be summarized as four basic claims: First, while God has indicated that Heaven is eternal, there is no such indication regarding Hell. All we know is that Hell's inhabitants will not leave it so long as Hell exists. Qur'anic verses such as 78:23, 6:128, and 11:107 indicate that Hell is of limited duration and that its continuation is conditional. Second, it has been established that God will allow into Heaven those who have never committed a good deed, such as the creation made specifically for Heaven, people who were initially consigned to Hell, and children whose fathers were righteous.⁴⁰³ On the other hand, no one will be punished for any reason other than sin. Thus, in light of their functions and characteristics, Heaven and Hell cannot be compared. Third, while Heaven is derived from God's mercy and forgiveness, Hell is derived from His punishment. Furthermore, as Qur'anic verses such as 15:49-50, 5:98, and 6:165 indicate, the blessings from God are the products of His names and characteristics, and are thus a reflection of His essence, thus necessitating their eternality. Punishment, on the other hand, is His creation, and like His other creations (e.g. this world), it will eventually perish once the wisdom behind its existence has been obtained. (This argument is developed further by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah). Fourth, God states in the Qur'an (e.g. 6:12) and the authentic hadith collections that His mercy encompasses everything. Thus – and here the argument becomes theodicean –, if God's punishment really were eternal, there would be no mercy in that. On the other hand, one may note God's wisdom and compassion in the punishments He has decreed for this life, as they purify the soul of its sins. Accordingly, it is reasonable to maintain

⁴⁰³ This is presumably based on Q. 52:21: "And those who have believed and their progeny followed them in belief, We shall join their progeny to them[.]"

that Hell's inhabitants would not be allowed to enter Heaven until they have been completely purified and rectified. Once that has been achieved, the *ratio essendi* of the punishment ceases to exist. (According to Ibn Taymiyyah, it was due to the belief that some individuals would never enter Heaven that many Muslim theologians doubted God's characteristics of wisdom and mercy, while emphasizing His omnipotence and denying that He was the Most merciful of all [*Arḥam al-Rāḥimīn*]).⁴⁰⁴

Given the manner in which many Muslim scholars have traditionally interpreted the Qur'an, these are bold claims on the part of Ibn Taymiyyah.

To drive his point home, Ibn Taymiyyah concludes *al-Radd* by presenting six signs of Heaven's eternity, which may be summarized as follows: The Qur'an indicates Heaven's continuity and that it will never be cut off, as evidenced by the Qur'anic statements noted above (e.g. 13:35, 38:54), as well as other passages, such as Q. 16:96, which states, "What you have will be exhausted, and what is with God remains [undiminished]." And since the blessings of God come from His essence, they will necessarily last eternally. Moreover, God indicates that the reward of the Righteous will never be cut off, as explicitly stated in Q. 41:8, 84:25, and 68:3. The Qur'anic expression "a gift, uninterrupted (*'atā'an ghayr majdhūdh*)" (11:108) indicates a reward that is eternal (unlike the expression in the preceding verse regarding Hell and punishment). Finally, Ibn Taymiyyah cites a famous hadith (found in both *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*) that states that death itself will come in the form of a spotted ram, which will stand between Heaven and Hell and be slaughtered, signifying the end of death itself. Thus, Ibn Taymiyyah goes beyond simply emphasizing the non-eternity of Hell to making the case for the eventual salvation of all, as Hell's inhabitants will continue to

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 80-3.

live after Hell has perished, and as the reports he cites indicate, this continuation of life is to occur in Heaven.⁴⁰⁵ Thus, Ibn Taymiyyah's discussion in *al-Radd* is controversial in more ways than one.

2.3. *The Controversy surrounding Ibn Taymiyyah's View of Hell's Duration*

That Ibn Taymiyyah's discussion in *al-Radd* has been considered controversial is perhaps most evident in the denial by some of his later supporters that he maintained the non-eternality of Hell. In fact, there are, generally-speaking, three different opinions regarding Ibn Taymiyyah's view on Hell's fate: First, that he believed that it is non-eternal; second, that he believed that it is eternal; and third, that he only seemed to lean towards the view that it is non-eternal.⁴⁰⁶

Related to this controversy is the question of whether Ibn Taymiyyah actually authored *al-Radd*. Adding fuel to this controversy is the fact that the manuscript of *al-Radd* found in Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah does not explicitly list Ibn Taymiyyah as the author: "It *appears* to be from among the works authored by Ibn Taymiyyah" [emphasis mine].⁴⁰⁷ Some (led by contemporary scholars such as 'Alī ibn 'Alī al-Ḥarbī) have also doubted Ibn Taymiyyah's authorship of the treatise precisely because of its content, particularly its apparent support for Hell's annihilation. According to such scholars, the link to Ibn Taymiyyah was made due to an erroneous conjecture made by Ibn Qayyim al-

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 83-7.

⁴⁰⁶ See Muḥammad ibn 'Abd-Allāh al-Simharī, "*Mawqif Shaykh al-Islām,*" *al-Radd 'alā man qāla bi-fanā' al-Jannah wa al-Nār*, ed. Muḥammad ibn 'Abd-Allāh al-Simharī (Riyadh: 1995), xviii-xix. Al-Subkī is a prominent representative of the first perspective, the contemporary scholar 'Alī ibn 'Alī al-Ḥarbī is known for his defense of the second, and many, including al-Simharī have maintained the third. (Ibid.)

⁴⁰⁷ See Muḥammad ibn 'Abd-Allāh al-Simharī, "*Nisbat al-kitāb ilā al-mu'allif,*" *al-Radd 'alā man qāla bi-fanā' al-Jannah wa al-Nār*, ed. Muḥammad ibn 'Abd-Allāh al-Simharī (Riyadh: 1995), xii.

Jawziyyah and others, and Ibn Taymiyyah’s actual writings regarding this issue, to which Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah refers (in works examined below), have not survived.⁴⁰⁸ To my mind, there is no substantive reason to doubt that the treatise was indeed the work of Ibn Taymiyyah for reasons that will be made apparent below.

The notion that Ibn Taymiyyah believed in Hell’s eternality is generally based on the following two arguments (as articulated by scholars such as al-Ḥarbī): First, the very fact that Ibn Taymiyyah composed *al-Radd* as a response to the Jahmites and Mu‘tazilites who maintained the eventual annihilation of both Heaven and Hell is an indication that he believed in an eternal Hell. The problem with this argument, however, is that *al-Radd* only signifies Ibn Taymiyyah’s denial of the annihilation of *both* Heaven and Hell, taken generally as a whole, and not necessarily Hell in particular. Second, the idea that Ibn Taymiyyah believed in Hell’s eventual annihilation was simply the fabrication of his adversaries, such as Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, and his student, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah. Ibn al-Qayyim’s ascription of this view to Ibn Taymiyyah was, so goes this purely conjectural argument, due to either an erroneous inference by the former, or his turning against Ibn Taymiyyah.⁴⁰⁹

In point of fact, we do have good reason to believe that Ibn Taymiyyah was the true author of the treatise. It is congruous with other writings attributed to him, especially if we take into account the careful wording of his *Fatāwā* when addressing the issue at hand. Moreover, the very fact that the statements found within the text are, as we shall see below, ascribed to Ibn Taymiyyah by his contemporaries, both supporters and

⁴⁰⁸ Al-Simharī, “*Nisbat al-kitāb*,” xii-xiii. As al-Simharī notes, al-Ḥarbī’s statement here seems to contradict his assertion elsewhere that the “alleged” treatise probably does not exist. (Ibid.)

⁴⁰⁹ Al-Simharī, “*Mawqif*,” xxiii-xxiv. While al-Ḥarbī would maintain these three arguments, he also makes the ostensibly inconsistent claim that Ibn Taymiyyah initially leaned towards Hell’s annihilation, and that this was based on the testimony of his student Ibn al-Qayyim. (Ibid.)

opponents, is a strong argument for its authenticity. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah quotes the text – sometimes verbatim, other times loosely – in his his own writings, while its specific arguments are also cited in al-Subkī’s refutation.⁴¹⁰

Assuming that Ibn Taymiyyah did indeed compose the treatise, one would be justified in maintaining that, at the very least, he leaned towards the view that Hell would eventually be annihilated due to God’s mercy. After all, even though he never *explicitly* states that Hell is necessarily non-eternal, he emphasizes and fully articulates the argument for a temporal Hell, and it is this argument that gets the final say. This is only further supported by the story behind Ibn Taymiyyah’s composition of *al-Radd* and the fact that potential counterarguments are addressed and dismissed. One can thus conjecture that the Jahmite denial of the eternality of *both* Heaven and Hell was superficially presented as the focus of *al-Radd* so as to camouflage what Ibn Taymiyyah recognized as being the truly controversial nature of the non-eternal Hell position.

Centuries later, *al-Radd* serves as a source of embarrassment for some Ibn Taymiyyah apologists, including Wahhābī scholars who consider the idea of a non-eternal Hell to be inherently problematic. Thus, we find one additional motivation for denying Ibn Taymiyyah’s authorship of *al-Radd*. As for those apologists who accept his authorship of *al-Radd*, we find that other tactics are employed. This may be observed, for example, in Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd-Allāh al-Simharī’s introduction to a 1995 edition of *al-Radd*, which was published in Riyadh. Al-Simharī asserts that, because Ibn Taymiyyah never explicitly states his own opinion, he remains in line with the Sunni doctrine of an eternal Hell.⁴¹¹ Al-Simharī goes on to argue that Ibn Taymiyyah’s opponents, such as al-

⁴¹⁰ Al-Simharī, “*Nisbat al-kitāb*,” xiv-xvi.

⁴¹¹ Al-Simharī, “*Mawqif*,” xxv-xxvii.

Subkī, should not have inferred from *al-Radd* that, even if Ibn Taymiyyah initially espoused Hell’s annihilation, that that was always his position. He then cites the apologetic hypothesis put forth by the late Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999) that Ibn Taymiyyah composed the treatise during his studies, before mastering the religious sciences⁴¹² – an ostensibly baseless conjecture in light of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah’s utilization of *al-Radd* during a period in which Ibn Taymiyyah had already established himself. Al-Simharī then takes an entirely different approach and argues that even if Ibn Taymiyyah did maintain that God’s mercy could encompass Hell’s inhabitants, this would not be a problematic assertion, as this was also the position maintained by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah and others.⁴¹³ Nevertheless, al-Simharī argues that since the doctrine of Hell’s eventual annihilation is improbable (*marjūh*), it is the duty of the ‘common’ Muslim to side with the doctrine indicated by the Qur’an and Sunnah, and adopted by many of the *Salaf*, namely, Hell’s eternity. The reason, he argues, is because it is only the sincere, knowledgeable *mujtahid* who may safely adopt any other position.⁴¹⁴ Therefore, we also find a contemporary form of elitism associated with this belief in a non-eternal Hell that is employed as a counterweight to Ibn Taymiyyah’s critics. While one orientation within Wahhābism seeks to deny the position altogether so as to avoid being discredited, another portrays it as a position of the elite.

In order to appreciate further the controversial nature of Ibn Taymiyyah’s stance, what follows is an examination of al-Subkī’s critique.

⁴¹² Al-Simharī, “*Mawqif*,” xxii.

⁴¹³ Interestingly, he even cites a recent Master’s thesis written by Fayṣal ‘Abd-Allāh al-Jāmi‘ah of Umm al-Qurā University (Mecca), entitled *Al-Jannah wa al-nār wa al-arā’ fihimā* (Heaven and Hell and the viewpoints regarding them). In it, the author gives preference to the doctrine of Hell’s annihilation on the basis that it is in accordance with what is known of “God’s expansive mercy, inclusive generosity, overflowing forgiveness, and considerable wisdom.” (Al-Simharī, “*Mawqif*,” xxii-xxiii)

⁴¹⁴ Al-Simharī, “*Mawqif*,” xxviii.

3. A Rejoinder to Ibn Taymiyyah's Argument for a Non-Eternal Hell by One of his Contemporaries: The Case of Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī

Taqī al-Dīn ‘Alī ibn ‘Abd al-Kāfī al-Subkī (d. 756/1355) was trained in Cairo, and after traveling to Damascus and Mecca, returned to become the chief qāḍī (judge) at the Maṣūriyyah madrasah at the Ibn Ṭulūn mosque. He then moved to Damascus and became the city's qāḍī before once again returning to Egypt, where he eventually passed away. He is said to have authored approximately 150 books on a variety of topics including law, theology, and poetry.⁴¹⁵ Relevant for our purposes is his treatise *al-I'tibār bi-baqā' al-Jannah wa al-Nār* (Consideration of the Permanence of Heaven and Hell), which is essentially a refutation of the arguments presented by Ibn Taymiyyah in *al-Radd* for a non-eternal Hell.

While there have historically been a number of rejoinders to Ibn Taymiyyah (and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah) regarding this issue,⁴¹⁶ *al-I'tibār*, which is said to have been written in the year 748/1347,⁴¹⁷ represents a well-known contemporary response. In it, al-Subkī, a fierce detractor of Ibn Taymiyyah, begins with an *ad hominem* attack. In attempting to discredit Ibn Taymiyyah himself and his credentials, al-Subkī notes that, among other things, “he is not one to be relied upon” because of his tendency to conflate what he transmits as Revelation with his own personal understanding.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁵ See Joseph Schacht, “Al-Subkī,” *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition*, Vol. 9 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), 744.

⁴¹⁶ For example, see Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Raf‘ al-astār li-ibṭāl adillat al-qā’ilīn bi-fanā’ al-Nār*, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (Beirut: 1984).

⁴¹⁷ See ‘Alī ibn ‘Abd al-Kāfī al-Subkī, *al-Rasā’il al-subkiyyah: fī al-radd ‘alā Ibn Taymiyyah wa tilmīdhīh Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah* (Beirut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1983), 208. Incidentally, this text includes additional polemical attacks against Ibn Taymiyyah regarding other issues, particularly legal ones.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 195.

As for the issue at hand, it is apparent that al-Subkī has one main goal in mind in writing *al-I'tibār*: to demonstrate that the temporal Hell position is an innovative one. Early on, he declares that unanimous consensus had been reached regarding the eternity of both Heaven and Hell, that this was documented by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), and that there is no doubt about this, for it is known by necessity and supported by Scriptural evidence. Al-Subkī goes on to cite 34 Qur'anic verses he considers to be *explicit* indications of Hell's permanence (*khulūd*), several of which explicitly indicate *al-ta'bīd*, which is here interpreted to denote 'eternity.' (He then cites 28 Qur'anic verses which seem to *support* the notion of Hell's permanence, and he notes that there are yet many other verses that could be cited for further support). Such an abundance of explicit verses, he argues, means that metaphorical interpretations are prohibited; only a literal interpretation would do justice to the verses in question.⁴¹⁹ And even though there was never any doubt that Ibn Taymiyyah believed in an eternal Heaven, al-Subkī also cites 38 Qur'anic verses that speak of Heaven's permanence, presumably to demonstrate that such verses are worded in ways that parallel those of Hell.⁴²⁰

Ibn Taymiyyah was certainly familiar with all of these verses. As such, al-Subkī's extensive citations could not have been meant to impress Ibn Taymiyyah and his supporters, but rather, to convince the undecided reader. If anything, al-Subkī continuously notes how egregious Ibn Taymiyyah's position is, *given* his knowledge. As such, al-Subkī asserts, to argue as Ibn Taymiyyah has done warrants a charge of Unbelief (*Kufr*).⁴²¹

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 196-8.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 198-200.

⁴²¹ Ibid., 198.

Al-Subkī goes on to cite 4 hadiths traditionally classified as ‘authentic’ to support his statement: 1. a hadith that states that whoever kills him/herself using a piece of iron will continually kill him/herself with that piece of iron while in Hell, remaining in it forever (*abadan*); 2. a hadith that states that Hell’s inhabitants (who are its ‘true inhabitants’) will neither live nor die in it; 3. the hadith cited above about death coming in the form of a spotted ram and being slaughtered; and 4. a hadith that states that the peoples of Heaven and Hell will be told that they will have permanence (*khulūd*).⁴²²

Thus, al-Subkī argues, the matter is clear. The eternal punishment of Hell’s inhabitants is clearly stated in Scripture, was the view of the *Salaf*, is in line with the consensus opinion, is known by both the natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) and necessity, and is even what all non-Muslim groups believe. And, he reiterates, to say otherwise, given this knowledge, demonstrates Unbelief.⁴²³

Even so, al-Subkī does not stop there, for he also aims to discredit Ibn Taymiyyah’s survey of viewpoints regarding this issue. He refers to Ibn Taymiyyah’s categorization of the different opinions regarding the afterlife, i.e., the temporal Heaven and Hell, the eternal Heaven and Hell, and the eternal Heaven and the temporal Hell. After noting that Ibn Taymiyyah leans towards the third category, al-Subkī makes the erroneous claim that Ibn Taymiyyah claims this to be *the* position of the *Salaf*. (As noted, Ibn Taymiyyah does not depict this as being the only view adopted by the *Salaf*, but rather one of two popular views). At any rate, al-Subkī responds by stating that there is not one ‘Pious Ancestor’ who adopted this view, and that that which was narrated about them is ambiguous, so their reports should be interpreted according to the explicit

⁴²² Ibid., 198.

⁴²³ Ibid., 200.

statements found in Revelation and the belief adopted by the generality of Muslims. As such, Ibn Taymiyyah’s view is an “innovation (*bid‘ah*) from among the most ominous and ugliest of innovations.”⁴²⁴

Al-Subkī goes on to refute Ibn Taymiyyah’s analysis of Q. 78:23, 6:128, and 11:107-8. As for Q. 78:23 (“Tarrying therein for ages [*aḥqāban*]”), al-Subkī argues that this should not be regarded as a limitation of duration. And even if it is argued that, according to certain reports, each ‘age’ (*ḥuqb*) is equivalent to a set time period, this still would not rule out the possibility that Hell’s inhabitants would continue to live in Hell (assuming the reports are authentic to begin with). Al-Subkī also notes that some scholars maintained that this verse is to be read only in conjunction with the subsequent verse, which states, “Wherein, they do not taste any coolness or fresh drinks.” Yet another opinion is that 78:23 was abrogated by 78:30: “So taste. We will only increase your punishment.” And though some may be tempted to argue that these verses are in reference to grave-sinning Believers, al-Subkī avoids making this opportunistic argument by noting that verses 27 and 28 clarify that the stated punishment is in reference to Unbelievers: “Indeed, they did not expect any reckoning; and denounced Our signs as lies.”⁴²⁵ Interestingly, however, when later analyzing the statement attributed to Ibn Mas‘ūd that there will come a time in which no one will remain in Hell after its inhabitants had remained in it for ‘ages,’ al-Subkī argues that if this report is indeed sound, it refers to grave sinning Muslims. To avoid charges of a contradiction, al-Subkī

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 201.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 201-3.

resorts to making the difficult argument that what is meant here by ‘ages’ is accordingly different from its connotation in the Qur’an.⁴²⁶

As for Q. 6:128 and 11:107-8, al-Subkī argues that although these verses have been widely discussed, the views put forth by Ibn Taymiyyah are simply innovative. Abū ‘Amr al-Dānī’s (d. 444/1052) *Taṣnīf*, for example, notes 27 doctrines regarding these verses, none of which refer to Unbelievers leaving Hell. As for the exceptions (e.g. “except as your Lord pleases”), these refer to either the period before which Hell’s inhabitants will enter Hell or the possibility other forms of punishment, such as the *Zamharīr*, an extremely cold alternative to the extremely hot Hellfire, which is implicitly referenced in the Qur’an (76:13). And while the expression “a gift, uninterrupted” (Q. 11:108) indicates Heaven’s eternality, the expression in Q. 11:107, “Your Lord does indeed what He wants,” refers not to punishment being cut off, but actually a variation and increase in punishment. And if his would-be interlocutor argues that the statement “Your Lord does indeed what He wants” refers to all Divine threats, al-Subkī accepts this, but argues that this does not justify the conclusion that Hell’s inhabitants will be saved. And as for the argument that the Qur’anic expression “a gift, uninterrupted” indicates God’s desire for the ‘People of the Garden’ (*Ahl al-Jannah*) while the expression “Your Lord does indeed what He wants” leaves us uninformed regarding His desire for the ‘People of the Fire’ (*Ahl al-Nār*), al-Subkī argues that this neglects the fact that we *do* know what God desires regarding the latter: eternal damnation. Despite all this, al-Subkī seems to acquiesce, stating that Q. 11:106-8 could be interpreted as indicating that people will eventually escape Hell (and all forms of punishment).

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 205.

Nevertheless, he asserts, such people could only be grave-sinning Believers.⁴²⁷ He presents this opinion without thoroughly addressing Ibn Taymiyyah's argument that the verses before and after indicate that this is in reference to Unbelievers.

In order to solidify his argument, al-Subkī also attempts to discredit the reports employed by Ibn Taymiyyah. This includes the report from 'Abd ibn Ḥamīd's *tafsīr* that quotes 'Umar as stating that the 'People of the Fire' will one day leave Hell after having remained in it "to the extent of (the number of) stones in a mountain." According to al-Subkī, the supposed narrator of this report, al-Ḥasan, generally did not transmit reports from 'Umar in the first place. Furthermore, this report is mentioned in 'Abd ibn Ḥamīd's *tafsīr* in the context of two different discussions, one in which the 'People of the Fire' leave and another in which they simply hope to leave. And if we assume that they will leave, this means either that they will go to the *Zamharīr*, or that it is a reference to grave-sinning Muslims leaving Hell; however, there is no indication of this being a reference to Unbelievers.⁴²⁸ In the final analysis, al-Subkī ultimately fails to seriously address Ibn Taymiyyah's argument that the expression 'People of the Fire' could only refer to Unbelievers.

In explaining why such reports exist in the first place, al-Subkī reminds the reader that they were made by the same *Salaf* who, he notes, were very much afraid of spending an eternity in Hell, as the Mu'tazilites would claim. As for the report attributed to al-Sha'bī that Hell is the fastest of the two abodes (i.e. Heaven and Hell) in being inhabited, and the fastest in becoming desolate, it is to be discredited, al-Subkī argues, since it goes against unanimous consensus. And if it is argued that there is no unanimous consensus

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 203-4.

⁴²⁸ Ibid. 204.

simply because it is not known to exist, while the differences in opinion are known to have existed and continue to exist, the response is that the only thing that can challenge a claim of unanimous consensus is an *explicit* statement that states the contrary, which we do not find. And if it is argued that we know of no report from the Companions that states that Hell is eternal, and that the Successors held different perspectives, we do not find them stating what Ibn Taymiyyah claims. As such, al-Subkī argues, we must assume the ‘best’ regarding them.⁴²⁹

It should come as no surprise then that al-Subkī rejects those arguments that attempt to utilize God’s names as evidence of Hell’s temporality. As for the argument that reward is derived from God’s characteristic of mercy while punishment is simply a creation, and that only the former can therefore be eternal, al-Subkī’s response is that God is also called Stern in Punishment (*Shadīd al-‘Iqāb*), the Omnipotent (*al-Jabbār*), the Subduer (*al-Qahhār*), the One Who Humiliates (*al-Mudhill*), and the Avenger (*al-Muntaqim*). Al-Subkī also attempts to counter Ibn Taymiyyah’s theodicean analysis, as he dismisses the claim that God would not be merciful were He to establish an eternal Hell. According to al-Subkī, Hell’s inhabitants deserve their abode, and God is therefore free to do as He wishes regarding them. Heaven, on the other hand, is the perfection of God’s mercy, and is awarded to those who have truly earned it.⁴³⁰ Thus, we find that unlike Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Subkī seems to stress the association between Divine omnipotence and justice, as opposed to mercy, or more precisely, the kind of mercy that is granted to those who have not proven themselves worthy of it.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 204-5.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 206-7.

As far as al-Subkī is concerned, the presence of evil which necessitates eternal damnation is indeed justifiable. And if it is argued that there is no wisdom in the creation of Hell's inhabitants in the first place (since were they destined to live in Hell eternally), al-Subkī's response is that the wisdom is to be found in the manifestation of God's power, and the esteem of the Believers. God's greatness is demonstrated by His creation of angels, righteous humans, and prophets (such as Muḥammad) on the one hand, and Pharaoh, Hāmān, Abū Jahl, satans from among both humans and *jinn*, and Iblīs on the other. If God had wanted to, He would have made everyone obedient Believers; however, He desired to distinguish one thing from its corrupting opposite, such as Belief and Unbelief, and knowledge and ignorance.⁴³¹

It is significant that according to al-Subkī's vision the afterlife is not a period in which Unbelievers can rectify themselves and receive Divine mercy – a vision based on the Qur'anic declaration, "I shall ordain My mercy for those who are conscious of God (*yattaqūn*)" (7:156). And to those who maintain that true evil-doers (who would repeat their sins if brought back to this life) would finally change following the completion of their punishment in Hell due to God's wisdom and mercy, al-Subkī's response is that this would mean that Iblīs, Pharaoh, Hāmān, and the rest of the Unbelievers would eventually reside in Heaven, where they would spend the rest of eternity. To al-Subkī's mind, this not only goes against the consensus opinion, but it is also an unusual assertion - an assertion, he states, that one would only expect from a non-Muslim. This, he argues, is also inconsistent with Scripture, for the Qur'an describes such Unbelievers as being among those who "have no hope of receiving [God's] grace" (29:23), and for whom the

⁴³¹ Ibid., 207-8.

Fire will “blaze more fiercely” each time it “goes down” (17:97).⁴³² And, al-Subkī notes, since the Prophet indicated that death itself will be slaughtered, it is not as if Unbelievers will be able to escape to a new form of existence.⁴³³

Indeed, as far as al-Subkī is concerned, it is futile for Unbelievers to submit to God only in the afterlife, as the Qur’an states, “No soul will profit from faith if it had none before” (6:158), “God has sealed their hearts” (2:7), and “their hearts have been sealed” (63:3; 9:87). Thus, al-Subkī maintains, these passages point to the impossibility of evil (*sharr*) leaving them and good (*khayr*) entering them.⁴³⁴ This is certainly one of the stronger counterarguments employed by al-Subkī so long as one assumes that such passages refer to *eternal* realities.

Interestingly, despite all this, al-Subkī’s methodology in tackling the issue of Hell’s duration is quite similar to that of Ibn Taymiyyah. Both employ Scripture, reason that is presumably based on Scripture, God’s names, and the views of the *Salaf*. Therefore, their differences have less to do with methodology and sources, and more to do with conflicting deductions. In the final analysis, al-Subkī’s position is no more irrefutable than that of his opponents. Nevertheless, his opponents would find a stronger articulation of the temporal Hell position by way of another contemporary of Ibn Taymiyyah, his disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah.

4. *The Life and Times of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah*

⁴³² Overall, this is similar to al-Ṣan‘ānī’s argument that Hell is not meant to be a place of rectification, and that it is impossible for devils (*shayāṭīn*) and evil demons (*jinn*) to reform themselves, since they are by their very *nature* evil and resistant to God’s oneness. (Al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Raf‘ al-astār*, 122-7)

⁴³³ Al-Subkī, *al-Rasā’il*, 206-7.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

Brilliant teachers tend to produce brilliant students. Accordingly, another prominent theologian in the annals of Ḥanbalism was none other than Ibn Taymiyyah’s student Shams al-Dīn Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr al-Zar‘ī, more commonly known as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, or simply Ibn al-Qayyim. He was born in Damascus in 691/1292 and died there in 751/1350. As indicated by his name, his father was the superintendent (*qayyim*) of the Jawziyyah madrasah,⁴³⁵ which also served as a Damascene Ḥanbalite court of law.⁴³⁶ Under the tutelage of Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim⁴³⁷ secured his place in the history books as a prominent Ḥanbalite theologian and jurisconsult who was well-versed in the Islamic sciences.⁴³⁸ And while Ibn al-Qayyim came to adopt many of his teacher’s doctrines, it would be an egregious mistake to assume that they were carbon copies of one another. Even so, like his teacher, Ibn al-Qayyim often clashed with the Mamluk government, and was imprisoned in the citadel of Damascus from 726/1326 until 728/1328. Furthermore, he too was opposed to the Sufi monist school (*al-Ittiḥādiyyah*) of Ibn al-‘Arabī, which is quite apparent in one of his major theological works, *Qaṣīdah nūniyyah*, a “profession of faith.”⁴³⁹

Also like Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim’s works cover a wide spectrum of topics, including rhetoric, mysticism, juridical methodology (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), politics, and theology.⁴⁴⁰ Works relevant for our purposes include *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā fī ajwibat al-Yahūd wa al-Naṣārā* (Guidance to the Perplexed in Responding to the Jews and

⁴³⁵ See Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Zaghālī, “*Tarjamat mu’allif al-kitāb*”, *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ ilā bilād al-afrāḥ* (Al-Dammām, Saudi Arabia: Ramādī lil-Nashr, 1997), vii-x (I should note that the text itself uses Arabic [rather than Roman] numerals in numbering the pages of the editor’s introductory remarks).

⁴³⁶ See Henri Laoust, “Ibn Qayyim al-Djawziyya,” *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition*, Vol. 3 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), 821-2.

⁴³⁷ By convention, I refer to Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah as Ibn al-Qayyim when omitting the last name.

⁴³⁸ Al-Zaghālī, “*Tarjamat*,” vii.

⁴³⁹ Laoust, “Ibn Qayyim al-Djawziyya,” 821-2.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 822.

Christians), which demonstrates a continuation of his master's polemics against 'People of the Book,' his incomplete *tafsīr*, which was given the title *al-Ḍaw' al-munīr 'alā al-tafsīr* (The Luminous Light on the Exegesis of the Qur'an), and *Ighāthat al-lahfān min maṣāyid al-Shayṭān* (Help to the Worried from Satan's Traps), a treatise on *taṣawwuf*. Also relevant for their references to the nature of the afterlife are *Shifā' al-'alīl* (The Cure for the Ill), *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawā'iq al-mursala 'alā al-Jahmiyyah wa al-Mu'aṭillah* (The Synopsis of the Thunderbolts Sent to the Jahmites and Mu'aṭillah),⁴⁴¹ and perhaps most significantly, *Hādī al-arwāḥ ilā bilād al-afrāḥ* (The Guide of Souls to the Communities of Festivities).

As will become apparent, while Ibn al-Qayyim generally seems to follow the footsteps of his teacher, he goes much further in elucidating an argument for both the non-eternality of Hell and the eventual salvation of all.

5. Analyzing Relevant Aspects of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah's Writings

5.1. Salvation on the Day of Judgment

Like Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim was not an advocate of soteriological religious pluralism. In *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā*, we observe a decisive Ibn al-Qayyim: "To deny the prophethood of Muḥammad is to deny the Lordship of God the Exalted."⁴⁴² An

⁴⁴¹ This is a summation of *al-Ṣawā'iq*, which was written by a certain Muḥammad ibn al-Mawṣilī.

⁴⁴² See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Hidāyat al-ḥayārā fī ajwibat al-Yahūd wa al-Naṣārā*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad al-Ḥājj (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1996), 583ff. Ibn al-Qayyim then goes on to cite what he deems to be erroneous beliefs held by the 'Islamic Philosophers' (*al-falāsīfah*), the Magi (*al-Majūs*), the Christians (*al-Naṣārā*), and Jews (*al-Yahūd*). Interestingly, Ibn al-Qayyim states elsewhere that the Prophet was sent to the 'People of Earth' (*ahl al-ard*), which at the time were composed of only five groups: Jews, Christians, Magians, Sabians (*al-Ṣābi'ūn*), and Polytheists (*al-Mushrikūn*). (Ibid., 235-7)

oft-cited objection to statements such as this is that they contradict Qur’anic passages such as 2:62, which states, “The Believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is good, shall receive their reward from their Lord. They shall have nothing to fear and they shall not grieve.” Ibn al-Qayyim addresses this objection head-on in *al-Daw’*, stating that this refers to Jews, Christians, and Sabians who lived *prior* to the era of the Prophet. He goes on to cite Q. 22:17, which states, “Indeed, the Believers, the Jews, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and the Polytheists (*mushrikūn*) – God shall decide between them on the Day of Resurrection. Surely, God is a witness of everything.” Based on the difference in wording between Q. 2:62 and 22:17 (i.e., the absence of any reference to belief in God and the Last Day in the latter), Ibn al-Qayyim states that 22:17 indicates that, even before the arrival of the Prophet, the Magians and Polytheists were ‘wretched’ groups, while the Jews, Christians, and Sabians were comprised of both ‘felicitous’ and ‘wretched’ individuals. Ibn al-Qayyim then cites a report attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās that states that there are six religions, one of which is for is the All-Merciful, and five of which are for Satan. The implication is that with the coming of the Prophet, Islam became the only acceptable path.⁴⁴³ And given his definition of *Īmān* (traditionally defined as ‘Belief’) as being a combination of both knowledge (*‘ilm*) and deeds (*‘amal*),⁴⁴⁴ Ibn al-Qayyim states that salvation on the Day of Judgment will be granted to those who not only believe, but

⁴⁴³ See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *al-Daw’ al-munīr ‘alā al-tafsīr*, ed. ‘Alī al-Ḥamad al-Muḥammad al-Ṣāliḥ (Dakhnah, Saudi Arabia: Mu’assasat al-Nūr li-al-Ṭibā‘ah wa al-Tajlīd, [Between 1995 and 1999]), 1: 214-7.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3: 119.

who also fulfill their religious obligations and avoid major sins (or at least sincerely repent for their major sins).⁴⁴⁵

What then about those who have never received Muḥammad’s Message? Like Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim is fully cognizant of the fact that certain individuals qualify as special cases. And like his master, Ibn al-Qayyim argues that God only punishes people when they have been warned by a Messenger – even if they had been engaging in acts that are *detestable* (*qabīh*). This is articulated in *al-Daw’*, in which Ibn al-Qayyim refers to Qur’anic statements such as 11:117 (“And your Lord would not have destroyed the cities unjustly, had their inhabitants been righteous”) and 6:131 (“That is because your Lord would not destroy cities on account of their people’s wrongdoing without warning them”). Ibn al-Qayyim also cites Q. 67:8-9: “Every time a new throng is cast into [Hell], its keepers ask them: ‘Has no warner come to you?’ They will say: ‘Yes indeed; a warner came to us but we disbelieved and said: ‘God did not send down anything.’” As Ibn al-Qayyim observes, those cast into Hell will only be taken to task for and questioned about their response to their Messenger’s warning, as opposed to their faulty use of the intellect.⁴⁴⁶ Thus, Ibn al-Qayyim’s standard for salvation is, like that of Ibn Taymiyyah, relatively strict in comparison to that of either al-Ghazālī or Ibn al-‘Arabī since exposure to the Message, as opposed to finding the Message convincing, appears to be the only prerequisite for one who is *compos mentis* to be held accountable for not subscribing to the Message.

Ibn al-Qayyim was certainly aware of the strictness of his standard and its implications. It is noteworthy, then, that in *Ighāthat al-lahfān*, he describes most of the

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 3: 513-4.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 521.

‘people of Earth’ as being ‘idol-worshippers’ (*kānū ya ‘budūn al-aṣnām*). This, he argues, helps to explain the Prophet’s statement that nine hundred ninety-nine people out of every one thousand will be among the ‘People of the Fire,’ as well as the following Qur’anic statements: “Most people insist on being ungrateful” (17:89), “Were you to obey most people on earth, they would lead you away from the path of God” (6:116), “Even if you desire it, most people will not believe” (12:103), and “We have not found among most of [the people of the cities to whom Messengers were sent] any who honors a covenant; but We found most of them evildoers” (7:102).⁴⁴⁷ Here we find a sharp contrast with al-Ghazālī: While Ibn al-Qayyim does not employ the additional hadiths and hermeneutic strategies utilized by al-Ghazālī to show that most are Heaven-bound, al-Ghazālī never explains how his conclusion in *Fayṣal al-tafriqah* is consistent with the Qur’anic verses cited by Ibn al-Qayyim.

5.2. *Rearticulating the Fate of Hell’s Inhabitants*

Despite the above, Ibn al-Qayyim, like Ibn Taymiyyah, conceives of God’s mercy as being inclusive of Hell’s inhabitants. Ibn al-Qayyim, however, goes much further than his teacher in making a case for the eventual salvation of all. This argument, which is fully laid out in his works *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ*⁴⁴⁸ and *Shifā’ al-‘alīl*,⁴⁴⁹ appears to be a unique

⁴⁴⁷ See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Ighāthat al-lahfān min maṣāyid al-Shayṭān*, ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Kīlānī (Egypt: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1961), 221.

⁴⁴⁸ See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ ilā bilād al-afrāḥ*, ed. Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Zaghālī (Al-Dammām, Saudi Arabia: Ramādī lil-Nashr, 1997), 569-626.

⁴⁴⁹ See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Shifā’ al-‘alīl*, ed. M. A. al-Shalabī (Jeddah: Maktabat al-Sawādī li-l-Tawzī’, 1991), 2:223-55.

contribution by Ibn al-Qayyim. As such, what follows is a summary and analysis of that discussion.

By focusing on the lengthier discussion in *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ*, we find that Ibn al-Qayyim addresses five relevant topics: 1. The Eternality of Heaven; 2. The Eternality or Temporality of both Heaven and Hell; 3. The Different Viewpoints Regarding Hell's Eternality; 4. The Fate of Hell's Inhabitants;⁴⁵⁰ and 5. The Distinction between the Eternality of Heaven and the Eternality of Hell. And while significant portions of his discussion are taken from Ibn Taymiyyah's *al-Radd* (e.g. Ibn al-Qayyim simply reproduces Ibn Taymiyyah's discussion when addressing the second topic, The Eternality or Temporality of Heaven and Hell), Ibn al-Qayyim's additions lead the reader to assume that he was familiar with al-Subkī's *al-I'tibār*, even though he does not refer to it by name. Perhaps Ibn al-Qayyim's most noticeable contribution to the temporal Hell argument is his added emphasis on the link between Divine mercy and omnipotence, his reflections on the Divine names, and his analysis of the word *abad*.

Ibn al-Qayyim begins by solidifying the case for an eternal Heaven, as he attempts to further support the arguments put forth by Ibn Taymiyyah, and to anticipate and effectively respond to criticisms by would-be interlocutors, particularly those attempting to downplay the distinction between Heaven and Hell's duration. Accordingly, Ibn al-Qayyim does what his teacher does not adequately do in *al-Radd*, and that is survey the various viewpoints among the *Salaf* regarding the interpretation of the expression "except as your Lord pleases" in Q. 11:108. (Ibn Taymiyyah essentially limits his analysis to other parts of this verse, particularly the concluding phrase, "a gift,

⁴⁵⁰ In Ibn al-Qayyim's discussion, the order of topics addressed is different in that the third topic, i.e. The Different Viewpoints Regarding Hell's Eternality, is listed before the fourth topic, The Fate of Hell's Inhabitants.

uninterrupted”). One view is that it refers to those who will leave Hell and enter Heaven, thus signifying the period of time not spent in the latter. But since this would only pertain to a specific group, Ibn al-Qayyim states that the more sound opinion is that the verse refers to all of Heaven’s inhabitants, since there would have been a time before which all entered Heaven. This could include this life, the period between death and resurrection (i.e. the *barzakh*), the period of judgment, and the crossing of the Bridge (*al-Ṣirāt*). According to others, the exception is merely theoretical, and is essentially a declaration that everything ultimately depends on God’s will. For yet others, however, the exception refers to God’s desire to extend life in Heaven for a period greater than the time in which “the heavens and the earth shall endure.” And this appears to be confirmed by the closing statement, “a gift, uninterrupted.” Meanwhile, others maintained that the issue might have nothing to do with time. As such, the exception refers to those individuals whom God prevents from entering Heaven. As for the expression “as long as the heavens and the earth shall endure,” according to some, this is a reference to the heavens and earth of *Heaven*, which will last eternally.⁴⁵¹

Having stated these various interpretations, Ibn al-Qayyim argues that while Q. 11:108 (particularly its exception) may be ambiguous (*mutashābih*), the expression “a gift, uninterrupted” is clear (*muḥkam*). And lest anyone doubt the eternity of life in Heaven, Ibn al-Qayyim notes that the Qur’an elsewhere affirms it in several places. For example, Q. 44:56 states: “They [the righteous] do not taste death therein [in Heaven], except for the first death[.]” Such statements are only affirmed in the hadith literature. For example, in an authentic hadith, the Prophet is quoted as saying, “Whoever enters Heaven will be pleased, will not be in despair, will remain (in it), and will not die.” Ibn

⁴⁵¹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah. *Hādī al-arwāḥ*, 569-72.

al-Qayyim also cites the familiar hadith of the slaughtering of death in the form of a spotted ram.⁴⁵²

Having established the eternity of Heaven, Ibn al-Qayyim proceeds to restate Ibn Taymiyyah's discussion on the three general views regarding the duration of Heaven and Hell.⁴⁵³ While Ibn al-Qayyim does restate some of what his master taught, it is clear that he had meditated on those teachings, as he elaborates on Ibn Taymiyyah's discussion in order to compensate for the perceived shortcomings of the latter's analysis. In reference to those who advocate Hell's eternity, Ibn al-Qayyim states that they utilize six arguments, and not four as Ibn Taymiyyah would have it. Ibn al-Qayyim adds the following two arguments, both of which demonstrate al-Subkī's influence: First, it is the unambiguous belief of both the *Salaf* and Sunnis (*Ahl al-Sunnah*) that both Heaven and Hell are created, that both will never cease to exist, and that it is only the 'people of innovation' (*ahl al-bid'ah*) who claim that either abode will one day perish.⁴⁵⁴ Second, Reason dictates it, for the insolent Unbelievers are the ones who, if given the opportunity, would simply return to their evil ways after having been punished. This is known by way of Q. 6:27-8:⁴⁵⁵

And if only you could see when [the Unbelievers] are stationed before the Fire and thus they say: "Would that we could be brought back so that we would not denounce the Revelations of our Lord, but would be part of the Believers." Indeed, what they used to conceal before will become clear to them; and were they returned [to life], they would surely go back to that which they were forbidden from. They are indeed liars.

⁴⁵² Ibid., 572-3.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 573-9.

⁴⁵⁴ There is a subtle difference between this argument and the argument that there was unanimous consensus among the *Salaf* regarding Hell's eternity – an argument which Ibn al-Qayyim here lists separately.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 591-3.

Thus, the argument goes, it would be illogical, or contrary to Reason, for God to grant the same reward to both the Righteous (*al-abrār*) and the Insolent (*al-fujjār*).

In discussing the responses to the above arguments, Ibn al-Qayyim restates Ibn Taymiyyah's responses and makes the following addition: If one seeks to argue for an eternal Hell on the basis of Reason, he/she must surely recognize its limitations. While Reason may lead one to the conclusion that there is reward and punishment, the details can only be known by way of Revelation. And when it comes to what Revelation has to say about the fate of Unbelievers, opinions vary. Hence, Ibn al-Qayyim asserts, the matter is far from resolved.⁴⁵⁶

That Ibn al-Qayyim seeks to engage in a more thorough analysis than does his teacher is quite apparent in his survey of the various viewpoints regarding the fate of Hell's inhabitants. Ibn al-Qayyim identifies seven (as opposed to Ibn Taymiyyah's three) doctrines in circulation regarding the fate of Hell's inhabitants:⁴⁵⁷

1. *Whoever* enters Hell will *never* leave it. This view is attributed to both the Khārijites and the Mu'tazilites.⁴⁵⁸

2. The inhabitants of Hell will be punished until their natures change and they become fire-like. As such, they will begin to feel pleasure from the Fire since it will be in conformity with their very nature. Ibn al-Qayyim ascribes this view to "Imām al-*Ittiḥādiyyah*" Ibn al-'Arabī, as presented in *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*. Ibn al-Qayyim presents Ibn 'Arabī's main justification for maintaining the termination of punishment as stemming from the notion that while God adheres to His promise (*wa'd*), such is not necessarily the case with His threat (*wa'id*). Supporting this last idea, which Ibn al-Qayyim elsewhere

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 593-6.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 579.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 579.

presents as his own, is the fact that while the Qur'an nowhere explicitly states that God will always adhere to His threats, such is not the case with regard to His promises. For example, Q. 14:47 states: "Do not think, then, that God will break His promise to His messengers. God is truly mighty and capable of retribution." On the other hand, some Qur'anic verses seem to imply that God will actually avoid adhering to at least some of His threats. For example, Q. 46:16 states: "Those from whom We accept the best of what they do and overlook their evil deeds shall be reckoned among the companions of Paradise, this being the promise of the truth which they were promised." Ibn al-Qayyim goes on to cite one of Ibn al-'Arabī's poems where he states that Hell "is called a chastisement (*'adhāb*) due to the sweetness (*'udhūbah*) of its food."⁴⁵⁹

Despite his agreement with Ibn al-'Arabī on the non-eternality of punishment, Ibn al-Qayyim declares his particular articulation to be an extreme position, and he contrasts it with the Mu'tazilite view that none of Hell's inhabitants will be saved from punishment. In concluding, Ibn al-Qayyim declares both views to be inconsistent with the Prophet's Message.⁴⁶⁰

3. Hell's inhabitants will be punished for a set time (*waqt maḥdūd*), and then will leave it and enter Heaven, while another group of people will take their place in Hell. This doctrine is said to have been held by the Jews who were in contact with Muḥammad, and is a doctrine that the Qur'an rejects:⁴⁶¹

And they [the Jews] say: "The Fire will only touch us for a few days (*ayyāman ma'dūdah*)." Say: "Have you received a pledge from God, and God does not revoke His pledge, or are you imputing to God what you do not know?" Indeed, whoever commits a sin and his sin takes complete hold of him is one of the people of the Fire, wherein they will dwell (*hum fīhā khālidūn*). (2:80-1)

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 579-80; cf. Ibn al-'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, 94.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah. *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ*, 580.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 580.

Have you not considered those who have received a portion of the Book? Upon being called to let the Book of God decide between them, some of them turn their backs, refusing to pay attention. That is because they say: “The Fire will only touch us for a few days (*ayyāman ma‘dūdāt*).” They have been deluded in their religion by their lies. (3:23-4)

Ibn al-Qayyim states that this is the doctrine of the Jews, the “enemies of God,” and is erroneous according to the Qur’an, the Sunnah, the unanimous consensus of the Companions, the Successors, and the leaders of Islam. In making the case against the few-days-in-Hell position, Ibn al-Qayyim goes on to cite various Qur’anic passages, including the following: a. “[The Evildoers] will not come (*wa mā hum bi-khārijīn*) out of the Fire.” (2:167); b. “Every time [the Unbelievers] want, in their gloom, to get out of it, they are brought back into it.” (22:22); c. “[The Unbelievers] will not be finished off and die, nor will be its punishment be lightened for them.” (35:36); and d. “[Those who have denied Our Revelations] shall not enter Paradise until the camel passes through the eye of the needle. Thus We punish the wicked sinners.” (7:40) Ibn al-Qayyim concludes by declaring this to be the most eloquent indication of “the impossibility of their entering Heaven.”⁴⁶² (As we shall see, Ibn al-Qayyim does not seem to consider such passages reflections of *eternal* realities).

4. Hell’s inhabitants will leave Hell, which will then continue to exist with no one remaining in it to be punished. Ibn al-Qayyim states that this view was related by (*hakāhu*) Ibn Taymiyyah. Ibn al-Qayyim concludes by simply stating that the Qur’an and Sunnah “refute this doctrine.”⁴⁶³

5. Hell will cease to exist since it is an *accident* (*ḥādithah*) that previously did not exist – the doctrine that Jahm ibn Ṣafwān and his followers are said to have adopted.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 581.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 581.

Similar to Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim states that there is no reason why Hell (or Heaven) should necessarily cease to exist, even if it is an *accident* which was originated at a certain point in time.⁴⁶⁴

6. Since eternal *accidents* are impossible, the movements of Hell's inhabitants would eventually cease, leaving them as inanimate bodies which neither move nor feel pain – the doctrine that is said to have been adopted by the Mu'tazilite leader Abū al-Hudhayl.⁴⁶⁵ Ibn al-Qayyim is clearly opposed to this view as well.

7. God will eventually cause Hell and its punishment to cease to exist. Ibn al-Qayyim here quotes Ibn Taymiyyah, who states that this was the doctrine was transmitted on the authority of 'Umar, Ibn Mas'ūd, Abū Hurayrah, Abū Sa'īd, and others. Ibn al-Qayyim goes on to cite the same reports noted by Ibn Taymiyyah regarding this.⁴⁶⁶

Conspicuously absent from this list of doctrines is the majority opinion of an eternal Hell for Unbelievers. In any case, Ibn al-Qayyim goes on to expand on the last viewpoint. He states, for example, that the exception in Q. 6:128 (in reference to the stay in Hell) appears to refer to salvation from eternal damnation, for we find a confession of sins in the same verse: “[They] will say: ‘Lord, we have profited much from each other and we have attained the term that you assigned for us.’” Similar indications may be found in Q. 28:75 (“Then they knew that the truth is God’s”), and Q. 67:10-1 (“And they will also say: ‘Had we listened or reasoned, we would not be among the Companions of the Fire. So they will confess their sin. Away, then, with the Companions of the Fire!’”). Thus, argues Ibn al-Qayyim, the exception refers to Unbelievers, and possibly also disobedient Muslims. As for the opinion that it refers only to the latter, Ibn al-Qayyim

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 581.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 581.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 582-6.

claims that this has no basis, and that when those who held this position recognized its weakness, they claimed that the exception refers to either the time period not spent in Hell or alternative forms of punishment, such as *al-Zamharīr*. To my mind, one difficulty in accepting Ibn al-Qayyim's argument here is that this would mean that, despite the similarity in wording, the exception in a verse like Q. 11:107 would be *significantly* different from the exception in the very next verse.

At any rate, that Ibn al-Qayyim firmly believed in an eternal Heaven and a non-eternal Hell is made most evident in the final section of his discussion, and it is here where Ibn al-Qayyim's unique contributions are most observable. Ibn al-Qayyim begins by claiming that the distinction between the eternity of Heaven and that of Hell may be affirmed on the basis of both Revelation (*al-Shar'*) and Reason (*al-'aql*).⁴⁶⁷ He then goes on to present his most elaborate argument for a non-eternal Hell, as he puts forth twenty-five arguments – a number of which seem to overlap – in order to support this distinction. As these arguments give us the best window into Ibn al-Qayyim's step-by-step thinking, and may very well be the most elaborate medieval elucidation of the eternal Heaven-temporal Hell position, what follows is a summary:

The first two arguments highlight the apparent differences between Scripture's depiction of the duration of reward in Heaven and that of punishment in Hell. According to Ibn al-Qayyim, God clearly indicates that the 'People of the Garden' (*Ahl al-Jannah*) will have a continuous, never-ending reward. As for the 'People of the Fire' (*Ahl al-Nār*), all we know is that, for a time, they will remain in Hell, they will not leave it, they will not die in it, they will be imprisoned in it, and that the punishment in Hell is necessary for them. Thus, the difference between the two descriptions is apparent (*Zāhir*). Moreover, in

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 597.

at least three Qur'anic verses, God indicates that Hell is temporal: 6:128, 11:107, and 78:23. And this is made especially apparent by the fact that, in contrast, the Qur'an *explicitly* mentions the eternity of Heaven and the reward in it.⁴⁶⁸

The third and fourth arguments, as well as the nineteenth and twentieth arguments, look to precedents of God admitting into Heaven individuals who may not have proven themselves worthy of Heaven. According to Ibn al-Qayyim, Scripture establishes that there will be people who have never done any good who will be taken out of the punishment in Hell and then placed in Heaven. (On the other hand, God will never place in Hell people who have never done any evil. His punishment is only for those who disobey Him). Scripture also establishes that there will be another creation made specifically to live in Heaven, which is not the case for Hell. And while it is true that there is a hadith in *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* which states that God will make another creation for Hell, it was obvious to al-Bukhārī himself that the hadith was reported erroneously. This is evidenced by the fact that the hadith is in a chapter for which, as a corrective, al-Bukhārī writes the following as the chapter heading: "As for Heaven, God will create for it another creation."⁴⁶⁹

Arguments five through seven, ten through sixteen, eighteen, twenty-one, and twenty-five draw a connection between a non-eternal Hell and Divine mercy and wisdom. Heaven is derived from God's mercy and pleasure, argues Ibn al-Qayyim, while Hell is derived from God's wrath (*ghaḍab*) and discontent. Moreover, it is mercy, and not wrath, that may be ascribed to God's essence and objectives, and so mercy must take precedence. And since it has been established that God's mercy will outstrip His wrath,

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 597.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 598, 615-8.

as stated in a famous hadith found in the authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) collections, Heaven should take precedence over Hell, and it would be owing to God’s unlimited pleasure (*riḍā*) if Hell’s inhabitants eventually received the same reward as Heaven’s inhabitants. Indeed, that which was created by God due to His wrath is no competition for what was created by the Merciful One (*al-Raḥmān*) due to His mercy.⁴⁷⁰ (This argument of looking to the very nature of Heaven and Hell to argue for the former’s eternality is also presented in *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawā’iq*).⁴⁷¹ Forgiveness (*al-‘afw*), Ibn al-Qayyim declares, is more beloved to God than vengeance (*al-intiqām*), mercy (*al-rahmah*) is more beloved to Him than punishment (*al-‘uqūbah*), and kindness (*al-faḍl*) is more beloved to Him than justice (*al-‘adl*).⁴⁷²

Moreover, Ibn al-Qayyim notes, God indicates that His mercy encompasses *everything*. After all, God created Unbelievers by His mercy, provided them with sustenance and forgave them by His mercy, sent them messengers by His mercy, and has punished them (and will punish them) by His mercy. It is for this reason that children of the Unbelievers have received from His mercy, for whoever sees them has mercy on them, and it is prohibited to kill them. Thus, God’s mercy outstripping His wrath when it comes to Unbelievers is something that has already been established in this life as a precedent.⁴⁷³ Moreover, according to a Divine report (*athar ilāhī*), God states that He does not withhold His mercy from those who disobey Him: if they repent, He forgives them, and if they do not, He functions as their physician, afflicting them with misfortunes in order to purify them. Thus, in that light, “the Fire is the greatest medication” (!). As

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 598-9.

⁴⁷¹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawā’iq al-mursalāh ‘alā al-Jahmiyyah wa al-Mu‘aṭṭillah*, ed. Sayyid Ibrāhīm (Cairo: 1992), 255-8.

⁴⁷² Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah. *Hādī al-arwāḥ*, 606-7.

⁴⁷³ Ibid., 610-3.

such, He will make the Fire cool and safe for Hell's inhabitants once they humble themselves, praise God, and declare that it is God's pleasure that they desire.⁴⁷⁴

In support of this assertion are reports such as the hadith found in Ahmad ibn Hanbal's *Musnad* which describes the situation on the Day of Judgment of four types of people: a deaf man who hears nothing, a feebleminded man, a senile man, and a man who died in a state of debility. Each will claim to have had some sort of impediment that prevented them from submitting to Islam. God will then test them by commanding them to enter the Fire. Those who obey will be kept cool and secure. And according to a similar hadith, those who disobey will be dragged into the Fire (and will presumably not be kept cool and secure). Thus, what these reports show is that God's grace was bestowed upon those who readily submitted to their punishment when they came to know that it would please God, that it would be in compliance with His command, and that it would allow for God's love for them.⁴⁷⁵

Another relevant hadith states that the cry of two of Hell's inhabitants will intensify, so God will have them both taken out (from Hell), and will inquire as to what caused their cry to intensify. Both will respond that it was so that God may have mercy upon them. God will respond by stating that, owing to His mercy, both will be given the freedom to submit themselves (to God) while in Hell. So one will submit himself, and God will consequently make the Fire cool and secure for him. The other, however, will remain standing. God will inquire as to why he did not submit himself, and he will respond with a request to be spared of the Fire after having suffered in its torment. God

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 603-7, 610-1.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 607-8.

will grant him his request, and both men will be allowed into Heaven, owing (once again) to God's mercy.⁴⁷⁶

Ibn al-Qayyim also builds on Ibn Taymiyyah's distinction between God's names and His actions. While it is true that God is described as being strict in punishment (*Shadīd al-'Iqāb*) and the Avenger (*al-Muntaqim*), He is never once described as either the Punisher (*al-Mu'āqib*) or the Torturer (*al-Mu'adhhib*).⁴⁷⁷ And while God, by His very essence, may avenge evils, once evil ceases to exist, torture will cease to exist. On the other hand, He is named the All-Forgiving (*al-Ghafūr*) and the Merciful (*al-Raḥīm*). And this distinction may be observed in the Qur'an itself, as in the case of the following verses: "Tell My servants that I am truly the All-Forgiving, the Merciful. And that My punishment is truly the painful punishment" (15:49-50); "Know that God is severe in punishment and that God is all-forgiving, merciful" (5:98); and, "Thereupon your Lord made it known that He would send against them one who would inflict on them the worst punishment until the Day of Resurrection. Your Lord is quick in retribution, and He is indeed all-forgiving, merciful" (7:167).⁴⁷⁸

Accordingly, that which is evil (*sharr*) describes not God's names, but His punishments, which result from Divine wisdom, and which cease once they become futile. For God is perfect and eternal, and consistently does that which is good (*ma'rūf*). According to the Prophet himself, the one most knowledgeable of God and His names and attributes, "Evil (*al-Sharr*) is not (to be ascribed) to [God]."⁴⁷⁹ And since none of His names describe Him as a punisher or as being wrathful, God need not punish or be

⁴⁷⁶ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ*, 608. Ibn al-Qayyim also cites a related report by al-Awzā'ī.

⁴⁷⁷ It is worth noting that some of the names typically ascribed to God in the well-known 'Ninety-Nine Names' list include names not found in the Qur'an, such as al-Ḍārr (the Harmer).

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 609.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 609-10.

wrathful continually. Ibn Qayyim concludes with the following: “So contemplate this signification with the contemplation of a scholar, pertaining to the domain of God’s names and attributes, and a gate from among the gates that lead to knowing and loving Him will open for you.”⁴⁸⁰

Thus, while al-Subkī finds additional support for the eternity of Hell in God being named Stern in Punishment (*Shadīd al-‘Iqāb*) and the Avenger (*al-Muntaqim*), Ibn al-Qayyim finds additional proofs for Hell’s non-eternity in God not being named the Torturer (*al-Mu‘adhib*). But if we assume that God will indeed terminate His punishment, how could He continue to be considered Stern in Punishment and the Avenger? This is one argument that Ibn al-Qayyim does not fully develop. In any case, one apparent problem with the notion that God’s names must reflect His eternal nature is the fact that God is also called the Bringer of Death (*al-mumīt*), and both Ibn al-Qayyim and al-Subkī maintain that death will no longer exist in the afterlife.

The eighth and ninth arguments address the purpose of punishment. According to Ibn al-Qayyim, Hell was created for the purpose of creating fear among the Believers, and purifying evildoers and criminals. Thus, Hell serves the purpose of cleansing the soul of the wickedness (*khath*) acquired in this world – wickedness that was not already cleansed (in this world) by way of sincere repentance, good deeds, and misfortunes. Accordingly, when a soul that is in Hell becomes completely cleansed, it is taken out of Hell. This is because the soul that becomes purified returns to the natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) established for it by God – a natural disposition that inclines to the Unity of God (*Tawḥīd*). And it is only because of the alterations to that natural disposition that most

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 609. This same discussion may be found elsewhere in Ibn al-Qayyim’s discussion on the names of God. See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, Eds. Y. A. Bidwī and A. A. al-Shawwā (Damascus: Dār Ibn Kathīr; Beirut: Dār al-Kalim al-Ṭayyib, 1997).

souls are destined for Hell – despite the fact that God sent His messengers and revealed His books in order to remind His servants of their natural disposition. In any case, the extent to which such alterations occur for each soul varies and can only be measured by God. Thus, when such alterations are rectified, the cause for punishment ceases to exist, for God has no interest (*gharaḍ*) in punishing His servant for no reason, as indicated by Q. 4:147, which states: “Why should God punish you, if you are thankful and faithful? God Himself is thankful, all-knowing.”⁴⁸¹ To the mind of Ibn al-Qayyim, the logic here could very well apply to the afterlife, and not simply this life. Indeed, God is above receiving any form of benefit from punishing His servants, and He does not simply punish for the sake of amusement. Punishments are therefore means and not ends. Once the ends have been obtained, the punishments become futile.⁴⁸² (This particular line of reasoning regarding the futility of eternal punishment is also found in *Mukhtaṣar al-Ṣawā’iq*).⁴⁸³

As such, Unbelief (*Kufr*) and associating partners with God (*Shirk*) necessitate a lasting (though ultimately temporal) punishment so long as they are present among people. This is something God indicates by way of the following Qur’anic expressions: “And were [Unbelievers] returned [to life], they would surely go back to that which they were forbidden from” (6:28); “And he who is blind in this world will be blind in the Hereafter and will stray even more from the right way” (17:72); and “If God knew of any good in them, He would have made them hear; and had He made them hear, they would still have turned away defiantly” (8:23). Therefore, those who do leave Hell (while Hell is still in existence) are those who deserve mercy and who have at least an atom’s weight

⁴⁸¹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ*, 599-600.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 603.

⁴⁸³ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Mukhtaṣar al-ṣawā’iq*, 252.

of good, as noted in an authentic hadith. As for those who remain in Hell, if we consider the natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) established in humans by God, and the likelihood that punishment in Hell would eventually rectify all, once Hell’s purification is complete, there will be no need for further punishment. Accordingly, the punishment in Hell and the pain accompanying it is actually a mercy from God – as is the case with the pain experienced in the punishments of this life (such as the *ḥudūd*). Indeed, the medication for a harsh disease may be incredibly tiresome, and even the most compassionate of physicians will resort to cauterizing with fire in order to remove a bad substance.⁴⁸⁴ Thus, intense pain may accompany rectification. Thus, we find that in God’s rewards and punishments, there is mercy, perfection, and justice.⁴⁸⁵

In his seventeenth argument, Ibn al-Qayyim examines Scriptural depictions of the duration of punishment in Hell. God, he notes, indicates that the punishment (in the afterlife) will be the punishment of an enduring ‘day’ (*yawm muqīm*), of a great ‘day’ (*yawm ‘aẓīm*), and of a painful ‘day’ (*yawm alīm*).⁴⁸⁶ However, with regard to the felicity (in the afterlife), God does not indicate that it is the felicity of a ‘day’ (nor is to be found in just one particular place). As such, the time spent in punishment will not be eternal, but rather, in accordance with the magnitude of the sins committed in this life of limited duration.⁴⁸⁷ Indeed, Ibn al-Qayyim states elsewhere, if one were to tarry in Hell for ‘ages’ (*aḥqāban*), and if according to one hadith, one ‘age’ (*ḥuqb*) is as long as fifty thousand

⁴⁸⁴ This is surely a fitting analogy for the author of *al-Ṭibb al-nabawī*. Incidentally, Ibn al-Qayyim has more to say of spiritual treatments in his treatise *al-Dā’ wa al-dawā’*. See Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *al-Dā’ wa al-dawā’*, ed. ‘Alī ibn Ḥasan ibn ‘Alī ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Ḥalabī al-Atharī (Riyadh: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1996).

⁴⁸⁵ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ*, 600-3.

⁴⁸⁶ The word translated as “day,” *yawm*, need not be a 24-hour day.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 613-4.

years, it would be impossible for any arrogance, polytheism, or filth to remain after such long periods of punishment.⁴⁸⁸

Incidentally, in *Shifā' al-'alīl*, Ibn al-Qayyim also argues that Qur'anic verses that refer to Hell as lasting 'forever' (*abadan*) need not be interpreted so as to mean 'without end.' Moreover, he argues, the word often used to denote 'eternality,' *al-ta'bīd*, may simply denote the duration of this world. And lest one deduces from this that neither Heaven nor Hell are eternal, he immediately follows this observation with the argument that we can trust that Heaven will indeed last forever, without interruption, because of Qur'anic statements such as those found in 11:108, 38:54, and 84:25, which explicitly describe Heaven's bounty as being 'uninterrupted,' or 'without end.' And as for those verses that state that Hell's inhabitants will never leave it (e.g. 2:168, 4:56, 15:48, 35:36, and 32:20), none of these indicate that Hell will never cease to exist.⁴⁸⁹

And, as Ibn al-Qayyim notes in *Hādī al-arwāh*, statements like Q. 78:23 are all threats for which punishment may be terminated if the basis for that punishment ceases to exist, as is the case of the one who adopts belief in the Unity of God. Moreover, God's mercy is great enough to bring hope to the Hell-bound Unbeliever. As one famous hadith notes, God created Mercy as one hundred units of mercy, and the Unbeliever who comes to learn of the extent of God's mercy, will never lose hope of one day entering Heaven.⁴⁹⁰

Arguments twenty-two through twenty-four highlight the fact that God may terminate punishments as He sees fit. God imposes permanence (*al-khulūd*) of punishment, and its continuity (*al-ta'bīd*), for those who disobey Him by committing a major sin. And that does not negate the possibility that God will at some point end the

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 615-7.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Shifā' al-'alīl*, 2:228-9.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Hādī al-arwāh*, 620-1.

punishment. For example, well known is Q. 4:93, which states: “And he who kills a Believer intentionally will, as punishment, be thrown into Hell, dwelling in it (*khālidan fihā*); and God will be angry with him, curse him, and prepare for him a dreadful punishment.” Also well known is the hadith which states that whoever kills him or herself using a piece of iron will continually kill him or herself with that piece of iron while in Hell, remaining in it ‘continuously’ (*abadan*). Moreover, there is also the hadith which states that whoever kills him or herself will be barred from entering Heaven. Even more serious is the statement found in Q. 72:23: “He who disobeys God and His Messenger, for him the Fire of Hell is in store. Therein they shall dwell ‘continuously’ (*khālidīna fihā ’abadan*).”⁴⁹¹

If God explicitly indicates that punishment in Hell is eternal, without end, then that would be considered a threat (*wa’id*). And while God does not break His promise (*wa’d*), were He to break His threat, that, Ibn al-Qayyim states, would be a praiseworthy act of forgiveness and generosity, according to *Ahl al-Sunnah* (Sunnis). For while it is God’s right to demand full recompense, it is also the right of the Most Generous (*al-Karīm*) to overlook His rights. And while God explicitly states in more than one place that He does not break His promises, not once does He state the same regarding His threats. As 11:107 explicitly indicates, “Your Lord does indeed what He wants” – a statement that even Companions (*al-Ṣaḥābah*) considered to be applicable to all threats in the Qur’an.⁴⁹²

Otherwise, “Were God to take mankind to task for their wrongdoing, He would not leave upon it a single creature[.]” (16:61), and “Were God to take people to task for

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 620.

⁴⁹² Ibid., 621-3.

what they have earned, He would not have left upon the face of the earth a single creature that crawls[.]” (35:45). Thus, with all the mercy we find in this life, what then should we expect of the afterlife when the portion of mercy will be multiplied ninety-nine times (as noted in an authentic hadith), and when God’s mercy will outstrip His wrath?⁴⁹³

Ibn al-Qayyim concludes his discussion by admitting to his readers that “perhaps” they will not find this perspective in any other work.⁴⁹⁴ He goes on to state that if anyone were to inquire as to what his own views were on this serious matter, he would respond with the Qur’anic statement, “Your Lord does indeed what He wants” (11:107). He would also respond with a report attributed to ‘Alī ibn Abī Tālib, which states that when he was mentioning the entrance of the ‘People of the Garden’ (*Ahl al-Jannah*) into Heaven, and the ‘People of the Fire’ (*Ahl al-Nār*) into the Fire, and their respective experiences, he stated, “Then after that, God will do what He pleases.”⁴⁹⁵ Ibn al-Qayyim concludes by making the traditional statement of humility, that whatever was correct in his book is from God, and whatever is incorrect is from either him or the devil, and that, ultimately, God knows best.

Despite these final qualifications, there seems to be little doubt that Ibn al-Qayyim, at the very least, leaned towards a non-eternal Hell, and perhaps even more so than Ibn Taymiyyah.

6. *Between Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah*

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 623-5.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 626.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 626.

Despite their differences, both Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim follow a similar methodology of employing a combination of Scriptural statements and views of the *Salaf*. As far as their conclusions are concerned, both are in agreement that Islam in its pure, unadulterated form is the only path to salvation upon death. Nevertheless, both make it clear that sane adults can only be punished if they had received the Message of Islam. As noted, they do not, however, go to the extent of al-Ghazālī in discussing what it means to receive the Message. Nevertheless, at least in the case of Ibn Taymiyyah, we find an account of the manner in which individuals who did not receive the Message in this life will be tested on the Last Day.

What is perhaps most interesting about the texts discussed here is the discourse regarding the fate of Hell’s inhabitants. As was the case with al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-‘Arabī, both emphasize the role of God’s mercy (*rahmah*) in the afterlife. However, unlike al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-‘Arabī, the presence of this mercy is seen as being manifested quite differently. The emphasis appears to be less on salvation upon death, but more upon salvation after the passing of ‘ages.’ And even though Ibn al-Qayyim dismisses Ibn al-‘Arabī’s vision of Hell becoming a place of felicity, his conclusion is seemingly more radical: That all – Pharaoh, the people of Thamūd, and Abū Lahab⁴⁹⁶ – will eventually inhabit Heaven after becoming purified. This may explain why both Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim seem to go greater lengths and exert a considerable amount of effort to demonstrate that their position does not go against unanimous consensus.

⁴⁹⁶ My hesitancy to include Satan here is due to a passage by Ibn al-Qayyim in *Shifā’ al-‘alīl* where he describes angels as beings who only commit good, satans (*al-shayāṭīn*) as beings who only commit evil, and humans as beings who do both. (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Shifā’ al-‘alīl*, 207). Thus, if Ibn al-Qayyim considered satans as being ontologically evil, one can only wonder if he believed that they would persist in Hell, cease to exist, or actually change and enter Heaven.

Incidentally, it is noteworthy that Ibn al-Qayyim seems to follow the path taken by Ibn al-‘Arabī in referring to God’s names as a support for the manifestation of mercy to all of humanity. Also noteworthy is Ibn al-Qayyim’s association of Divine mercy with Divine omnipotence and the idea that “God does as He pleases.” This association is employed to argue that God need not be bound by “justice,” or at least the kind of justice maintained by Rationalists such as the Mu‘tazilites.

As for the argument for a non-eternal Hell, there can be no doubt that Ibn al-Qayyim’s version of the argument is much more thorough and nuanced than that presented by Ibn Taymiyyah, despite the overlap between the two. Accordingly, Binyamin Abrahamov makes the insightful observation that Ibn al-Qayyim’s argument for a non-eternal Hell is “very convincing, though not irrefutable.”⁴⁹⁷ And while Ibn al-Qayyim represents one contemporary of Ibn Taymiyyah who supported and further developed the argument for a non-eternal Hell, the opposite is true of another contemporary of Ibn Taymiyyah, Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī.

In any case, the controversial view that Heaven is infinite but Hell is not is considered by many to have been an innovation of Ibn Taymiyyah which was then adopted by Ibn al-Qayyim. And even though Ibn al-Qayyim’s *Ḥādī al-arwāḥ* is considered the most extensive medieval Muslim scholarly discussion on this issue,⁴⁹⁸ we do know for a fact that Hell’s temporality was a position that may be found in works of both earlier and later scholars. Indeed, many scholars have noted either that there are reports related on the authority of the *Salaf* (‘Pious Ancestors’) regarding Hell’s annihilation or that there was a difference of opinion regarding this doctrine. These

⁴⁹⁷ See Binyamin Abrahamov, “The Creation and Duration of Paradise and Hell in Islamic Theology,” *Der Islam* 79 (2002), 101.

⁴⁹⁸ Al-Simharī, “*Mawqif*,” xvii.

include the following: ‘Abd ibn Ḥamīd’s *Tafsīr*; ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq ibn ‘Aṭīyyah al-Andalusī’s *tafsīr*; al-Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s *tafsīr*; al-Qurṭubī’s *al-Tadhkirah*; Ibn Abī al-‘Izz al-Ḥanafī’s *Sharḥ al-Taḥāwīyyah*; Muḥammad al-Amīn al-Shanqīṭī’s *Daf’ ihām al-iḍṭirāb ‘an āyāt al-kitāb*; Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s *Al-Maqsid al-asnā fī sharḥ asmā’ Allāh al-ḥusnā*; Ibn al-Wazīr’s *Īthār al-ḥaqq ‘alā al-khalq*; al-Dhahabī’s writings on Hell’s characteristics (*Sifat al-Nār*); al-Ḥāfiẓ ibn Rajab’s *al-Takhwīf min al-Nār*; Mar’ī ibn Yūsuf’s *Tawfīq al-farīqayn ‘alā khulūd ahl al-dārayn*; and al-Ṣan‘ānī’s *Raf’ al-astār li-ibṭāl adillat al-qā’ilīn bi-fanā’ al-Nār*.⁴⁹⁹

7. *Excursus: Building on the Writings of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah: The Case of Maulana Muhammad ‘Ali*

The debate surrounding Hell’s duration took on a different permutation in the 20th century, as may be observed in the writings of the Aḥmadi scholar Maulana Muhammad ‘Ali and a non-Muslim, the Western academic James Robson. Even so, the centuries-old arguments put forth by Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah have continued to make their presence felt in these modern discussions.

Maulana Muhammad ‘Ali (d. 1951) of Lahore belonged to the messianic Aḥmadiyyah sect. Its eponym was Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad (d. 1908), who claimed to be a ‘prophet’ of sorts (without denying Muḥammad’s place as the final ‘legislative’ Prophet), as well as the Mahdi and ‘Promised Messiah’ who would restore Islam’s purity. Founded in 1889 in British India,⁵⁰⁰ the sect at one point in the early 20th century came to be

⁴⁹⁹ Al-Simharī, “*Mawqif*,” xvii-xviii.

⁵⁰⁰ See Yohanan Friedmann, “Aḥmadīyah,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 1, ed. John L. Esposito (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 54-6.

considered the ‘chief form’ in which Islam was portrayed to the West.⁵⁰¹ As a mouthpiece for the sect, ‘Ali produced a well-known monograph entitled *The Religion of Islam*, as well as an influential English translation of the Qur’an. It is in these works that we find evidence of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim’s discourse influencing a modern Muslim scholar, particularly with regard to the non-eternality of Hell. In fact, at the end of his discussion in *The Religion of Islam*, ‘Ali cites both Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim by name as support for his position – something that was quite unusual for ‘Ali to do.

In his works, ‘Ali makes a few predictable declarations that are in line with the views of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah. He states, for example, that Paradise will be granted to those for whom “the good preponderates over the evil,” and that Hell will be for those for whom “the evil preponderates over the good.”⁵⁰² According to ‘Ali, the ‘righteous’ are those “who believe and do good.”⁵⁰³ In further elaborating this connection between faith and deeds, ‘Ali states that “faith, which is the water of spiritual life, is converted into rivers, and good deeds, which spring from faith, are the seeds whence grow the trees of the next life.”⁵⁰⁴

As ‘Ali would have it, faith (*īmān*) is accepting the truth presented by the Prophet, whereas Unbelief (*kufr*) is rejecting that truth. As such, the dividing line between Muslim and Unbeliever, ‘Ali argues, is the *Shahādah*, that is, the confession of God’s unity and Muḥammad’s prophethood. Nevertheless, ‘Ali makes it clear that “the requittal of good

⁵⁰¹ See J. Robson, “Is the Moslem Hell Eternal?,” *The Moslem World* 28 (1938), 392-3.

⁵⁰² See Maulana Muhammad ‘Ali, *The Religion of Islam: A Comprehensive Discussion of the Sources, Principles and Practices of Islam* (Cairo: National Publication and Printing House, 1967 [originally published in 1936]), 291.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 291.

and evil is a law apart, which goes on working irrespective of creeds,” as demonstrated by Q. 99:7-8, which state: “Then whoever has done an atom’s weight of good shall find it; and whoever has done an atom’s weight of evil shall find it.” Accordingly, ‘Ali states, “A believer is capable of doing evil and an unbeliever is capable of doing good, and each shall be requited for what he does.”⁵⁰⁵ Moreover, he states, God “hearkens to the prayers of all, whatever their religion or nationality. He is equally merciful to all and forgives the sins of all...He deals with all nations alike.”⁵⁰⁶

Despite this emphasis on the unity of humanity, however, ‘Ali makes it a point to describe the problematic nature of various creeds (including the ‘Christian creed’) due to their *Shirk*, or association of partners with God.⁵⁰⁷ As he explains, “Shirk [is] of all sins the most serious because it degrades man and renders him unfit for attaining the high position for him in the Divine scheme.”⁵⁰⁸ Moreover, ‘Ali describes Islam as being “perfect expression of the Divine will,” as well as a corrective to the ‘errors’ of all previous religions.⁵⁰⁹

And although ‘Ali makes it a point to define ‘*islām*’ as ‘submission’ (to God) in interpreting Q. 3:19⁵¹⁰ and 3:85⁵¹¹, he nevertheless maintains that *islām* is attained by way of the religion of Islam. As he states in a footnote to his translation of Q. 2:62:

Belief in God and the last day is equivalent to Islam as the true religion. [T]he door of salvation, to an unlimited progress, is open to all people who accept the right principles of religion and act according to them, so that even a Muslim is not saved by his mere belief which without good deeds is only lip-profession. The

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 122-5.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 145ff; also see Maulana Muhammad ‘Ali, *Translation of the Holy Quran (without Arabic text)* (Lahore: Ahmadiyya Anjuman-i-Ishaat-i-Islam, 1934), xlff.

⁵⁰⁸ ‘Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 146.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 4-5; ‘Ali, *Translation*, xxviiff.

⁵¹⁰ “True religion, in God’s eyes, is *islām*.”

⁵¹¹ “If anyone seeks a religion other than *islām*, it will not be accepted from him/her: he/she will be one of the losers in the Hereafter.”

existence of truth or good men in other religions is not denied by the Holy Quran, but perfect peace, or the state of absolute contentment which is indicated by freedom from grief and fear, is obtainable only in Islam, because Islam alone is the religion of absolute submission to the Divine Being.⁵¹²

Like Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim, it is difficult to get a complete picture of ‘Ali’s position on the fate of non-Muslims not ‘properly’ exposed to the Message of Islam in a post-Muhammadan world, especially in light of ‘Ali’s interpretations of Qur’anic verses like Q. 4:165⁵¹³ and 17:15⁵¹⁴ (both of which indicate that exposure to Messengers is a prerequisite for punishment). For example in his footnote to Q. 17:15, ‘Ali, unlike al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-‘Arabī, seems to interpret the verse in such a way that it precludes its being applicable in the context of his own time.⁵¹⁵

Most relevant for our purposes is ‘Ali’s discussion on the nature of Hell,⁵¹⁶ and, as noted, it is here where we find significant overlap with the ideas of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim. ‘Ali states that while Hell “only represents the evil consequences of evil deeds,” it is nevertheless

not a place merely for undergoing the consequences of what has been done; it is also a remedial plan. In other words, chastisement is not for the purpose of torture; it is for purification so that man, rid of the evil consequences which he has brought about with his own hands, may be made fit for spiritual advancement.⁵¹⁷

To support this notion that punishment may be a means for purification, ‘Ali cites Q. 7:94, which states, “We did not send forth a Prophet to any city but afflicted its people

⁵¹² ‘Ali, *Translation*, 14 f.n. 1.

⁵¹³ “They were Messengers bearing good news and warning, so that humankind would have no excuse before God, once the Messengers had been sent: God is almighty and all wise.”

⁵¹⁴ “Whoever accepts guidance does so for his/her own good; whoever strays does so at his/her own peril. No soul will bear another’s burden, nor do We punish until We have sent a Messenger.”

⁵¹⁵ He states: “The transgressions of the people were great, but God had first sent an apostle to warn them. Or the meaning is that God does not punish people for breaking a law until He has revealed that law through a prophet.” (‘Ali, *Translation*, 282 f.n. 4.)

⁵¹⁶ ‘Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 307ff. It is worth noting that ‘Ali precedes this with a discussion on the effects of Hell on its inhabitants, and how it will cause them to feel ‘intense regret’ for their actions (as indicated in Q. 2:167). (Ibid., 305-7)

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 307; ‘Ali, *Translation*, lxviff.

with distress and suffering, that perchance they might humble themselves.” With this being the case for punishment in this life, ‘Ali, apparently sidestepping the verses cited by al-Subkī in making the opposing argument, argues that the same applies to punishment in the next life. After all, ‘Ali argues, that which is good helps individuals to progress, and that which is evil hinders such progress, as indicated by various Qur’anic verses.⁵¹⁸ As such, since purification is the ‘great object’ of human existence, those who sought evil and their own retrogression in this life will have to eventually undergo the purification process in Hell.⁵¹⁹

And, ‘Ali argues, there are other reasons for thinking of Hell as a purgatory of sorts. For one thing, ‘Ali employs the familiar emphasis on God’s mercy. He notes, for example, the Qur’anic amplification of God’s attribute of mercy in numerous Scriptural passages.⁵²⁰ Thus, like Ibn al-Qayyim, ‘Ali views God’s punishment as being more than simply a demonstration of God’s greatness, as al-Subkī would have it. As ‘Ali states, “Such a merciful Being could not chastise man unless for some great purpose, which purpose is to set him again on the road to the higher life, after purifying him from evil. It is like a hospital wherein different operations are performed only to save life.” And since the ultimate objective of life is to “live in the service of God” (as evidenced by Q. 51:56), by “being purified in the fire, [one] is again made fit for Divine service.”⁵²¹ (Unanswered is the question, What exactly does “Divine service” entail in the context of the afterlife?). To further support this assertion, ‘Ali notes that Hell is described in the Qur’an as being

⁵¹⁸ E.g., Q. 91:9-10, 92:4-10, 1:7, 41:46, and 45:15.

⁵¹⁹ ‘Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 307-8. It is worth noting that ‘Ali sees the path towards purification as potentially beginning in this life. ‘Ali also argues that the *barzakh* or *qabr* stage, which immediately follows death and precedes Resurrection is also a period of spiritual growth. (Ibid., 266-71)

⁵²⁰ E.g., Q. 6:12, 6:54, 6:148, 7:156, 40:7, 39:53, and 11:119.

⁵²¹ ‘Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 308-9.

the ‘friend’ (*mawla*) of the sinners (Q. 57:15), as well as their ‘mother’ (*umm*) (Q. 101:9). Furthermore, he notes, it is noteworthy that the term *fitnah* is used in the Qur’an to refer to the ‘trials’ experienced by both Believers in this life⁵²² and ‘evil-doers’ in Hell.⁵²³ After all, the term *fitnah* in its original usage denoted the casting of gold into fire for the purpose of purifying it.⁵²⁴

‘Ali maintains that both the Qur’an and hadith themselves indicate that all of Hell’s inhabitants will one day be released from it once they have been transformed. But if Scripture had indicated this, why was this not the view of many Muslim scholars, past and present? According to ‘Ali:

This is a point on which great misunderstanding prevails even among Muslim theologians. They make a distinction between the Muslim sinners and the non-Muslim sinners, holding that all Muslim sinners shall be ultimately taken out of Hell, but not the non-Muslim sinners.⁵²⁵

As ‘Ali would have it, the source of confusion is a misreading of the words *khulūd* and *abad*. ‘Ali concedes that both can indicate ‘eternity.’ Nevertheless, following in the footsteps of Ibn al-Qayyim (without actually citing him here), he argues that according to all specialists in the Arabic language, they can also connote ‘a long time.’ Going beyond Ibn al-Qayyim, ‘Ali then makes the case that the Qur’an itself supports such a reading. For example, the word *khulūd*, he argues, is used ‘freely’ in the Qur’an to refer to punishment of both Muslim and non-Muslim sinners in Hell (as in Q. 4:13-4). As for the word *abad*, it is mentioned only thrice in reference to sinners remaining in Hell.⁵²⁶ That it should be taken to mean ‘a long time’ is supported by very the fact that a dual and

⁵²² E.g., Q. 2:191, 29:2, and 29:10.

⁵²³ E.g., Q. 37:63.

⁵²⁴ ‘Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 309.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁵²⁶ Interestingly, ‘Ali never cites these three occurrences.

plural form of the word are actually used in Arabic, thus indicating that the word, particularly its singular form, refers to ‘a part of time.’ Moreover, and in following the footsteps of Ibn Taymiyyah, he argues that the Qur’an elsewhere refers to the punishment of the Unbelievers as lasting for ‘ages’ (*aḥqāban*). Unlike Ibn Taymiyyah, however, he argues that each age (*ḥuqba*)⁵²⁷ is equivalent to a year, many years, or eighty years – estimates that are significantly smaller than those of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim. In any case, ‘Ali’s point is that the wording indicates a limited period of time.⁵²⁸

It is thus no surprise that in his translation of the Qur’an he translates *abad* as ‘forever’ in reference to the stay in Heaven⁵²⁹, but as ‘for long ages’ in reference to the stay in Hell.⁵³⁰ Interestingly, one exception to this is his choice of ‘forever’ in his translation of Q. 4:168-9 (“God will not forgive those who have disbelieved and do evil, nor will He guide them to any path except that of Hell, where they will remain ‘forever’ [*abadan*] – this is easy for God”) – perhaps because the verse may be understood to merely reflect a *hypothetical* reality (for while it would be easy for God to guide some to an eternal stay in Hell, this need not reflect what will actually occur).

‘Ali responds to his imaginary interlocutor who maintains that *abad* must mean ‘eternity’ by noting that a limit to the duration of time spent in Hell is made by the expression ‘except as God wills’ (*illā mā shā’a Allāh*). Indeed, ‘Ali argues, this expression (found in Q. 6:128 and a variant of which is found in Q. 11:107) “clearly indicate[s] the ultimate deliverance of those in Hell.”⁵³¹ But here we face a familiar

⁵²⁷ I believe ‘Ali meant to write *ḥuqb* here instead of *ḥuqba*.

⁵²⁸ Ibid., 309-10.

⁵²⁹ The word *abad* is used in reference to Heaven in Q. 4:57, 4:122, 5:119, 9:22, 9:100, 64:9, 65:11, and 98:8.

⁵³⁰ The word *abad* is used in reference to Hell in Q. 4:169, 33:65 and 72:23.

⁵³¹ ‘Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 312.

problem: What about the duration of life in Heaven? After all, a similarly delimiting expression is found in connection to it in Q. 11:108 ('except as your Lord pleases' [*illā mā shā'a rabbuka*]). To this 'Ali makes the familiar observation that there is an interesting difference in the final expressions of Q. 11:107 and Q. 11:108: the former affirms that God does as He pleases, while the latter makes it clear that life in Heaven will never be cut off.⁵³²

In examining various Qur'anic verses used to argue for an eternal Hell,⁵³³ 'Ali does the very thing that Ibn al-Qayyim does: he looks for loopholes. 'Ali concludes that even though these verses indicate that Hell's inhabitants will be unable to escape the punishment, "not a word is there in any of these verses to show that God will not take them out of it, or that the tortures of Hell are endless."⁵³⁴

'Ali also looks to the hadith corpus to solidify his argument. He first looks to a hadith that states:

Then God will say, 'The angels have interceded and the prophets have interceded and the faithful have interceded and none remains but the most Merciful of all merciful ones. So He will take out a handful of from fire and bring out a people who have never done any good.'⁵³⁵

Accordingly, 'Ali argues, none can remain in Hell after this event occurs, especially since "the handful of God cannot leave anything behind."⁵³⁶

'Ali also cites familiar hadiths that are more explicit, such as: "Surely a day will come over Hell when it will be like a field of corn that has dried up after flourishing for a while," and "Surely a day will come over Hell when there shall not be a single human

⁵³² Ibid., 312-3.

⁵³³ E.g., 2:167, 5:36-7, 22:22, and 32:20.

⁵³⁴ 'Ali, *The Religion of Islam*, 311.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 313.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 313.

being in it.” He also cites the famous sayings noted above attributed to ‘Umar and Ibn Mas‘ūd. ‘Ali goes on to state that similar reports come from “many other Companions,” including Ibn ‘Umar, Jābir, Abū Sa‘īd, Abū Hurayrah, as well as the Successors. ‘Ali then states that this was also the view of “later Imāms” such as Ibn al-‘Arabī, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, and “many others.”⁵³⁷

In spite of the influence that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought has had on the Aḥmadiyah,⁵³⁸ ‘Ali’s reference to him here is clearly erroneous. As we have seen, the latter never once argues for a non-eternal Hell, even if he does argue for a non-eternal punishment in Hell.

At any rate, one significant difference between ‘Ali and both Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim is ‘Ali’s apparent confidence in his position. Conspicuously absent from the conclusion of his argument is the traditional formula *God knows best*. Instead, he argues matter-of-factly, and concludes by arguing that the following hadith “establishes beyond all doubt that all men will ultimately be set on the way to the higher life”:

“Then will [God] say, [‘]Bring out (of the fire) every one in whose heart there is faith or goodness to the extent of a mustard seed, so they will be taken out having become quite black; then they will be thrown into the river of life and they will grow as grows a seed by the side of a river.” (*Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* 2:15)

All in all, one can certainly observe the influence of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim’s discourse in ‘Ali’s argument for a non-eternal Hell. This, despite the fact that ‘Ali chooses different points of emphasis than does Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim. For example, as far as ‘Ali is concerned, the proper translation of the word *abad* appears to be a much more significant issue.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 313-4.

⁵³⁸ Friedmann, “Aḥmadiyah,” 54.

Just like his medieval predecessors, ‘Ali’s argument for a non-eternal Hell would lead to strong criticisms. We now examine a non-Muslim, Western scholarly response to ‘Ali – a response that constitutes what appears to be Western academia’s first *direct* engagement with Muslim scholarly discussions on Hell’s duration. And while ‘Ali’s argument bears some resemblance to that of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim, what follows, interestingly enough, bears some resemblance to the argument put forth by al-Subkī.

7.1. Examining a Western Academic Response to ‘Ali

‘Ali’s argument for a non-eternal Hell, and particularly his selective translation of *abad*, led to a Western academic rejoinder by James Robson, who was a Professor of Arabic at the University of Manchester, in an article entitled “Is the Moslem Hell Eternal?,” which was published in *The Moslem World* in 1938. Robson’s critique of ‘Ali is based mainly on the latter’s statements in his translation, as opposed to his monograph *The Religion of Islam*, of which Robson was at nevertheless aware since he makes a passing reference to it at the end of his article.⁵³⁹

Robson admits that *abad* can mean both ‘forever’ and ‘for a long time.’

Nevertheless, he argues that ‘Ali is

mistaken [in] assuming that one is free to use either [definition] arbitrarily, for it is extremely unlikely that the same word would be used in similar contexts and be left to the ingenuity of readers to recognize that in one place it has one meaning and in another a different meaning. The words *khālidīna fīhā abadan* must surely mean the same thing, whether they apply to the blessed or the damned.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁹ Robson, “Is the Moslem Hell Eternal?,” 393.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 387.

Robson also takes issue with ‘Ali’s selective translation of the word *khuld*. For example, ‘Ali translates *shajarat al-khuld* (found in Q. 20:120 in reference to the story of Adam) as ‘the tree of immortality,’ and *jannat al-khuld* (found in Q. 25:15 in reference to Heaven) as ‘the abiding garden.’ But in reference to Hell, he translates *dār al-khuld* as ‘the house of long abiding.’

Robson acknowledges that ‘Ali’s reference to the term *aḥqāb* (in Q. 78:23) is a seemingly more effective argument for a non-eternal Hell. Nevertheless, Robson dismisses the argument on the basis that both early and later commentators (such as al-Ṭabarī, Sa‘īd ibn Qatāda, al-Zamakhsharī, and ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar al-Bayḍāwī) interpreted the term as being endless, without limits, long ages followed by long ages. In looking to those views which have been most popular among Muslim exegetes as being a standard which trumps other considerations, Robson seems to follow the very path trodden by al-Subkī.

As for ‘Ali’s interpretation of Q. 11:106-8, Robson describes it as “interesting,” and states that “there are grounds for it in the actual words of the passage.”⁵⁴¹ Ultimately, however, Robson dismisses the interpretation on the basis that: a. ‘Ali’s reading may not be in line with the verses’ original intent; and b. it is contrary to the traditional understanding of the verses. In supporting these assertions, Robson assembles what appears to be a hodge-podge of viewpoints held by scholars of different persuasions. For example, he notes that according to al-Ṭabarī, the temporal stay in Hell is a reference to grave-sinning Believers (and not to all of humanity) since God threatened the Unbelievers with *khulūd* in Hell, and “there can be no exceptions among the

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., 389.

[U]nbelievers.”⁵⁴² As Robson observes, al-Ṭabarī thus seems to have understood *khulūd* as being a reference to “eternal remaining.” On the other hand, Robson notes, the Mu‘tazilite al-Zamakhsharī understands the exception in Q. 11:107 as meaning that fire is not the only means of punishment in Hell, for God will also punish by way of ‘intense cold,’ humiliation, Divine anger, etc.⁵⁴³ Similarly, the exception in Q. 11:108, is understood as being a reference to other forms of reward, such as God’s pleasure and other unknown blessings.

Robson, like al-Subkī, goes on to cite a number of hadiths typically classified as ‘authentic’ that seem to indicate an eternal Hell. For example, one hadith states that the people of Heaven and Hell will be told that each will remain (*khālid*) where they are. Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, and ‘Ali would certainly take issue with this hadith being used as evidence given their understanding of the notion of *khuld*. Robson also cites the very hadith cited by al-Subkī: the hadith of ‘death’ being slaughtered. According to Robson, this supports the notion of an eternal Hell since it concludes by noting that Hell’s inhabitants will consequently have sorrow added to their sorrow as a result. A longer version of this report concludes with the declaration that both parties will remain where they find themselves, and that there there will be no death in it ‘forever’ (*abadan*). Robson then refers to those hadiths that speak of people being taken out of Hell in order to point out the implication that others will remain in it. Robson then cites a hadith which states that anyone with a mustard seed of faith will not enter Hell, and anyone with a mustard seed of pride will not enter Heaven. According to Robson, this tradition “makes

⁵⁴² Ibid., 389.

⁵⁴³ As Robson observes, for al-Zamakhsharī, who is a Mu‘tazilite, the notion that grave-sinning Believers will leave Hell and enter Heaven is unacceptable. (Ibid., 390)

it clear that Hell must be everlasting.”⁵⁴⁴ As for ‘Ali’s citation of the Ibn Mas‘ūd tradition which speaks of a time (after ‘ages’ have passed) in which no one will remain in Hell, Robson notes that this report was rejected by al-Ṭabarī.

And while ‘Ali presents his view as being one maintained by a number of early scholars, Robson, like al-Subkī, argues that the view of an eternal Hell goes “against the clear teaching of the community of which Muhammad is reported to have said, ‘My people will never agree upon an error.’”⁵⁴⁵ Robson thus employs the *ijmā‘* argument, albeit without much support; while he does cite various Ḥanafī creedal declarations of an eternal Hell, this is certainly selective and unrepresentative of the vastness of Muslim scholarly thought as we have already seen.

Robson concludes that the Islamic Hell cannot be compared with the Roman Catholic Purgatory since the former is indeed meant to be eternal. Furthermore, and parallel to al-Subkī’s character assassination of Ibn Taymiyyah, Robson attempts to discredit ‘Ali by arguing that because he belongs to the Aḥmadiyyah, his writings, which were relatively influential in the West, should not be considered representative of mainstream Muslim thought. But is not ‘Ali’s argument bolstered when it is shared with prominent medieval Traditionalist scholars of a radically different persuasion?

All in all, Robson’s counter-argument demonstrates some interesting parallels to the rejoinder put forth by al-Subkī. Both Robson and al-Subkī understand the terms *abad* and *khuld* in similar ways, argue that the exceptions in Q. 6:128 and 11:107 do not refer to the eventual salvation of Unbelievers, and assume that there is *ijmā‘* on the eternality of Hell. To my mind, Robson is at his strongest when he observes ‘Ali’s selective reading

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 391.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., 392.

of *abad*. One could also add here that if we decided to simply read *abad* as always meaning ‘for a long time,’ as opposed to ‘forever,’ this presents a problem for any advocate of an eternal Heaven. After all, it was partly the use of the term *ahqāb* (‘ages’) in reference to the stay in Hell that led Ibn al-Qayyim and ‘Ali to argue for a non-eternal Hell in the first place.

Even so, Ibn al-Qayyim’s reading of *abad* assists ‘Ali’s argument: the term is used to refer to continuity so long as a particular abode is in existence. In other words, if one remains in Heaven *abadan*, he/she remains in it so long as Heaven continues to exist. If, however, one remains in Hell *abadan*, then this applies so long as Hell exists. This argument avoids the problems inherent in having to choose between ‘forever’ and ‘for a long time.’

Ibn al-Qayyim’s discussion of Q. 11:106-8 also serves as an effective rejoinder to both Robson and al-Ṭabarī, as it presents an effective counter-argument against those who maintain that Q. 11:106-7 are in reference to only some of Hell’s inhabitants.

One further weakness in Robson’s argument is his selective reading of certain hadiths. The very hadiths he cites can be read quite differently given the considerations presented above. Moreover, Robson does not seriously address the various hadiths cited by ‘Ali. He merely notes that one of them was discounted by al-Ṭabarī.

In any case, this modern debate seems to represent a historical repetition, as we find ‘Ali and Robson engaging in the very dance that the very different Ibn Taymiyyah and al-Subkī engaged in centuries earlier.

8. Conclusion

In sum, we find that the specific arguments put forth by Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim for a non-eternal Hell are ostensibly unique articulations in Islamic theological discourse that have effectively survived throughout the ages and continue to leave their mark despite their controversial nature. In fact, their arguments are utilized by the famous modernists Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, whose relevant discussions are considered in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā

1. *The Life and Times of Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā*

In focusing specifically on Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), it is necessary that we first take a step back and look at the development of the modern Salafiyyah movement to which he belonged. In its most popular form, it was a reform movement established by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) towards the end of the 19th century.⁵⁴⁶ It arose during a period of Western colonialism, and is characterized by its desire to both reform Islamic thought and end the intellectual, political, moral, and cultural stagnation of the Muslim world. It strongly opposed the blind imitation of antiquated religious decrees, and advocated a revival of *ijtihād* (unmediated interpretation). And with its distinctively modernist nature, it also explicitly

⁵⁴⁶ The term *Salafiyyah* is derived from the Arabic root *salaf*, which means ‘predecessors,’ and is often used to refer to the first three ‘generations’ of Muslims (where the timeframe of a ‘generation’ is equivalent to a century). Thus, the presumption is that the individual *Salafis* who make up the Salafiyyah derive their understanding of Islam directly from the religion’s primary sources (i.e. the Qur’an and Sunnah), instead of looking to the traditions, customs, and ideas that were developed by later Muslims. See Emad Eldin Shahin, “Salafiyyah,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 3 (Oxford University Press, 1995) 463ff.

emphasized the role of Reason and Science, and asserted that Islam was indeed compatible with both.⁵⁴⁷

Al-Afghānī was probably of Iranian Shī‘ite origin, and had spent a considerable amount of time in Afghanistan during his youth. (Al-Afghānī himself claimed that he was an Afghan).⁵⁴⁸ After a brief stint in Istanbul, al-Afghānī made his way to Egypt, where he taught at al-Azhar University and established a following. It was there that he would meet his young Egyptian disciple, ‘Abduh, who once described his master as “the perfect philosopher.”⁵⁴⁹ As for ‘Abduh, he was born in 1849 in Lower Egypt. After acquiring an Islamic education and an interest in Sufism, ‘Abduh eventually made his way to al-Azhar University.⁵⁵⁰

Following his criticisms of both British colonizers and local elites, al-Afghānī was expelled from Egypt in 1879. In 1884, he was joined by ‘Abduh in Paris, where they published the weekly Arabic Islamic journal *al-‘Urwah al-wuthqā* (The Strongest Link). After ‘Abduh and he parted ways, al-Afghānī would eventually move to Istanbul, where he worked on Sultan ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd II’s (d. 1918) pan-Islamic project of appealing to Shī‘ites. He passed away after having been confined there during the last years of his life (due to abysmal relations with the Sultan).⁵⁵¹ On the other hand, ‘Abduh, who was arguably the most significant figure of the modern Salafiyah movement, would return to Cairo to write his famous *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* (The Message of Unity) and become Egypt’s

⁵⁴⁷ Shahin, “Salafiyah,” 464ff.

⁵⁴⁸ See Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “al-Afghani”* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 4-9.

⁵⁴⁹ See Osman Amin, *Muhammad ‘Abduh*, trans. Charles Wendell (Washington, D.C.: American Council of Learned Societies, 1953), 15-7.

⁵⁵⁰ See Joseph Schacht, “Muḥammad ‘Abduh,” *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition*, Vol. 7 (Leiden: Brill: 1993), 418.

⁵⁵¹ See Ignaz Goldziher, “Djamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī,” *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition*, Vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 417-9.

grand *muftī*.⁵⁵² In their time, both al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh were controversial to some (due to what was perceived to be heterodox teachings) and inspirational to others (due to their reform-mindedness).

Al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh were the patron saints of the modern Salafiyyah movement, which sought a return to the understanding of Islam adopted by the earliest Muslims. Their legacy lived on in Islamic modernism and liberalism, as exemplified by figures such as ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq (d. 1966) and Tāhā Ḥussein (d. 1973). They left another, competing legacy, however, in the form of disciples who took the Salafi movement in a more conservative direction. Most prominent among these was ‘Abduh’s student Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā. Riḍā was born in 1865 near Tripoli, Lebanon, and was trained first in a traditional Islamic school, and then in a school established by Shaykh Ḥusayn al-Jisr (d. 1909) which combined religious and modern sciences. A student of the works of al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyyah, Riḍā believed that the Muslim world needed a reformation due to both its moribund state and an excess of immoral practices, such as those stemming from popular Sufism. Thus, influenced by al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh’s *al-Urwah al-wuthqā*, Riḍā moved to Egypt in 1897, initiating his association with ‘Abduh.⁵⁵³ Riḍā was especially instrumental in propagating Salafi ideas by way of his periodical *al-Manār* (The Lighthouse) (1889-1935), which was initially a joint effort with ‘Abduh before the latter’s death. It is notable that the movement under Riḍā became relatively more conservative, and his ideas have been widely considered a link between the reformism of al-Afghani and ‘Abduh and the activism of the famous Egyptian neorevivalist organization, the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-ikhwān al-muslimīn*), which was

⁵⁵² Schacht, “Muḥammad ‘Abduh,” 419.

⁵⁵³ See Emad Eldin Shahin, “Rashīd Riḍā, Muḥammad,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 3, ed. John L. Esposito (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 410-1.

established by Ḥasan al-Bannā (d. 1949) and which counted among its members the popular and notorious Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966).⁵⁵⁴ Considering Riḍa’s work in *al-Manār*, which helped to propagate the modern Salafi message of reform, as well as his authorship of several books, the quantity of his writings surpassed those of both ‘Abduh and al-Afghānī. In examining Riḍa’s writings we find an obsession with issues ranging from the importance of Muslim reform to the restoration of the caliphate to the value of actively pursuing the good of what the West has to offer.⁵⁵⁵

The ideas of both the modernist and fundamentalist branches of the Salafiyyah movement would spread throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and the rest of the Muslim world. In light of contemporary Muslim scholarly discourse, it would appear that many of the ideas put forth by the modern Salafiyyah movement are as relevant (and contentious) now as they were over a century ago.

Most relevant for our purposes is the Qur’an commentary (*tafsīr*) taken from *al-Manār*, which is largely Riḍa’s summary of ‘Abduh’s teachings, as well as Riḍa’s own interpretations (and vindication of “an entire range of the traditional heritage”⁵⁵⁶).⁵⁵⁷ This *tafsīr*, which was first published on its own in 1927, covers only through Q. 12:107.⁵⁵⁸

⁵⁵⁴ Shahin, “Salafiyyah,” 467. In fact, al-Bannā revered and was quite influenced by *al-Manār*’s Qur’anic commentary. See Muḥammad ‘Amārah, “*Tamhīd*,” *al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyyah ma’a al-‘ilm wa al-madaniyyah* (Giza, Egypt: Maktabat al-Nāfidhah, 2006), 2-3.

⁵⁵⁵ Shahin, “Rashīd Riḍā,” 410-1.

⁵⁵⁶ See Jacques Jomier, *Le Commentaire Coranique du Manār: tendances modernes de l’exégèse coranique en Égypte* (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve, 1954), 63 (Cited in Jane McAullife, *Qur’anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 83).

⁵⁵⁷ Perhaps the only thing that may be said to be even somewhat relevant about *Risālat al-Tawhīd* is that ‘Abduh speaks of Islam as being the faith established by God, and that God has allowed for a diversity of opinions within that faith. For example, see Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, trans. Ishaq Musa ‘ad and Kenneth Cragg (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1966), 129-31.

⁵⁵⁸ There is actually debate regarding the final verse covered in *al-Manār*, with the alternatives listed as Q. 12:25 and 52. This is due to “accidental transpositions” in the case of the former, and variations from earlier editions to later editions in the case of the latter. Also, it should be noted that, according to Aḥmad al-Sharabāshī, Riḍa stopped at Q. 12:101 and Shaykh Muḥammad Bahjah al-Bayṭār continued through the end of the surah. (McAullife, *Qur’anic Christians*, 79; cf. Aḥmad al-Sharabāshī, *Rashīd Riḍā al-ṣiḥāfī al-*

(Because of his death, ‘Abduh’s direct involvement in the *tafsīr* would cease by Q. 4:126).⁵⁵⁹ *Tafsīr al-Manār*, with its relatively liberal influences from ‘Abduh and its relatively conservative influences from Riḍa,⁵⁶⁰ is now generally considered “to be authoritative by both progressive and conservative Egyptian [Muslim] theologians.”⁵⁶¹ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Riḍa is generally considered one of the “preeminent exegetes of the twentieth century.”⁵⁶² As will become apparent, while ‘Abduh’s views on salvation and the fate of ‘Others’ are sometimes difficult to discern, Riḍa’s position is relatively clear: He maintains the superiority of Muḥammad’s Message while seeming to elevate – at least in relation to the other case studies – the emphasis on Divine mercy to another level. He does so by incorporating both al-Ghazālī’s standard for non-Muslim entry into Heaven and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah’s argument for a non-eternal Hell. As will become apparent, however, this was, at least in the case of al-Ghazālī’s discussion, in no way an uncritical incorporation.

2. Analyzing Relevant Aspects of Riḍa’s Writings

2.1. Between Islam and ‘islām’

mufasssīr al-shā’ir al-lughawī [Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-‘Āmmah li-Shu’ūn al-Maṭābi’ al-Amīriyyah, 1977], 157-9). Incidentally, Riḍa had also begun an abridgment of his commentary, which covers through Q. 12:111. See Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā and Muḥammad Aḥmad Kan’ān, *Mukhtaṣar tafsīr al-Manār*, ed. Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1984).

⁵⁵⁹ ‘Amrah, “*Tamhīd*,” 2-3. This, of course, is not to say that ‘Abduh did not write any form of commentary on later Qur’anic passages.

⁵⁶⁰ Cf. Mahmudul Haq, *Muhammad ‘Abduh: A Study of a Modern Thinker of Egypt* (Aligarh: Institute of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, 1970), 110 (Cited in McAullife, *Qur’anic Christians*, 82-3).

⁵⁶¹ See J.J.G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), 20 (Cited in McAullife, *Qur’anic Christians*, 83).

⁵⁶² McAullife, *Qur’anic Christians*, 85.

Make no mistake – and, as I demonstrate below, a common mistake it is – Riḍa was not an advocate of soteriological religious pluralism. Nevertheless, in his writings, he makes it a point to look beyond official religious affiliations and focus on the content of beliefs. This is made clear in Riḍa’s relatively lengthy commentary on what is perhaps pluralists’ most oft-cited Qur’anic verse, 2:62, which states:

The Believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians (*al-Ṣābi’ūn*) – whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is good, shall receive their reward from their Lord. They shall have nothing to fear and they shall not grieve.

At the onset, Riḍa, who is known for having grouped verses into logical units,⁵⁶³ quotes ‘Abduh, who believed that this verse should be read in relation to the previous verse, which states:

And when you [Jews] said: “O Moses, we will not put up with one kind of food; so pray to your Lord to bring forth for us some of what the earth produces: green herbs, cucumbers, corn, lentils, and onions.” He said: “Would you exchange that which is better for that which is worse? Come down to Egypt where you will get what you asked for.” Humiliation and abasement were inflicted on them and they incurred God’s wrath. That was because they disbelieved in God’s Revelations and unjustly killed the Prophets, thus committing disobedience and aggression (2:61).

In this context, ‘Abduh’s argument is that Q. 2:62 serves as both a general statement and a reference to those non-Muslims who fall outside of the criticism found in Q. 2:61. There is, however, more to be said here, and Riḍa goes on to state that it was ‘Abduh’s contention that it matters not with which religion (*dīn*) or religious community (*millah*) one associates. What *truly* matters – and what will grant one success in this life and the next – is ‘true faith’ (*ṣidq al-īmān*) in God. What *truly* matters is that one be a

⁵⁶³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 84-5.

servant to God and God alone. This, Riḍa adds, entails ‘true’ faith in both God and the Last Day, as well as good deeds (*al-‘amal al-ṣāliḥ*) (as Q. 2:62 states).⁵⁶⁴

Riḍa goes on to cite Q. 4:123, a verse which states:

It will not be according to your hopes or those of the People of the Book: anyone who does wrong will be requited for it and will find no one to protect or help him/her against God.

This verse was reportedly revealed after a debate had taken place between a group of Muslims and Jews regarding who could rightfully claim to be the preferred people of God. All could agree that the Jews had received God’s Message first. But this did not indicate preference, the Muslims argued, because it was they had who were now receiving the final Message and were on the ‘true’ (and ‘original’) path of Abraham and his sons. Moreover, they argued, it is only through their religion, Islam, that one could enter Paradise. Therefore, Riḍa argues, the revealing of this verse in this particular context demonstrates the superiority of ‘true’ faith and good deeds over simply associating oneself with a certain religious community.⁵⁶⁵

This position is further elucidated in Riḍa’s commentary on a Qur’anic verse that is often cited by exclusivists, Q. 3:19, a verse which states:

The [true] religion (*al-dīn*) with God is ‘Islam’ (*al-islām*). Those who were given the Book did not disagree among themselves, except after certain knowledge came to them, out of envy among themselves. Whoever disbelieves in God’s Revelations will find God swift in retribution!

According to this verse, what matters most, so goes the argument, is the concept of *islām*, or submission (which is the true “religion [*al-dīn*] with God”), and not simply

⁵⁶⁴ See Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-ḥakīm al-shahīr bi-tafsīr al-Manār* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1970), 1:333-6.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:336-8.

belonging to the religion formally called Islam (i.e. ‘reified Islam’).⁵⁶⁶ This is what is meant by the Qur’anic description of Abraham (and other Prophets) being a *muslim*, or one who submits. As such, the Qur’anic notion of a ‘true’ *muslim* is, according to ‘Abduh and Riḍa, that of one whose faith in God is pure and free of any association, and whose deeds are pure – regardless of the time and place, and, again, regardless of the religious community to which he/she belongs. This notion of *islām*, it is argued, is also what is meant by Q. 3:85 (“Whoever seeks a religion other than ‘Islam’ (*al-islām*), it will never be accepted from him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers”).⁵⁶⁷

Despite this emphasis on the concept of *islām*, in the final analysis, we find that both ‘Abduh and Riḍa maintain the superiority of Islam, the religion taught by Muḥammad. For example, ‘Abduh declares elsewhere that Islam, unlike Christianity, is “the religion of refinement and true perfection.”⁵⁶⁸ This perceived superiority also extends to salvation – at least for Riḍa. (‘Abduh’s statements elsewhere seem to send mixed signals regarding whether he too maintained such a position).⁵⁶⁹ Riḍa, for example, states that so long as one has been ‘properly’ exposed to the Message of Islam, then pristine Islam (and not necessarily the kind of Islam followed by anyone who simply associates him/herself with the Muslim *ummah*) becomes the primary path to salvation in

⁵⁶⁶ This same notion is found in Riḍa’s commentary on Q. 2:167 (“Those who followed will say: ‘If only we could go back, we would disown them as they disowned us.’ Thus God will them their works as sources of deep regret, and they will not come out of the Fire”). After quoting ‘Abduh as stating that this verse is in reference to ‘Unbelievers’ (*al-Kuffār*), Riḍa warns that this could include Muslims who simply recite the *Shahādah* without really upholding what it entails. (Ibid., 2:81ff)

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 3:257-60.

⁵⁶⁸ See Muhammad ‘Abduh, *al-Islām wa al-Naṣrāniyyah ma’a al-‘ilm wa al-madaniyyah* (Giza, Egypt: Maktabat al-Nāfidhah, 2006), 9.

⁵⁶⁹ ‘Abduh elsewhere seems to demonstrate pluralistic tendencies with regard to Bahā’is, for example. See Juan R. Cole, “Feminism, Class and Islam in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13 (1981), 387-407. That ‘Abduh’s beliefs on such a topic are sometimes difficult to discern should come as no surprise. His signals have been so mixed that some have questioned whether he actually believed in God in the first place. See, for example, Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and ‘Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London: Cass, 1966). As such, one can only wonder how much of ‘Abduh’s voice in *al-Manār* is truly ‘Abduh’s and not Riḍa’s recasting of ‘Abduh.

a post-Muḥammadan world. This position is made clear towards the end of Riḍā's commentary on Q. 3:19. Here, he argues that the very fact that the rest of the verse addresses the 'People of the Book' in a post-Muḥammadan world is an indication that they had ceased to be *muslims* and true followers of the Message brought forth by their Prophets. And this is in large part due to the divisions that were formed among them and the modifications that were made to the original Message of their religions. As an example of these phenomena, Riḍa refers to the history of the Christian Church and the various councils that it convened, beginning with the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, and the subsequent excommunication of Arius (d. 336 CE) and the Arians.⁵⁷⁰

While Riḍā may have maintained the problematic nature of all faiths other than Islam, he, like the other case studies, was simply unwilling to consign multitudes of ostensibly 'sincere' non-Muslims to eternal damnation for simply not adhering (formally at least) to the path of God's Messengers. This certainly applies to those individuals who never received any form of the Message, as is certainly the case of those who lived in between the eras of the various Messengers (*Ahl al-Fatrah*), such as the pre-Islamic Arabs. Not included among *Ahl al-Fatrah* are Jews and Christians, for even though Riḍa maintains that they follow an impure path, there is enough of the original Message present in their Books to not write them off as having been completely unfamiliar with God's Message. As Riḍa notes, for example, the Qur'an states "[the Jews] have the Torah with God's judgment" (Q. 5:43). (This, despite 'Abduh's statement cited elsewhere that the current scriptures used by the 'People of the Book' are sources of delusion and

⁵⁷⁰ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 3:258-9. In noting Riḍā's reference to Arius, it is perhaps helpful to keep in mind Arius' controversial position, i.e., that Jesus was the *created* Son of God. This was ostensibly closer to Islamic doctrine than the Council's decision, i.e., that Jesus was "begotten, not made," and of the same substance as (and coeternal with) God the Father.

misguidance).⁵⁷¹ As for the ‘Sabians’ [*al-Ṣābi’ūn*], Riḍa notes two different interpretations as to who they are: They are either an offshoot of Christianity that engaged in star-worshipping,⁵⁷² or a group similar to pre-Islamic Arabian monotheists (*Ḥanīfs*). If the latter, then they are more likely to be considered among *Ahl al-Fatrah*. If, the former, however, then “like the Jews and Christians,” they will be expected to follow their religion, having understood its obligations, “until another form of guidance reaches them.”⁵⁷³

As for *Ahl al-Fatrah*, a discussion on their fate provides a starting point for examining the case of non-Muslims who have not been exposed to Muḥammad’s Message in a post-Muḥammadan world. Towards the end of Riḍa’s commentary on Q. 2:62, ‘Abduh is quoted as stating that the fate of *Ahl al-Fatrah* was an issue of debate among scholars, with the majority believing that they would be saved based on the principle that one is made-responsible only by way of Revelation (*al-Shar‘*). Accordingly, those who never came to know of it will not be punished. Seeming to support this assertion are Q. 17:15 (“We do not punish until We send a messenger”) and Q. 4:165 (“so that humanity will have no plea against God, after the Messengers’ coming”). ‘Abduh ascribes this view to the Ash‘arites. (As we saw in the previous chapter, this was also the view of Ibn Taymiyyah, who argued against another view ascribed to the Ash‘arites, namely that God, because of His omnipotence, could punish *anyone*, with or without sin as a basis). On the other hand, according to the minority, which consists of Mu‘tazilites and ‘Ḥanafīs’ (i.e. Māturīdites), the intellect (*al-‘aql*)

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., 4:316.

⁵⁷² Incidentally, Riḍā uses this opportunity to describe Christians as having become “the most insolent community in the world.” (Ibid., 1:338)

⁵⁷³ Ibid., 1:337-8.

suffices as the means by which one is made-responsible and taken to account for his/her beliefs and deeds. Accordingly, Messengers merely confirm the truth, while providing humanity with greater insight into those things which one would otherwise be unable to know, such as the details of the Afterlife, and the precise manner of worship that is pleasing to God. And as for Q. 17:15, if one takes into account the ostensibly past tense nature of the wording of the verse,⁵⁷⁴ it could be argued that it refers only to punishments in *this* life.⁵⁷⁵

Having noted these differing viewpoints, Riḍa goes on to cite al-Ghazālī's categorization of non-Muslims not exposed to Muḥammad's Message, which, as noted earlier, addresses the fate of those non-Muslims living in a post-Muḥammadan world. Interestingly, with regard to al-Ghazālī's first group, i.e., those individuals who heard virtually nothing about the Message of Islam, Riḍa, in an apparent confirmation of al-Ghazālī's categorization, argues that they include the people of the United States of America, and that they will be saved. (Incidentally, it is probably Jane McAullife's misreading of al-Ghazālī's standard as being a reference to *Ahl al-Fatrah* that leads her to assume that Riḍa is here speaking of "the people living on the American continent in the period between Jesus and Muḥammad."⁵⁷⁶ This also helps to explain her problematic assessment elsewhere that Riḍa "harshly condemns the majority" of Christians (and others), thus "leaving them the sole prospect of torment in the Fire").⁵⁷⁷ As noted in Chapter 2, al-Ghazālī explicitly refers to post-Muḥammadan Christians in explaining the application of his categorization). The inclusion of Americans in the first group would

⁵⁷⁴ In Arabic, this verse reads, "wa mā kunnā mu'adhibīn ḥattā nab'atha rasūlā."

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 1:338.

⁵⁷⁶ McAullife, *Qur'ānic Christians*, 114.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 179.

certainly be questionable in a 21st century context, given the likelihood that the majority of Americans have been exposed to *something* accurate related to Islam’s Message. Otherwise, compared to the first group, there are arguably more Americans today who belong to al-Ghazālī’s third group, i.e., those individuals who only heard ‘lies’ about the Prophet. Whatever the case may be, Riḍa goes on to state that, to his mind, al-Ghazālī’s third group is in actuality identical to the first. Accordingly, there are really only two categories of non-Muslims: those who are *truly* exposed to Islam and those who are not.⁵⁷⁸ Riḍa concludes by stating that salvation will be granted to those who “believe in God and the Last Day *in the correct way* that was demonstrated by their Prophet, and [who] do virtuous deeds” [emphasis mine].⁵⁷⁹ Otherwise, he argues, if one maintains an unsound belief after having received the Message, such as the belief of anthropomorphists (*al-mushabbihah*), antinomians (*al-ḥulūliyyah*), and monists (*al-itihādiyyah*), then the promise found in Q. 2:62 in no way refers to him/her. The same applies to those whose deeds are unsound, he argues, for faith and deeds are intertwined. After all, he notes, the Qur’an states, “Indeed, those who fear God, when a visitation from the Devil afflicts them, will remember [God’s commands], and behold they will see clearly” (7:201).⁵⁸⁰

How, then, will those not exposed to the Message be judged? It is in answering this question that we find Riḍa’s most obvious divergence from al-Ghazālī’s standard: Riḍa sides with the Mu‘tazilites and argues that such people will be taken to account according to what they had comprehended and believed to be true and good in this life. Unanswered, then, is the question, What is the point of having Messengers in the first

⁵⁷⁸ Riḍa, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 1:338-9.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:339.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:339.

place if one can have a meaningful test without them? Is their function merely to inform people of certain details that are *ultimately* nonessential, at least according to this model? In any case, Riḍa takes issue with those who claim that individuals unexposed to the Message will simply be granted Paradise. After all, he argues, that would mean that the presence of Messengers is – as far as many people are concerned – an evil (*sharr*), since it essentially qualifies ‘Unbelievers’ for punishment.⁵⁸¹ It is significant that Riḍa here does not speak of a Messenger-of-Resurrection. Ultimately, it would appear that proposed solutions to the problem of non-exposure to the Message are bound to result in other kinds of problems. The solution adopted by Riḍa seems to place the necessity for Messengers into question (although it does not portray Messengers as being the sole cause for punishment). On the other hand, as noted in the previous chapter, the notion of a Messenger-of-Resurrection leads to more questions than answers regarding the nature of the Message of such a figure.

Having noted the general stance adopted by Riḍa (and, at least according to *al-Manār*, ‘Abduh as well) regarding salvation (and before proceeding with Riḍa’s views on the duration and purpose of punishment), it is worth noting that there is currently a trend among some Muslim academics to employ and/or reference (‘Abduh and) Riḍā’s discussions on salvation. What follows is an evaluation of a representative sampling of that discourse.

2.2. *Assessing the Influence of Riḍā in a Contemporary Debate on Pluralism*

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 1:339.

In *Qur'ān, Liberation, and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression*, contemporary Muslim academic Farid Esack of South Africa presents an Islamic justification for religious pluralism. Much of his argument is based on Riḍā's *tafsīr*. One response to Esack would come from another contemporary Muslim academic, T. Winter of the United Kingdom. What follows is a demonstration of the manner in which Riḍā's *tafsīr* is at times erroneously employed and/or referenced in this debate.

Among Esack's objectives in *Qur'ān, Liberation, and Pluralism*, the two that are most relevant for our purposes are: 1. establishing "the idea of qur'anic hermeneutics as a contribution to the development of theological pluralism within Islam,"⁵⁸² and 2. a reexamination of "the way the Qur'an defines Self and Other (believer and non-believer) in order to make space for the righteous and just Other in a theology of pluralism for liberation."⁵⁸³ To this end, Esack refers to contemporary scholars Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) and Mohammed Arkoun, as well as various works of *tafsīr* by prominent scholars, including Riḍā, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), Ibn al-'Arabī, and M. Ḥussain al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981).

Esack cites Riḍā's commentary on Q. 3:19 to demonstrate that Riḍā was of the opinion that the terms *dīn* and *islām* used in the verse signify "the intensely personal submission of the individual to God and the universal spirit, in which all religious communities partake" and which bear "no relationship to conventional Islam."⁵⁸⁴ Moreover, Esack observes that, unlike the other exegetes he examines, Riḍā makes an

⁵⁸² See Farid Esack, *Qur'ān, Liberation, and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 14.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 127-8.

“explicit distinction between reified and non-reified *islam*.”⁵⁸⁵ And though Riḍā’s interpretation may appear to be a modernist, innovative one, Esack goes on to argue that, based on the work of Wilferd Cantwell-Smith⁵⁸⁶ and Jame Smith⁵⁸⁷, it is “closer to the earliest interpretation of this text and of *islam* than contemporary Muslim conservatism may want to concede.”⁵⁸⁸

Esack also looks to Riḍā’s commentary on Q. 2:62 and 5:48 to argue that Riḍā “seems to acknowledge Jews, Christians, and Sabians as ‘believers’”⁵⁸⁹ who belong to the same religion (*dīn*).⁵⁹⁰ And given the declaration in Q. 4:123-4 that being a Believer (*mu’min*) is a condition for salvation, Esack attempts to demonstrate a Qur’anic basis for religious pluralism – a pluralism wherein *deeds* are factored as intrinsic parts of faith. Indeed, Riḍā himself asserts the importance of deeds and its association with faith in, among other places, his commentary on Q. 2:62 (as noted above),⁵⁹¹ as well as his commentary on Q. 8:2-4.⁵⁹²

Significant for Esack is Riḍā’s commentary on Q. 5:48, a verse which states:

And We have revealed to you [i.e. Muḥammad] the Book in truth, confirming that which is before it of the Book and a guardian over it. Judge between them, then, according to what God has revealed, and do not follow their illusory desires, diverging from what came to you of the Truth. To each of you, We have alid down an ordinance (*shir’ah*) and a clear path (*minhaj*); and had God pleased, He would have made you one nation, but [He wanted] to test you concerning what He gave to you. Be, then, forward in good deeds. To God is the ultimate return of all of you, that He may inform you of that wherein you differed.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁸⁶ See Wilferd Cantwell-Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Mentor Books, 1991).

⁵⁸⁷ See Jane Smith, *A Historical and Semantic Study of the Term ‘Islam’ as seen in a Sequence of Qur’an Commentaries* (Montana: University of Montana Press, 1975).

⁵⁸⁸ Esack, *Qur’ān*, 131.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 167-8.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 122.

Here, Esack notes, Riḍā makes a distinction between the religion (*dīn*), “which is one,” and the various revealed laws (*sharī‘ahs*), “which can abrogate” one another.⁵⁹³ As such, though there is only one *dīn*, God allows for a diversity within that *dīn* (just as the theory of abrogation [*naskh*] leads to a diversity of laws within Islam itself) due to the varying capacities of humans, or else God would have made all of humanity ‘a single nation’ (Q. 5:351). Thus, according to Esack, unlike ‘traditional’ interpretations which affirm that Q. 5:48 was addressed only to Muslims and pre-Muḥammadan communities, Riḍā maintains that Q. 5:48 is inclusivist in that it is addressed not only to Muslims, but to “the People of the Book and to humankind in general.”⁵⁹⁴ (I will address Esack’s claim here below).

On the other hand, Esack admits that there are elements of Riḍā’s commentary that are antithetical to *pure* religious pluralism. For example, Esack notes that “*islam*, in even the most personalist interpretations offered by Rida, was also lived out as a set of injunctions within the paramaters of formalized *shari‘ah*”⁵⁹⁵ – even if Esack would seem to interpret Riḍā’s position as being inclusive of systems of *sharī‘ah* that are beyond Islam (such as those of the ‘People of the Book’).⁵⁹⁶ Moreover, Esack notes that Riḍā (in his commentary on Q. 5:48) appears to “counterbalance his ideas on the validity of religious pluralism” by engaging in

a lengthy discussion on the supposed unsuitability of both the ‘stagnant legal severity of Judaism...[and] the legal leniency...spiritual excesses...and acquiescence to worldly power’ of Christianity. [Riḍā] then contrasts this with the supposed supremacy of a moderate and dynamic Islam.⁵⁹⁷

⁵⁹³ Ibid., 167.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 167-8.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., 132.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 167-8.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., 171.

Esack also recognizes that even in his commentary on Q. 2:62, Riḍā

deals at length with the question of salvation for those who did not encounter a prophet, or receive his or her message, and even reflects on the necessity or otherwise of believing in the prophethood of Muhammad as a condition of salvation. [Riḍā] interprets ‘those who have faith’ as ‘those Muslims who followed Muhammad during his lifetime and all those who follow him until the Day of Resurrection[.]’⁵⁹⁸

Nevertheless, given how Riḍā is perceived to have only *reflected* “on the necessity or otherwise of believing in the prophethood of Muhammad as a condition of salvation,” Esack continues by stating, “[Riḍā] says that ‘whosoever among them who has faith’ is a specification of the other three groups mentioned, i.e. those among the Jews, Christians, and Sabeans who believe with a ‘correct faith.’”⁵⁹⁹

In the final analysis, Esack portrays Riḍā as asserting “the validity of other religious paths” in a post-Muḥammadan world.⁶⁰⁰

To my mind, Esack’s portrayal represents a misreading of Riḍā. Esack’s discussion leads the reader to believe that Riḍā simply finds Islam to be superior to other paths that are legitimate and salvific *in and of themselves*. In reality, Riḍā not only finds religions such as Judaism and Christianity to be inferior, he also believes Islam to be the primary path to salvation *so long as* one has been exposed to the Muḥammadan Message in its ‘true’ form. Otherwise, if one has not been ‘properly’ exposed to the Message, then some of Riḍā’s *ostensibly* pluralistic statements begin to make more sense.⁶⁰¹ In fact, much of what Esack interprets as being pluralistic should be viewed in a different light.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., 165.

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., 165-6.

⁶⁰¹ One must also not overlook the possibility that Riḍā sometimes had Muslims in mind when speaking of *islām* in a general sense. Such an approach certainly serves as an effective means of explaining – especially during a time in which Muslims were weak in an unprecedented manner – why individuals formally adhering to Islam could maintain values and beliefs that were seemingly antithetical to the religion.

While it is true that Riḍā (and ‘Abduh before him) speaks of the importance of the concept of *islām* vis-à-vis Islam the religion, this must be read in the context of the *entirety* of his commentary on Q. 2:62. While Riḍā conceives of *islām* in its broadest sense, his position is that once one is exposed to Muḥammad’s Message in its ‘true’ form, he/she is to be held accountable – even if he/she had already been exposed to what Muslims would consider the ‘remnants’ of an older Message. How else are we to understand Riḍā’s apparent sponsorship of al-Ghazālī’s criterion (which was to be applied to non-Muslims in a post-Muḥammadan world, and not simply those living during the ‘gaps’ between Prophets), not to mention his own contribution that Americans may be counted among al-Ghazālī’s first category of non-Muslims, and that the third group is similar to the first? Riḍā was not merely ‘reflecting,’ or else he surely would not have concluded his commentary on Q. 2:62 without providing a counterview.

Esack’s reading of Riḍā becomes even more problematic when one examines the latter’s commentary on Q. 5:69, which, similar to Q. 2:62, states, “For the Believers, the Jews, the Sabians, and the Christians – those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds – there is no fear: they will not grieve.”⁶⁰² Here, Riḍā states that when one examines the previous and subsequent verses, one is left with the conclusion that “the People of the Book did not uphold the religion (*dīn*) of God.”⁶⁰³

How, then, can Esack characterize Riḍā as someone who deemed the paths of the ‘People of the Book’ (and possibly other non-Muslims)⁶⁰⁴ – in a post-Muḥammadan

⁶⁰² Riḍā notes and dismisses the theory that the order of groups listed in Q. 5:69 would indicate that Christians were in a better place with God than Sabians, who were in a better place than Jews, who were in a better place than hypocrites. (Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 6:479)

⁶⁰³ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 6:476.

⁶⁰⁴ Incidentally, Riḍā states that Zoroastrians could potentially be counted among the ‘People of the Book.’ (Ibid., 4:315-6)

world – as belonging to the same religion (*dīn*)? That Riḍā would interpret ‘whosoever among them who has faith’ (Q. 2:62) as being inclusive of Jews, Christians, and Sabians makes perfect sense so long as one keeps in mind Riḍā’s discussion on looking beyond official religious communal affiliations. As such, the references to Jews, Christians, and Sabians may be regarded as simply being indications of origins, affiliations, or even ethnicity. Indeed, as Mohammad Bamyeh notes, in Muḥammad’s Arabian context, terms such as “Jew” and “Christian” tended to refer to tribal membership as opposed to religious beliefs.⁶⁰⁵ That Riḍā would think along these lines is supported by the fact that he interprets the following Qur’anic statement as being in reference to historical figures like the Abyssinian al-Najāshī,⁶⁰⁶ as well as the ‘People of the Book’ in general who believe in Muḥammad’s Message⁶⁰⁷:

Some of the People of the Book believe in God, in what has been sent down to you and in what was sent down to them, humbling themselves before God; they would never sell God’s Revelation for a small price. These people will have their rewards with their Lord; God is swift in reckoning. (Q. 3:199)

Otherwise, Riḍā may also have in mind those who are among the People of the Book who are *muslim* in the eyes of God, either according to al-Ghazālī’s criterion or by secretly believing in Islam. Such a position is therefore quite different from asserting that other religious paths are valid, as that speaks to the legitimacy of the *substance* of the paths themselves in a post-Muḥammadan world.

⁶⁰⁵ See Mohammad A. Bamyeh, *The Social Origins of Islam: Mind, Economy, Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 79-80.

⁶⁰⁶ Al-Najāshī was the Christian Abyssinian king (Negus) who, much to the dismay of the Meccan pagans, granted refuge to those early Muslims who embarked on the first *hijra*. Muslim traditions would maintain that he converted to Islam.

⁶⁰⁷ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 4:315-6.

As for Esack’s reference to Riḍā’s commentary on Q. 5:48, the former fails to examine that discussion in light of its continuation, particularly the commentary on the very next verse, which states:

So [Prophet] judge between them according to what God has sent down. Do not follow their whims, and take good care that they do not tempt you away from any of what God has sent down to you. If they turn away, remember that God intends to punish them for some of the sins they have committed: a great many people are lawbreakers (5:49).

While it is true that Riḍā makes a distinction between the one *dīn* and the multiple *sharī‘ahs*, and considers Q. 5:48 as being addressed to all of humanity, Esack fails to note the following points (which dramatically alter one’s perceptions of Riḍā’s discussion): 1. Riḍā interprets “the Book” as being the Qur’an, which, unlike the Torah and Gospel, “completes the religion (*dīn*)”⁶⁰⁸; 2. Riḍā argues for the unreliability of the earlier Scriptures vis-à-vis the infallible, unchanged Qur’an; 3. He notes that Q. 5:49 commands Muḥammad to judge the ‘People of the Book’ according to what *he* received from God, as opposed to what *they* received from God; and 4. Riḍā argues that while it is true that God established various *sharī‘ahs*, not only have the non-Islamic ones been abrogated, but they cannot be followed in a world in which Muḥammad’s universal Message is available – especially considering the modifications that other religious paths are presumed to have undergone over the years.⁶⁰⁹

Thus, to deduce that Riḍā ever had pluralism in mind is simply unwarranted, especially when one factors his statements elsewhere, such as his declaration (found in *al-Waḥy al-muḥammadī* [The Muḥammadan Revelation]) that Islam is “the religion of all

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., 6:410.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 6:411-22.

peoples.”⁶¹⁰ And lest there still be any doubt regarding Riḍā’s position, I believe that the following statement of his (in reference to “self-deluded” members of the ‘People of the Book,’ and certainly others) should settle the matter once and for all:

No one can be credited with belief (*īmān*) who knows [the Qur’an] and yet disagrees with it by preferring his/her own scriptures...Everyone reached by the call (*da‘wah*) of Muḥammad and to whom its truth is evident, as it is to them, but who rejects and resists, as they reject and resist, gains no positive credit for his belief in former prophets and their books. His belief in God is not an authentic belief, one linked to fear of God and submission (*khushū‘*)”⁶¹¹

Interestingly, we find a similar mischaracterization of Riḍā by Winter in an article entitled “The Last Trump Card: Islam and the Supersession of Other Faiths.” Winter here provides a counterargument against religious pluralism as advocated by Esack and Mahmoud Ayoub (who incidentally makes his case by examining the writings of Rahman and Iranian mullah Sayyid Maḥmūd Ṭāleqānī [d. 1979]).⁶¹² According to Winter, Muslim thinkers such as Esack and Ayoub “characteristically deploy complex hermeneutic strategies of contextualisation and deconstruction in order to unearth the seeds of a theological pluralism from the Koran’s discourse.”⁶¹³ Before proceeding with his response to such pluralistic readings, Winter characterizes Esack’s stance as being a “revival of Rashīd Riḍā’s project of redefining the Koranic concept of ‘believer’ (*mu‘min*), generally understood by the exegetic tradition as a subset of ‘Muslim’, to

⁶¹⁰ See Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *al-Wahy al-muḥammadī* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-‘Alā li-l-Shu‘ūn al-Islāmiyyah, 2000) (originally published in 1933), 26.

⁶¹¹ McAullife, *Qur’ānic Christians*, 173, 176; cf. Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 4:317-8.

⁶¹² See Mahmoud Ayoub, “Nearest in Amity: Christians in the Qur’ān and Contemporary Exegetical Tradition,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8 (1997), 145-64.

⁶¹³ See T. Winter, “The Last Trump Card: Islam and the Supersession of Other Faiths,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 9 (1999) 2, 135.

include all believers in God”⁶¹⁴ – a project that Winter challenges, as he makes the case for Ghazalian “non-categoric supersession.”⁶¹⁵

To my mind, what is perhaps most interesting about this contemporary debate is that, unbeknownst to either Esack or Winter, the latter actually comes out looking to be more on the side of Riḍā than does the former!

2.3. *The Purpose and Duration of Punishment in Hell*

Having noted and clarified Riḍā’s general standard for achieving salvation on the Last Day, the next question becomes, What is to befall those destined for Hell, i.e. the ‘People of Hellfire’? Is their punishment eternal, or will they one day be saved? In answering this question, Riḍā once again looks to the ideas put forth by medieval scholars and emphasizes Divine mercy in arguing – at least in the later volumes of *al-Manār* – that even the ‘wretched’ will be spared of God’s wrath.

In the earlier volumes, on the other hand, Riḍā does not appear to seriously engage in the debate over Hell’s duration. If anything, it almost seems at times as if he (as well as ‘Abduh) was content with the popular view that Hell’s punishment is eternal. For example, in his commentary on Q. 2:162 (“[The Unbelievers] will remain in this state

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., 135.

⁶¹⁵ Winter argues against the pluralists by pointing to: a. the contradictory nature of different religious teachings, which, because of the “law of noncontradiction,” tends to lead to the “problem of transcendental agnosticism”; b. seemingly explicit Scriptural indications of both Islam’s superiority and the impossibility of religious pluralism, c. Islam’s self-proclaimed position as a final, universal religion, d. the consensus of medieval scholars, and e. the numerous hadiths that make a pluralistic position untenable. (It is worth noting that, in relation to Esack, Winter clearly takes the hadith literature more seriously, as he cites numerous hadiths throughout the course of his argument). Winter, however, also points out that Islam need not advocate the eternal damnation of all non-Muslims. As support for this position, he briefly refers to the views of various scholars, particularly al-Ghazālī and Shāh Walī Allāh. Therefore, Winter advocates a model of “non-categoric supersession.” (Ibid., 135-53)

of rejection: their punishment will not be lightened, nor will they be reprieved”) Riḍā notes that he does not recall anything by ‘Abduh regarding this matter. Assured that what will follow are Riḍā’s own views, he states that, as this verse appears to indicate, Hell’s inhabitants will remain in Hell, having been denied God’s mercy – a denial that is continuous. Moreover, Riḍā states that there is no hope for them, for when they passed away, their deeds were cut off, and they were prevented from reflecting and purifying themselves. And, he continues, God will neither pay attention to nor purify them.⁶¹⁶

Despite this, Riḍā’s tone elsewhere is noticeably different. This is perhaps most evident in his commentary on two familiar passages, Q. 6:128 and 11:106-8, to which we now look.

In his commentary on Q. 6:128, Riḍā provides a lengthy analysis of the issue of Hell’s eternity.⁶¹⁷ He begins by informing the reader that he will first summarize al-Ṣuyūṭī’s (d. 911/1505) discussion on this issue, as found in his exegetical work *al-Durr al-manthūr fī al-tafsīr al-ma’thūr*, particularly his discussion on Q. 11:106-7. He goes on to cite various reports that parallel those cited by Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim. He cites, for example, a hadith which states that when the Prophet recited Q. 11:106-7, he stated, “If God wills to remove from Hellfire and admit into Paradise a people from among those who were made wretched, He will do so.”⁶¹⁸ Riḍā then attempts to analyze the exception (e.g. *illā mā shā’a rabbuka*) found in reference to the punishment in Hell (in Q. 6:128, and, with a slightly different wording, in Q. 11:107). He cites the view ascribed to Ibn ‘Abbās that the exception refers to those (Believers) who committed major sins (*al-kabā’ir*) (without repenting) who will be taken out of Hellfire by way of

⁶¹⁶ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 2:53-4.

⁶¹⁷ Ibid., 8:69ff.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid., 8:69.

intercession – a view, it is noted, that is antithetical to the Khārijite claim that such individuals are eternally damned. Also ascribed to Ibn ‘Abbās is the view that the exception refers to God’s volition in commanding Hellfire to consume its inhabitants. According to another voice (al-Sadī), however, Q. 11:107 (and presumably 6:128) has been abrogated by those Medinan verses which indicate permanence. On the other hand, according to another view, the exception is to be applied to the entire Qur’an, particularly those references to people remaining in Hell.⁶¹⁹ Riḍā then cites familiar reports attributed to ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, Abū Hurayrah, Ibn Mas‘ūd, al-Sha‘bī, and ‘Abd-Allāh ibn ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ, all of which speak of Hell becoming desolate. Another interpretation, he notes, is that the exception denotes either a prolongation or a reduction of the duration of punishment. He then cites two positions found in Ibn Abī al-‘Izz’s (d. 792/1389) commentary on the creed of the famous theologian al-Ṭahāwī (d. 321/933) (*Sharḥ al-‘aqīdah al-Taḥāwīyyah*): 1. ‘Unbelievers’ (*al-Kuffār*) will remain in Hell, and Hell – and presumably the Unbelievers – will eventually cease to exist. 2. As maintained by al-Ṭahāwī himself, Unbelievers will remain eternally in a never-ending Hell. Both are described as positions found among Sunnis (*Ahl al-Sunnah*). Riḍā then cites the Jahmite view of a non-eternal Hell (which, as noted earlier, was accompanied by the belief in a non-eternal Heaven), and the view of a non-eternal punishment in Hell, as advocated by Ibn al-‘Arabī and a famous Sufi expounder of his works, ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 805/1402-3).⁶²⁰

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 8:69.

⁶²⁰ Ibid., 8:70.

Riḍā then utilizes considerable space in quoting Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah’s lengthy discussion on this issue in *Hādī al-arwāḥ*.⁶²¹ This is followed by words of praise for Ibn al-Qayyim and his status as a scholar, as well as a declaration that Ibn al-Qayyim was not an oddity, and that other exegetes and theologians adopted a similar view, i.e., of a non-eternal Hell and the eventual salvation of all.⁶²² Riḍā goes on to explain (in a manner that is ostensibly apologetic) that Ibn al-Qayyim’s discussion on this issue was cited for the purpose of providing insights and, more importantly, pointing out the great error committed by people of all communities associated with the popular faiths, namely, claiming: 1. to be the only group that will be saved, and 2. that “the majority of humankind will be punished severely, perpetually, with no end – ever.”⁶²³ As such, Riḍā argues, Ibn al-Qayyim’s discussion is beneficial inasmuch as it allows for a reconsideration of God’s overwhelming mercy. This, he admits, despite the fact that many (*al-jamhūr*) have maintained Hell’s eternity.⁶²⁴

Without explicitly citing Ibn al-Qayyim’s *Shifā’ al-‘alīl*, Riḍā (like Maulana Muhammad ‘Alī) goes on to argue that, linguistically, the Qur’anic words typically interpreted to denote Hell’s eternity could in fact be understood in such a way that temporality is not precluded from the realm of possible meanings. For example, he notes, the word *abad*, which is often understood as meaning ‘forever,’ can actually be used in Arabic to simply denote ‘a long time.’⁶²⁵

Riḍā concludes this section by stating that, in light of the doctrine adopted by many (*al-jamhūr*), this detailed discussion may benefit heretics, but does not harm

⁶²¹ Ibid., 8:70-98.

⁶²² Ibid., 8:98-9.

⁶²³ Ibid., 8:99.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 8:99.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 8:99.

Believers. Finally, we are informed that a continuation of his analysis is to be found in his commentary on Q. 11:106-8, to which we now look.⁶²⁶

Here, we find Riḍā to be once again open to the notion of a non-eternal Hell and the eventual salvation of all. First, with regard to the expression “abiding therein (*khālidīna fīhā*), so long as the heavens and earth endure” (Q. 11:107), used in reference to the duration of the stay in Hellfire, Riḍā states that this signifies permanence, and that one should not think of the earth being referred to here as being the same earth in which we now live. And this is because “this earth will transform and cease to exist at the onset of the Last Day.”⁶²⁷ Nevertheless, Riḍā argues, the expression “except as your Lord pleases (*illā mā shā’a rabbuka*)” (11:107) emphasizes the importance of God’s volition in determining whether punishment in Hell will indeed be continuous. This emphasis on Divine will, he notes, is to be found in other Qur’anic statements, such as, “Say, ‘I do not have the power to benefit or harm myself, except as God pleases’” (7:188).⁶²⁸ And this is further emphasized by the rest of Q. 11:107: “Your Lord does indeed what He wants.”⁶²⁹

And even though Q. 11:108, which speaks of Heaven’s inhabitants, also includes the same exception (“except as your Lord pleases”), Riḍā argues that the concluding expression, “a gift, uninterrupted (*‘aṭā’an ghayr majdhūdh*)” indicates that Heaven is never-ending. Indeed, he argues, the difference between this verse’s concluding expression and that of the preceding verse is significant and telling. It demonstrates, Riḍā argues, the fact that God rewards righteous ‘Believers’ beyond what they earned, whereas ‘Unbelievers’ are recompensed according to their actions. Furthermore, he continues,

⁶²⁶ Ibid., 8:99

⁶²⁷ Ibid., 12:160.

⁶²⁸ Other examples cited include 10:49 and 6:87.

⁶²⁹ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 12:160-1.

those who are among the ‘People of Hellfire’ *deserve* eternal damnation even though their sins were temporal, on the basis that they intended to continue sinning. And such people are the minority, he argues, since Unbelief ceases when various impediments to faith are removed – as exemplified by the example of the Meccan Arabs who eventually became ‘Believers’ after having been fiercely opposed to Islam. Yet even for those who deserve eternal punishment, Riḍā notes that the reference to their ‘perpetual stay’ (*al-khulūd*) in Hellfire can be reasonably assessed in the manner of his earlier commentary in *Sūrat al-An‘ām* (6),⁶³⁰ which, as noted, appears to favor Ibn al-Qayyim’s argument for the eventual salvation of all.

Riḍā, however, is not finished, and he continues his discussion on this very issue at the conclusion of his commentary on *Sūrat Hūd* (11). Here, Riḍā notes that most of the verses that speak of ‘eternality’ (*al-ta’bīd*) are in reference to the Believers’ stay in Heaven. Moreover, he notes that in several instances where the fate of the inhabitants of both Heaven and Hell are mentioned together, an emphasis is made only on the Believers remaining in Heaven ‘forever’ (*abadan*). These include Q. 4:56-7, 121-2, 64:9-10, and 98:6-8. And since the Qur’an would never use words haphazardly or without purpose, he argues, we should expect there to be wisdom in this. After all, he continues, there is a significant difference between reward based on more than just justice, i.e. the reward of Heaven’s inhabitants,⁶³¹ and reward based solely on justice, i.e. the reward of Hell’s inhabitants. But there is a problem with this argument which Riḍā acknowledges: Elsewhere (in Q. 4:169, 33:65,⁶³² and 72:23⁶³³), the Qur’an does use the word *abad* to

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 12:161-2.

⁶³¹ As Riḍā puts it, God rewards by multiples of ten to seven hundred. (Ibid., 12:214-6)

⁶³² I should note that the text that I am using provides incorrect references here.

refer to the punishment of Hell’s inhabitants. (Incidentally, in all three of these instances, we find no similar statement regarding Heaven’s inhabitants in the verses immediately preceding or succeeding them). Having noted this, Riḍā then aborts his line of reasoning, and returns to his original claim that the word *abad* was not necessarily used by the Arabs to mean “forever, without end.”⁶³⁴

Riḍā concludes by first reiterating that while many (*al-jamhūr*) believe in an eternal Hell, some scholars argued otherwise because of the overwhelming evidence of God’s mercy (*rahmah*) and because, according to both reason (*‘aql*) and Revelation (*naql*), He could never be unjust. Riḍā goes on to state that although he had originally intended to mention all the doctrines espoused by the scholars on this issue, he found Ibn al-Qayyim’s discussion and reference to God’s expansive and perfect mercy, as well as His inclusive will – both of which are only truly understood by God Himself – to be sufficient. Riḍā ends by noting that among the later scholars who were opposed to the position maintained by Ibn al-Qayyim are al-Qāḍī al-Shawkānī (in his *tafsīr*, *Fath al-Qadīr*) and al-Sayyid Ḥasan Siddīq Khān (in his *tafsīr*, *Fath al-Bayān*).⁶³⁵

All in all, when it comes to the issue of Hell’s eternity, Riḍā’s commentary is, at least on the surface, contradictory. This may be explained by the fact that *Tafsīr al-Manār* was written over a relatively long period of time, and so one would expect to see a natural evolution in Riḍā’s thinking. His earlier, ‘Abduh-inspired discussions (i.e., on 2:162) have him (and presumably ‘Abduh) appearing to be either indifferent or on the side of an eternal Hell, as he argues that self-reformation after death is not possible – a

⁶³³ Regarding this particular verse, Riḍā states that the disobedience referred to here is a general one that includes disobedience in matters of faith, that is, associating partners with God (*Shirk*). (Ibid., 12:214-6)

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 12:214-6.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 12:216.

position that is antithetical to the justification given by Ibn al-Qayyim for a non-eternal Hell.⁶³⁶ In his later discussions, however, he ultimately appears to lean towards the position adopted by Ibn al-Qayyim. Had Riḍā lived long enough to complete his commentary, one would expect that he would have also discussed the significance of Q. 78:23. As for the argument that the word *abad* does not necessarily denote ‘forever,’ ‘without end,’ etc., its main disadvantage from a practical standpoint, as noted in the previous chapter, is that it makes a Scripture-based argument for an eternal Heaven more challenging. Unlike Ibn al-Qayyim, however, who at least tackles this issue in *Shifā’ al-‘alīl*, Riḍā does not. Finally, one has to wonder why Riḍā even bothers to note that the word *abad* is used more frequently with regard to Heaven. The very fact that it is used at all (and more than once, at that) with regard to Hell makes this observation *effectively* futile.

In sum, we find that while ‘Abduh’s views on salvation are sometimes difficult to discern in *al-Manār*, both he and Riḍā seem to favor the special role played by both *islām* and Islam, and, at least in the case of Riḍā, the role played by Divine mercy. As such, the latter maintains that most of humanity will not be among the Unbelievers who will remain in Hell continuously, and that even such Unbelievers will probably receive Divine mercy and attain salvation eventually. As would be expected given his late position chronologically, we find that in relation to scholars such as al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-‘Arabī, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Ibn al-Qayyim, less of Riḍā’s discussion is original, and much of it

⁶³⁶ Even so, it is worth noting that in his commentary on Q. 2:80, Riḍā refers to the ‘Jewish’ claim that the Jews will only be in the Fire for seven days, and states that this claim was made without proper knowledge. Riḍā does not, however, state that the stay in Hell will be either temporal or eternal. (Ibid., 1:362). In his discussion on the other verse which refers to the ‘Jewish’ claim of a temporal Hell (Q. 3:24), Riḍā argues that most Muslims of his time also fall into the trap of believing that those Muslims who commit major sins will only be in Hell for a brief period of time, and that non-Muslims will remain in Hell no matter what their deeds were. (Ibid., 3:266-8)

consists of references to and quotations by certain scholars of the past – a feature that many would erroneously consider uncharacteristic of the modern Salafiyyah movement.

3. Excursus: Beyond Riḍā: Sayyid Quṭb as an Example of Divergent Evolution?

As noted, the modern Salafiyyah movement under Riḍā (and, to a lesser extent, ‘Abduh) is generally considered to have been a major influence on Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn*). It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Riḍā’s views (including those on salvation) were wholly adopted by the Brotherhood. In attempting to identify divergences (as well as convergences), and briefly assess why they would exist, what follows is an analysis of the relevant writings of a figure who is arguably the Brotherhood’s best-known member, Sayyid Quṭb.

Sayyid Quṭb Ibrāhīm Ḥusayn Shādhilī was born in 1906 in Upper Egypt. The son of an educated nationalist, Quṭb is said to have memorized the Qur’an by age ten, and received a bachelor of arts degree in arts education from Cairo’s Dār al-‘Ulūm in 1933. Thereafter, he worked as an inspector for the Ministry of Education, and wrote various literary works and newspaper articles. His life would take a new turn in 1948, when he was sent to the United States of America to analyze Western education systems. Returning three years later with a master of arts degree in education, Quṭb came to acquire a distaste for certain aspects of American society, particularly its racism towards Blackamericans, its liberal intermixing of the sexes, and its support for the state of Israel.⁶³⁷

⁶³⁷ See Shahrough Akhavi, “Quṭb, Sayyid,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, Vol. 3, ed. John L. Esposito (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 400-1.

In 1953, Quṭb joined forces with the Muslim Brotherhood. In light of the tense relationship that would develop between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Free Officers who ruled over Egypt, Quṭb was arrested and brutally tortured (despite his poor health), before finally being executed in 1966. Having had a number of his colleagues killed before him in jail, it is perhaps not surprising that Quṭb would develop the belief that Muslims must engage in active resistance – physical or otherwise – against an unjust government until it is replaced by a truly Islamic one – an idea developed in his famous treatise *Ma‘ālim fī al-ṭarīq* (Milestones).⁶³⁸

Most relevant for our purposes is his ever popular *tafsīr, Fī zilāl al-Qur’ān* (In the Shade of the Qur’an). As will become apparent, Quṭb’s discussion on the fate of ‘Others’ demonstrates Riḍā and ‘Abduh’s influence, while ultimately following a considerably different path. As will become apparent, despite his emphasis on God’s volition to do as He pleases, Quṭb could *never* be mistaken for a pluralist.

One instance of Quṭb’s borrowing from Riḍā and ‘Abduh is to be found in his commentary on Q. 2:62, where he states that the verse (particularly, “whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does good deeds, shall have nothing to fear and they shall not grieve”) makes it clear that what matters most is correct belief and “not clannishness of race (*jins*) or nation (*qawm*).” But, he warns – perhaps foreseeing the potential for later scholars to misread this as an argument for pluralism – “that is of course [only true] before the Muḥammadan mission (*al-ba‘thah al-Muḥammadiyyah*). As for after it, the form of the final faith has already been delimited”⁶³⁹

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 401-2.

⁶³⁹ See Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī zilāl al-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1982), 1:75-6. Regarding the groups noted in Q. 2:62, Quṭb defines “those who believe” (*alladhīna āmanū*) as being Muslims, “*alladhīna hādū*” as being either the Jews who “returned to God” or the Jews who are the “children of Yahūdā,” “*al-Naṣārā*” as

Quṭb continues this line of thought in his commentary on Q. 3:19. Here, he states:

[God] does not accept from anyone a religion (*dīn*) other than [Islam]. Islam is that which is submission (*al-istislām*), obedience (*tā‘ah*), and observance (*al-itbā‘*). Therefore, the religion which God accepts from people is not simply a conception in the intellect. Nor is it simply a belief (*taṣḍīq*) in the heart. Simply put, it is fulfilling the truth of that belief and that conception... And there is no Islam without submission to God, obedience to His Prophet, observance of His course (*manhaj*), and judging by His Book in life’s affairs.⁶⁴⁰

Quṭb continues by stating that those Jews who stated, “The Fire will only touch us for a few days (*ayyāman ma‘dūdāt*)” (3:24), cannot be considered among the ‘People of the Book’ (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), and are in fact Unbelievers. Quṭb defines ‘Unbelievers’ (*al-Kuffār*) as being those who do not accept appealing to the Book of God. (Quṭb goes on to warn that those who take the ‘Unbelievers’ as their helpers [*awliyā*] have nothing whatsoever to do with God). Such a definition, of course, dramatically alters the way in which the very notion of ‘People of the Book’ is to be understood(!).⁶⁴¹ (This is to be contrasted with Riḍā’s discussion of how many Christians, for example, had ceased to be *muslims*, while still maintaining their status as ‘People of the Book’). Quṭb then proceeds to discuss the concept of God’s oneness (*Tawḥīd*) and its implications. The problem with Christians, he argues, is that they mix the will of God with the will of Jesus, and they differ greatly among themselves in their ideas – a historical cause for much bloodshed. And the basis for this bloodshed, he argues, is explained by the second part of Q. 3:19:

the “followers of Jesus,” and “*al-Ṣābi‘ūn*” not as Sabeans, but as most likely being those pre-Islamic *Ḥanīf* Arabs who abandoned polytheism in favor of the monotheism of Abraham. Quṭb states that this understanding of “*al-Ṣābi‘ūn*” is more likely to be true than that found in other works of *tafsīr*, i.e., that they are ‘star-worshippers.’ (Ibid., 1:75)

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., 1:377.

⁶⁴¹ As Neal Robinson notes, “it is arguable that Quṭb is skating on dangerously thin ice when he describes the expression ‘People of the [Book]’ as misleading. If as he alleges, Jews and Christians today are much as they were in the time of the Prophet, how can he question the appropriateness of the label which God gives them in the Qur’ān?” See Neal Robinson, “Sayyid Quṭb’s Attitude Towards Christianity: Sūra 9.29–35 in *Fī Zilāl al-Qur’ān*,” *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 173.

“Those who were given the Book did not disagree among themselves, except after certain knowledge came to them, out of envy among themselves.” And lest one argue that the division among Christians was the result of ignorance, Quṭb argues that they had already received definitive knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-qāṭi‘*) of God’s oneness and uniqueness, human nature, and the reality of servitude.⁶⁴² As such, they are to be held accountable before God.

So much for those who have previously received the Message. What about those who have not? To answer this question, we first look to Quṭb’s analysis of Q. 17:15. Here, Quṭb is brief, and demonstrates an obvious departure from Riḍā. He states that it is due to God’s mercy (*rahmah*) that He only punishes after He sends forth a messenger who warns and reminds people, and it is due to God’s mercy that he does not take people to account based on what they might derive from the signs (*āyāt*) found in nature and the natural disposition (*al-fiṭrah*) of humans. Moreover, he states, “it is a mercy (*rahmah*) from God that He excuses His servants before seizing them with punishment. God’s manner proceeds like this in the destruction of the villages and the seizing of their people in this world.”⁶⁴³

Quṭb has in fact more to say on this matter in his earlier commentary on Q. 4:165. Here, Quṭb discusses the ability of the intellect (*al-‘aql*) to comprehend God’s signs; however, he once again refers to the mercy of being taken to task only after receiving the Message.⁶⁴⁴ And though the intellect is to be utilized to understand and accept the Message, and though “Islam is the religion of the intellect,” he nevertheless states (seemingly in response to Riḍā) that “it is not the role of the intellect to judge the religion

⁶⁴² Quṭb, *Fī zilāl al-Qur’ān*, 1:377-80.

⁶⁴³ Ibid. 4:2217.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., 2:805-6.

and its decisions, with respect to validity and invalidity, acceptance and rejection, after it is reassured of the validity of their origins from God.”⁶⁴⁵ To do otherwise, he argues, would be Unbelief (*kufr*).⁶⁴⁶ Thus, Quṭb’s view on the fate of those not exposed to the Message seems congruous with that of Ibn Taymiyyah; however, no mention is made here of a Messenger-of-Resurrection.

In any case, Quṭb continues by stating that, as followers of the Prophet, Muslims *must* spread the Message, and remove any obstacles that stand in the way of the call to that Message – even if this is accomplished by way of Jihad. In so doing, he argues, Muslims will be able to both maintain God’s proof against people and save them from – and here we find an apparent contradiction – punishment in the Afterlife and misfortune in this life. Otherwise, he argues, humanity will be in error and will experience misfortune – but not punishment – in this life, and God will have no proof against humanity in the Afterlife. As in his commentary on Q. 17:15, Quṭb emphasizes that, so long as the Message has not been received, one is not taken to task for what may be derived by way of signs found in the Universe, the natural disposition, and, he also notes, the intellect (*al-‘aql*). For even the brightest minds, such as Aristotle and Plato, he states, were unable to reach the basic Message brought forth by the Messengers. And even when monotheism was reached independent of the Message, as was the case of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten, the differences were nevertheless significant (e.g. Akhenaten’s one god was Aten, a sun god). Quṭb concludes his discussion by stating that the proof against God has ceased to exist on account of the last Message – a Message that is general and

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid., 2:806-7.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., 2:807.

for all people and all times.⁶⁴⁷ Thus, while Muslims are expected to spread the Message, because of the universal nature of that Message, Quṭb appears to be saying that it will nevertheless be at least generally known throughout the world until the Last Day. Left out of Quṭb's discussion is an explanation of the specific *modus operandi* of how one qualifies as being a receiver of the Message – a problem that was also observed in the writings of Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah. One can only wonder what Quṭb had in mind. Is it simply hearing something, positive or negative, about Islam? And what about those living in relative isolation, such as the 12th century Anatolian Christian monks described by al-Ghazālī? In any case, Quṭb does not seem to assume, as al-Ghazālī does, that throughout the course of post-Muḥammadan human history, many – and possibly most – have not been 'properly' exposed to the religion (if at all). We are left with the impression that the overwhelming majority of – and possibly all – non-Muslims (who are sane and of age) will be held accountable on the Day of Judgement for not having been Muslim.

What then about the Afterlife? Do Hell's inhabitants have the opportunity to attain salvation? Here, we find Quṭb emphasizing Divine justice over Divine mercy, especially in comparison to Riḍā, Ibn al-'Arabī, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah. A simple examination of Quṭb's commentary on those Qur'anic verses typically employed to argue for a non-eternal Hell (i.e. 6:128, 11:106-8, and 78:23) seems to bear this out. Regarding Q. 6:128, Quṭb describes the stay in Hell as being a continuous one, and the exception as essentially being a *reminder* of God's unlimited volition.⁶⁴⁸ (This is unlike Riḍā, who emphasizes Divine volition to explain the

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 2:809-14.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 3:1207.

significant role given to Divine mercy). In looking to Quṭb’s commentary on Q. 11:106-8, we find a similar discussion. And in light of the apparent difference between the description of Heaven and Hell, Quṭb describes the conclusion of Q. 11:108 (“a gift, uninterrupted”) as being an assurance to Heaven’s inhabitants that their stay in Heaven will not be cut off.⁶⁴⁹ Quṭb, however, does not discuss this further as being an indication of a temporal Hell. Finally, in his commentary on Q. 78:23, Quṭb simply states that the long stay in Hell will be renewed “ages (*aḥāqban*) after ages.”⁶⁵⁰ He, however, never entertains the idea that these ages could ever come to an end.

And while such statements may ultimately be deemed to be ambiguous, Quṭb’s vision of an eternal Hell is explicitly demonstrated in his commentary on those Qur’anic verses that refer to Hell lasting ‘forever’ (*abadan*), particularly 4:169 and 33:65. (As for Q. 72:23, which declares that those who disobey God and His Messenger will remain in Hellfire ‘forever’ (*abadan*), Quṭb is brief, describing the verse as generally being a clear warning, while making no reference to the duration of the punishment).⁶⁵¹

Regarding Q. 4:169 (“[God will not guide Unbelievers to any path] except that of Hell, where they will remain ‘forever’ (*abadan*) – this is easy for God”), Quṭb states that it is not God’s business to forgive and guide those who disbelieve and act unjustly, as it is they who cut off the means for their forgiveness. Accordingly, he states, “they deserve eternal stay (*al-khulūd al-mu’abbad*) in [Hell],” and that they have no hope for escaping it.⁶⁵² In his commentary on Q. 33:65 (“There [the Unbelievers] will stay ‘forever’ (*abadan*), with no to befriend or support them”), Quṭb states that the ‘Unbelievers’ (*al-*

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., 4:1929.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid., 6:3807.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 6:3737.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 2:813.

Kāfirūn) will remain in a fire prepared for them for “a long time, the duration of which only God knows. It has no end save in God’s knowledge, inasmuch as God desires.” Nevertheless, despite this recognition of God’s unbound volition, he continues by declaring that ultimately “there is no hope for salvation from this fire.”⁶⁵³

Quṭb makes no further elaborations on Hell’s duration in his commentary on other verses typically employed to argue for an eternal Hell, such as Q. 2:80-1,⁶⁵⁴ 2:161-2,⁶⁵⁵ and 2:167.⁶⁵⁶ While God’s freedom to forgive everyone is recognized, it is clear that Quṭb certainly believes that Hell’s inhabitants deserve eternal punishment, and that they will probably experience precisely that. And even if God were to forgive Hell’s inhabitants, one may wonder whether Quṭb conceives of this possibility as, as al-Ṭaḥāwī would seem to have it, simply entailing a non-eternal existence for Hell’s inhabitants, or, as some of the other case studies would have it, the eventual salvation of all. The answer to this is to be found in his commentary on Q. 7:40, a verse which states, “Indeed, those who have denied Our Revelations and rejected them arrogantly – the gates of heaven shall not be opened for them and they shall not enter Paradise until the camel passes through the eye of the needle. Thus We punish the wicked sinners.” Here, Quṭb, following the wording of the verse, is brief in stating that *only when* the camel passes through the eye of the needle will those who denied God’s Revelations and rejected them arrogantly have their “invocation (of God) or repentance accepted – and that time has passed,” and it is only

⁶⁵³ Ibid., 5:2882-3.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid., 1:85-6.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid., 1:151.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., 1:154.

then that they will be admitted into Heaven.⁶⁵⁷ As such, *were* God to actually forgive Hell's inhabitants, Quṭb's vision *seems* to only have their non-eternal existence in mind.

All things considered, when comparing Quṭb to the other case studies, it would appear that his general views on salvation are closer to Ibn Taymiyyah, as opposed to Riḍā, with regard to non-Muslims being held accountable for not being Muslim. With regard to Hell's duration, he is closer to al-Ghazālī, as he maintains the view of an eternal Hell. As for his methodology, it appears to be most similar to that of Ibn al-‘Arabī (!), since we generally find only ambiguous references to hadiths and the views of the *Salaf* ('Pious Ancestors') and previous scholars – this, despite the fact that, elsewhere, Quṭb does cite scholars including Riḍā⁶⁵⁸ and Ibn al-Qayyim.⁶⁵⁹

Thus, we find that under the influence of Quṭb (and certainly others), the Muslim Brotherhood that Riḍā had influenced had ostensibly gone its own way on the issue of salvation. And while intentions are ultimately difficult to discern, there are many potential reasons why a modern scholar like Riḍā, living during a time of Western superiority, would put forth a relatively 'merciful' vision of salvation. Most probable perhaps is the following: In a time in which religion in general and Islam in particular were being criticized by intellectuals associated with the ascending Western powers in an unprecedented manner, the subconscious desire to portray Islam as a rational yet merciful religion was surely more present during early 20th century, colonized Egypt than it was

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., 3:1291.

⁶⁵⁸ For example, see Sayyid Quṭb, *Khaṣā'is al-taṣawwur al-Islāmī wa muqawwamātuh* (Cairo: 'Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1962), 20.

⁶⁵⁹ For example, in *Ma'ālim fī al-tarīq* (Milestones), Quṭb provides a lengthy reference to Ibn al-Qayyim's discussion on the evolution of the Prophet's relationship with non-Muslims. For example, see Sayyid Quṭb, *Milestones*, trans. Ahmad Zaki Hammad (Indianapolis: American Trust, 1993), 43ff.

during any time in the medieval period – the Mongol conquests notwithstanding.⁶⁶⁰ On the other hand, there are many potential reasons why a modern Egyptian scholar of the very next generation would arrive at conclusions that are, in relation to the case studies examined here, on the other end of the spectrum with regard to the emphasis on mercy. A disillusionment with Western superiority, paralleling the withdrawal of colonialist forces from Egypt and the coming to power of ‘non-Islamic’, secular, nationalistic governments that were often violently opposed to groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, could certainly lead to a reactionary response. Such speculations of psychological motivations must, of course, be tempered by a recognition of the role played by Riḍā and Quṭb’s incongruent methodological principles (as described above) in arriving at their radically different conclusions.

4. Conclusion

In sum, we find that while attempting to demonstrate the importance of true faith over belonging to a particular religious community, Riḍā (and *al-Manār*’s ‘Abduh) ultimately maintains Islam’s superiority – despite the fact that many later interpreters would have difficulty in discerning this. Even so, Riḍā’s emphasis on Divine mercy leads him to look to the works of both al-Ghazālī and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah to present a model that, taken as a whole, is arguably more ‘merciful’ in emphasis than that of all the

⁶⁶⁰ It is perhaps telling that in Jane McAullife’s examination of a number of medieval and modern commentaries of the Qur’an, she finds that it is only the twentieth-century works (including Riḍā’s) that “prompt at least general reference to the contemporary context and the Christian component thereof.” (McAullife, *Qur’ānic Christians*, 36) On the other hand, when it comes to the medieval exegetes, McAullife notes that “it is frequently difficult to determine from internal evidence alone whether a commentary was written in Anatolia or Andalusia, whether its *mufassir* (commentator) had ever seen a Mongol or Crusader or had ever conversed with a Christian or conducted business with one.” (Ibid., 35)

other case studies since it combines: a. the belief that only a minority will be among Hell's inhabitants, and b. the belief in the eventual salvation – or at least its likelihood – of all of Hell's inhabitants. But the role of context cannot be underestimated, and it is noteworthy that a figure highly influenced by Riḍā's writings but living in later times (i.e. Quṭb) could go quite a different route.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Among some of the most prominent scholars in the history of Islam, there does indeed exist a rich diversity of opinions regarding salvation and the fate of non-Muslims. While scholars such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-‘Arabī, and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā all maintain that God would not take to task ‘earnest’ non-Muslims for not being Muslim, they differ when it comes to explaining how such non-Muslims would indeed be ‘tested’: Al-Ghazālī seems to avoid the issue as he states that God’s mercy will be upon them and that most of humanity will enter Heaven; Ibn al-‘Arabī speaks not only of Divine mercy, but also of a Messenger-of-Resurrection being sent to those who did not ‘properly’ receive the Message; and Riḍā argues that such individuals will be taken to task according to their own deductions and moral standards. Other scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, do not seem to leave much room for Divine mercy on the Day of Judgment for any sane, adult non-Muslim who had received the Message, as both ‘sincerity’ and ‘proper’ reception of the Message are never explicitly factored as excuses – even if a Messenger-of-Resurrection is included in the equation for those who simply received no Message –, and as most of humanity seems destined for Hell. According to this model, Divine justice and the superiority of Muḥammad’s Message have to be maintained, or else the question becomes, What exactly is the use of

God sending Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd-Allāh as a Messenger? Then again, these are the same concerns with which all the other scholars had to contend. Al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-‘Arabī, and Riḍā were certainly not soteriological religious pluralists, at least in the John Hick sense. As far as they were concerned, the path of Muḥammad is *the* ideal path to God, and justice, as a Divine attribute, must manifest itself. And yet, there is one major factor that prevents them from reaching Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim’s conclusion: the perceived role of Divine mercy.

Even so, Divine mercy always finds a way – *some way* – to make its presence felt in *all* of the main case studies, particularly through the oft-made connection to Divine omnipotence and the idea that God does as He pleases, not being bound by even His own threats. Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim are certainly no exceptions in this regard. In fact, one could say that, according to their view of the future, Divine mercy makes a triumphant reappearance (while existing underneath the surface all along). As they would have it, Divine mercy is manifested in the – at the very least, probable – salvation of all, signaling the end of Hell itself, which was, in that case, a purgatory of sorts. Riḍā would also adopt this view, only adding to his emphasis on Divine mercy. And while Ibn al-‘Arabi would argue that some will always remain in Hell, he maintained that Hell will eventually transform from a place of torment to one of pleasure, with only a veil separating the now-content inhabitants of Hell from their Maker. Meanwhile, for his all emphasis on mercy, and even though he *seems* to speak of the futility of never-ending punishment, al-Ghazālī ultimately speaks of the eternal damnation of a small minority. Therefore – at least based on these case studies – such an emphasis on Divine mercy can hardly be deemed a modern hermeneutic phenomenon.

Even so, it is perhaps ironic that despite the fact that the majority of case studies examined here argue otherwise, we can only conclude that the view of a never-ending punishment in Hell and the prohibition of some from ever receiving pleasure in the Afterlife has tended to be the norm, rather than the exception. For whereas al-Ghazālī never feels compelled to justify his view of eternal damnation, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, Ibn al-‘Arabi, and Riḍā (given his wholesale citation of Ibn al-Qayyim’s discussion) all engage in apologetics to prove that even though their respective positions seem unique and unusual, they are actually correct and – at least in most cases – in accordance with the views of the earliest Muslims, i.e. the *Salaf*, as well as other prominent Muslims of the past. (Even the ever-confident Maulana Muhammad ‘Ali must resort to citing the names of Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, and Ibn al-‘Arabī to support his argument that all will be saved). They also generally emphasize the importance of not underestimating God’s mercy and compassion – a sure sign that all encountered their fair share of skeptics. These skeptics include scholars like Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, who finds no problem in declaring Ibn Taymiyyah’s position to be heretical and worthy of the charge of Unbelief (*Kufr*). Indeed, those who argue for the eventual salvation of all have to get around the presumption of *ijmā‘* (unanimous consensus), which I would argue simply cannot exist in light of these high-profile dissensions (as well as the arguments that they themselves put forth for why *ijmā‘* had not been reached). Moreover, it is quite interesting that, notwithstanding their major differences regarding other issues, some of the most prominent scholars of all time would agree on the non-eternality of punishment – Ibn al-‘Arabī and Ibn Taymiyyah standing together.

At any rate, perhaps the most significant of hurdles for these scholars has been attempting to utilize the Qur'an and Hadith literature as proof-texts. Although Divine mercy is clearly emphasized and arguably given priority in Islamic Scripture, it almost seems as if any discussion of the salvation of non-Muslims involves apologetic reinterpretations of specific Qur'anic verses and hadiths. After all, there is not one verse in the Qur'an which explicitly states that all, or even 'sincere' non-Muslims, will eventually be saved. On the other hand, there are *numerous* verses which speak of the damnation of Unbelievers, and Hell's inhabitants remaining in Hell. (This is primarily what leads J. Robson to speak of Maulana Muhammad 'Ali's discourse as being misleading). And yet the case for a non-eternal Hell, as articulated by Ibn al-Qayyim, for example, cannot simply be dismissed as a weak argument, even if it is not irrefutable. To my mind, it must have been convincing enough to lead someone like Riḍā to adopt Ibn al-Qayyim's view, even though Riḍā's earlier commentary, which gave a more prominent role to Muḥammad 'Abduh's teachings, seems to sponsor an eternal Hell.

But beyond the eternity debate, we find that even the ostensibly less controversial argument that most of humanity will not be among Hell's inhabitants also has to encounter Scriptural hurdles. Unlike Ibn al-Qayyim, who looks to certain Qur'anic verses that speak of most of humanity's shortcomings, as well as the well-known hadith that states that nine hundred ninety-nine out of every one thousand people will be destined for Hellfire, al-Ghazālī has to resort to employing less popular hadiths to argue that most are actually destined for Heaven. Despite its shortcomings, however, al-Ghazālī's strategy is, in the final analysis, a viable one, as he provides an interpretation that takes the 'nine hundred ninety-nine out of every one thousand' hadith into account.

Indeed, despite their radically different backgrounds and influences, there is perhaps nothing that is as convincing to such scholars as a good Scriptural argument. And it would certainly be a mistake to assume that these scholars (Ibn al-‘Arabī included) were simply coming to conclusions that have no basis in Revelation. After all, this is theology not philosophy. On the other hand, while these scholars certainly engaged in exegesis, there can be no denying the role of eisegesis in their writings. This may help to explain the utilization of Q. 11:106-8, for example, as a means of arguing for an eternal punishment of either the hot or cold variety (as maintained by al-Subkī), an eternal Hell void of punishment (i.e. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s position), and the non-eternality of Hell itself (as maintained by Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Qayyim, Riḍā, and ‘Alī) – radically different readings, to say the least.

And we must not forget the influence of context. To my mind, it is contextual considerations that allow us to make sense of the major differences found in the works of Riḍā and Sayyid Quṭb. On the other hand, while the Mongol-dominated world of Ibn Taymiyyah might allow us to understand why he would uphold a relatively strict standard for salvation on the Day of Judgment, it is perhaps wise not to overemphasize the role of context, especially as we assess Ibn Taymiyyah’s leaning towards a non-eternal Hell (unless, of course, we discover that he was in fact in dialogue with non-Muslim non-eternalists).

In sum, by examining the works of certain highly influential medieval and modern Muslim scholars of various theological backgrounds, we find that the discourse on salvation and the fate of ‘Others’ involves a limited array of recurring themes, particularly the two themes of Divine mercy (*rahmah*), which is often associated with

God's unlimited volition, and the significance of Muḥammad's Message, which is often associated with human submission and Divine justice. Even so, the conclusions put forth by these scholars are radically different in certain regards. All are utilizing most of the same texts (the exceptions being a handful of hadiths which usually function to supplement a particular argument), emphasizing the same themes, and yet, because of variations in hermeneutic strategies and motivations, we find that these texts allow for the kind of variation that makes the often monolithic characterizations put forth by numerous scholars a demonstration of apologetic reassessment, polemical over-simplification, or intellectual laziness. Indeed, a recognition of this discourse is necessary for those of us who seek to be conscious of the spectrum of scholarly readings of Islamic scripture. Indeed, we would do well to avoid simply echoing a single side of a particular debate, even if that side represents the majority.

I will conclude as I began, by asking the question, "What does Islam say about the fate of 'Others'?" Whatever the answer may be, I hope that the present study demonstrates, *at the very least*, that we should avoid the very trap many scholars have fallen into, and that is providing one-dimensional responses, whether it be with regard to the issue of salvation on the Day of Judgment, the issue of eternal punishment, or both. Indeed, a deeper appreciation of the rich diversity of possibilities is in order.

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