PART 3

Theological and Mystical Aspects

Is Hell Truly Everlasting?

An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Universalism

Mohammad Hassan Khalil

Is the Quranic hell everlasting? For many theologians and scholars of religion, this is a non-issue: the everlastingness of the Fire (*al-nār*) is taken for granted in numerous works on Islam. In Muslim theological works, it is often made clear that while sinners who passed away with at least an iota of faith (*īmān*) in their hearts may one day be saved (though this claim was famously contested by, among others, various Muʿtazilites), those who rejected faith and refused to mend their ways before death will never be relieved of the torments of hell.¹ Many theologians present the doctrine of everlasting damnation, or damnationism, as one that was agreed upon by “consensus” (*ijmāʿ*).² By dismissing or, more commonly, not mentioning alternative views, various modern western works on Islam leave the reader with a similar impression.³

Yet upon closer examination, we find that we cannot label as damnationists some of the most prominent theologians in the history of Islam. These include giants such as Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), and, in modern times, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) and Yusuf al-Qaradawi. With the

- 1 See, for example, Watt (tr.), *Islamic creeds* 36 (a version of the Ḥanbalite creed), 52–4 (Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭahāwī [d. 321/933]), 60 (the anonymous *Waṣṣṣya* ascribed to Abū Ḥanīfa [d. 150/767]), 82 (Najm al-Dīn al-Nasafī [d. 537/1142]), 88 (ʿAḍud al-Dīn al-Ijī [d. 756/1355]); Ibn Bābūya Shaykh Ṣadiq (d. 381/991), *Risālat al-iʿtiqād*, tr. Fyzee, *Shiite creed* 80–2; ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037), *Uṣūl* 238, 242–4.
- 2 See, for example, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), *Marātib* 167–73; Ibn ʿAṭīyya al-Andalusī (d. 541/1146), *Muḥarrar* ii, 346; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), *Muḥaṣṣal* 237; Sayf al-Dīn al-ʿAmidī (d. 631/1233), *Akbār* iv, 360; Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273), *Tadhkira* ii, 211; Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), *Shifāʾ* 163; Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 791/1389), *Sharḥ* 106, 114–5; Marʿī ibn Yūsuf al-Karmī (d. 1033/1624), *Tawqīf* 76; Ḥasan Ṣiddīq Khān (d. 1890), *Yaqẓat* 15–7, 125.
- 3 See, for example, Calder, *Limits* 224; Esposito, *Islam* 33–4; Esposito, *What everyone needs to know* 29; O'Shaughnessy, *Muhammad's thoughts* 68; Rahman, *Major themes* 120; Rustomji, *Garden* 2, 40, 80, 82; Sells, *Approaching* 106, 199; Stöckle, *Doctrine* 49; Watt, *What is Islam?* 48; Winter, *Last trump card* 137.

exception of Ibn al-ʿArabī, these scholars were open to the possibility that *all* of humanity might one day be delivered from hell and granted admission into the everlasting Garden (*al-janna*)—a position henceforth referred to as universalism. As for Ibn al-ʿArabī, although he affirmed the everlastingness of the Fire, he maintained that the damned will be relieved of all physical torments and will in fact experience some form of contentment *in hell*—a position I call quasi-universalism.⁴ Perhaps more obscure is the view that the damned will ultimately perish rather than experience perpetual torment—an annihilationist outlook ascribed to Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d. 128/746), who reportedly went so far as to claim that even heaven and its inhabitants will similarly eventually cease to exist.⁵

In what follows, I shall present the scriptural arguments for universalism put forth by Ibn Taymiyya and his student Ibn al-Qayyim—traditionalist scholars who produced the most developed medieval articulation of Islamic universalism. I shall also discuss the critical damnationist responses by their contemporary Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 756/1355). I hope to show that, contrary to popular belief, the duration (not to mention purpose) of damnation in the case of unbelievers has long been a contested topic in Islamic thought.⁶

1 Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-Qayyim, and the Case for Universalism

Toward the end of his life, and for reasons that are ultimately difficult to discern, Ibn Taymiyya gravitated toward a universalist paradigm. Not long before he passed away as a prisoner in the Citadel of Damascus, he composed what is widely regarded as his final work: a treatise commonly called *Fanāʾ al-nār* (The Annihilation of the Fire).⁷ It is here that we encounter what is to the best of our knowledge the first fully-developed case for Islamic universalism.⁸

4 See Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt* iii, 25, 466; Khalil, *Islam*, 62–7.

5 See Shahrastānī, *Milal*, 87–8.

6 For a more thorough examination of the topic at hand, see Khalil, *Islam*, particularly the introduction and chap. 3; and Hoover, Islamic universalism.

7 Two extant manuscripts of the *Fanāʾ* are located in Cairo's Dār al-Kutub and Beirut's al-Maktab al-Islāmī, though the Beirut text is incomplete. The *Fanāʾ* was published in its entirety for the first time in 1995 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia under the somewhat misleading title *al-Radd ʿalā man qāla bi-fanāʾ al-janna wa-l-nār* ("The Rejoinder to Those Who Maintain the Annihilation of the Garden and the Fire").

8 For a response to the modern claim that Ibn Taymiyya either abandoned or never advocated universalism, see Khalil, *Islam* 86–9. For a response to a similar claim regarding Ibn al-Qayyim, see Khalil, *Islam* 99–101.

In the *Fanā'*, Ibn Taymiyya attempts to present the Garden and the Fire as being fundamentally dissimilar—a common theme in universalist discourse. Heaven, according to Ibn Taymiyya, is undeniably everlasting: its “food is perpetual” (*akluhā dā'im*) (13:35); its provisions “will never end” (*mā lahu min nafād*) (38:54) and will “neither be limited nor forbidden” (*lā maqtū'a wa-lā mamnū'a*) (56:33); the Garden will be “an unceasing gift” (*ʿaṭā' ghayr majdhūdh*) (11:108). According to the “leaders” of Islam, the everlastingness of heaven is a fundamental tenet, the denial of which renders one a heretic.⁹

Hell is another matter. To illustrate this, Ibn Taymiyya cites Q 6:128 and 11:106–108, both of which state that the damned will remain in the Fire “unless [God/your Lord] wills otherwise”:¹⁰

On the day [God] gathers everyone together [saying], “Company of *jinn*! You have seduced a great many humans,” their adherents among human-kind will say, “Lord, we have profited from one another, but now we have reached the appointed time You decreed for us.” He will say, “Your home is the Fire, and there you shall remain (*khālidīna fihā*)”—unless God wills otherwise (*illā mā shā'a Allāh*): your Lord is wise, aware.

(6:128)

The wretched ones will remain in the Fire, sighing and groaning, there to remain (*khālidīna fihā*) for as long as the heavens and earth endure, unless your Lord wills otherwise (*illā mā shā'a rabbuka*): your Lord carries out whatever He wills. As for those who have been blessed, they will be in paradise, there to remain as long as the heavens and earth endure, unless your Lord wills otherwise (*illā mā shā'a rabbuka*)—an unceasing gift (*ʿaṭā' ghayr majdhūdh*).

(11:106–108)

It is reported that some of the Companions of the Prophet—including Jābir ibn 'Abd Allāh (d. 78/697) and Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī (d. 74/693)—taught that the exception in Q 6:128 (“unless God wills otherwise”) qualifies all divine threats. These include threats such as the following: “such people will have nothing in the hereafter but the Fire” (Q 11:16); “they shall not leave the Fire” (Q 2:167); “whenever, in their anguish, they try to escape, they will be pushed back in and told, ‘Taste the suffering of the Fire’” (Q 22:22).

We find no similar statement attributed to the Companions concerning the divine promises of heavenly reward—this, even though the promise in Q 11:108

9 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 42–4.

10 My translation of the Quran loosely follows that of Abdel Haleem, *Qur'an*.

is similarly qualified (“unless your Lord wills otherwise”). But notice what follows both exceptions in Q 11:106–108: whereas paradise is an “unceasing gift,” God “does as He pleases” with regard to hell. Ibn Taymiyya takes this entire passage to mean that God is not bound to punish or reward anyone; however, whereas hell’s fate is left ambiguous, God explicitly informs us of His plan to provide everlasting reward to those who are righteous.¹¹

A third passage that Ibn Taymiyya invokes is Q 78:23: “[The transgressors] will remain in [hell] for ages (*aḥqāban*).” The “transgressors” (*al-ṭāghīn*) condemned here and explicitly mentioned in the previous verse are unbelievers who “did not fear a reckoning, and they rejected Our messages as lies” (Q 78:27–28). As Ibn Taymiyya explains, the term “ages” (*aḥqāb*) connotes finitude. Thus, he argues, it necessarily limits the duration of chastisement for the unbelievers. Although the term *aḥqāb* appears nowhere else in the Quran, the singular form of this term, *ḥuqub*, appears in Q 18:60: “Moses said to his servant, ‘I will not rest until I reach the place where the two seas meet, even if it takes me years [or an age (*ḥuquban*)]!’” One gets the impression from this verse that each “age” is long but ultimately finite. Ibn Taymiyya cites reports ascribed to the *salaf* that indicate that each “age” lasts either forty, seventy, eighty, or seventy thousand years (with each day being equivalent to one thousand years), or a period of time known only to God.¹² A long duration of chastisement would explain why we find in the Quran a refutation of the claim made by some Jews that they may only be punished in hell for a “a few days” (2:80–81). Be that as it may, Ibn Taymiyya’s argument here is compelling: if the damned were to remain in hell *forever*, why would God use the term “ages” in the first place?

Ibn Taymiyya points to statements attributed to the Prophet’s Companions that simultaneously corroborate his universalist assertions and invalidate any consensus claims concerning the everlastingness of the Fire. According to one report cited by ‘Abd ibn Ḥamīd al-Kissī (d. 249/863) in a no longer extant work of Quranic commentary, the second caliph and Companion of the Prophet ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644) proclaimed that the people of the Fire (*ahl al-nār*) will eventually leave the Fire after a long period of chastisement.¹³ Furthermore, the Companion Ibn Mas‘ūd (d. 32/652) reportedly foretold “a time” in which “no one” will remain in hell—a time that will arrive after the

11 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 57–61, 66–8. On the qualification of divine threats, see Ibn al-Qayyim, *Ḥādī* 620–3; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’*, ii, 229–30; Khalil, *Islam* 98, 194 n. 165.

12 Ibid., 60–6.

13 Ibid., 53. Ibn al-Qayyim suggests that Ibn Taymiyya was introduced to this statement ascribed to ‘Umar shortly before the composition of the *Fanā’*. See Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’* ii, 231, 245.

passing of “ages” (*aḥqāban*). A similar proclamation was attributed to the Companion Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678).¹⁴

To be sure, Ibn Taymiyya would have dismissed the common claim that because the Quran employs the terms *khālidīna* and *abadan* when describing the fate of the inhabitants of hell, damnation must be everlasting. Thus, *khālidīna fihā abadan* (Q 72:23) need not mean “they will remain in [hell] forever,” just that they will be confined to hell, unable to escape it, as long as it exists. As Ibn al-Qayyim elaborates elsewhere, these terms can connote extended yet ultimately finite periods of time. Consider the Quranic statement concerning the evildoers among the Jews: “they will never long for [death]” (*lan yatamannawhu abadan*) (Q 2:95). Here the term *abadan* (translated as “never”) expresses the perpetuity of their aversion to death; however, this could only constitute a temporal reality. In the life to come, the people of hell will cry, If only God would “put an end to us!” (Q 43:77). Thus, *abadan* connotes perpetuity, but only within a particular context, for instance, this life or life in hell. Lest one deduce from this that heaven may not be everlasting—for its duration is also referred to by the term *abadan* (e.g. 98:8)—, Ibn al-Qayyim maintains that heaven’s endlessness is made evident by the aforementioned passages that describe heaven’s bounty as never-ending (Q 38:54) and “unceasing” (Q 11:108).¹⁵ To reiterate, the terms used in these passages are never used in reference to hell. And as Ibn al-Qayyim observes, the Quran appears to limit the duration of chastisement when it mentions “the punishment of a dreadful day” (*yawm ‘azīm*) (6:15) and “a painful day” (*yawm alīm*) (11:26); never does it refer to the joy of paradise as the joy of a “day.”¹⁶

Once again, for universalists, heaven and hell are profoundly dissimilar. The Garden, Ibn Taymiyya writes, is derived from God’s everlasting essence—an essence of mercy (*raḥma*). This mercy is stressed throughout the Quran.¹⁷ Furthermore, Ibn al-Qayyim avers that God in the Quran never calls Himself by a name that connotes wrath. God is “severe in punishment” (*shadīd al-‘iqāb*) (Q 5:98) and “swift in punishment” (*sarī‘ al-‘iqāb*) (Q 7:167) but He is not the Punisher (*al-mu‘āqib*). “He forgives whomever He will and punishes whomever He will” (Q 3:129), but while He calls Himself the Forgiving (*al-ghafūr*), He

14 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 60–2.

15 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Mukhtaṣar*, ii, 675; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’*, ii, 228, 239.

16 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 597.

17 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 81–3. Indeed, all but one sura either begin with or are preceded by the phrase, “In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy (*al-raḥmān*), the Giver of Mercy (*al-raḥīm*).”

never calls himself the Torturer (*al-mu'adhdhib*).¹⁸ Along these lines, notice the wording in Q 15:49–50: “[Prophet], tell My servants that I am the Forgiving, the Merciful, but My torment is the truly painful one.”¹⁹ Assuming, then, that wrath is merely an aspect of God’s actions (rather than His essence), its duration must be finite: only that which is connected to God’s essence persists.

What, then, is the purpose of temporal wrath and chastisement? According to Ibn Taymiyya, all chastisement rectifies and purifies wrongdoers.²⁰ Ibn al-Qayyim uses the metaphor of a physician who causes his patient pain through a life-saving medical procedure. In this light, chastisement is the rugged, agonizing path to ultimate mercy and contentment.²¹ For those who maintain that God’s mercy will be forever restricted to certain people, Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim remind their respective audiences that divine mercy “encompasses all things” (Q 7:156); and as we read in the hadith corpus, it “outstrips” and “overcomes” His wrath.²² Indeed, God has “taken it upon Himself to be merciful” (Q 6:12). And He is “the most merciful of the merciful” (*arḥam al-rāḥimīn*) (Q 7:151).²³ It is true that He is also just. But this is precisely why He only punishes people in accordance with their *finite* sins.²⁴

In the end, following the Judgment Day slaughtering of death itself (in the form of a spotted ram, according to a popular hadith),²⁵ and after the people of the Fire complete their chastisement and purification, they will be saved. Following the annihilation of the Fire, the once-damned will proceed to the only remaining destination, “the abode of felicity.” There they will enjoy “everlasting pleasure.”²⁶

18 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 609–10. On this point, see Khalil, *Islam* 98, 195 n. 166.

19 Cf. Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 81–3.

20 Ibid., 81–3.

21 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 599–603, 611.

22 The hadiths about God’s mercy “outstripping” and “overcoming” His wrath appear in, among other places, Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-tawḥīd* 15. Hadiths are quoted according to Wensinck’s *Concordance*.

23 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 81–3; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 598–9, 606–7; Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’*, ii, 240–3.

24 Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hādī* 599–600, 603.

25 Versions of the spotted ram hadith appear in, among other places, Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *tafsīr sūrat 19* 1; Tirmidhī, *Jāmi’*, k. *al-janna* 20.

26 Ibn Taymiyya, *Radd* 87.

2 Al-Subkī's Refutation

Approximately two decades after the death of Ibn Taymiyya, the Ash'arite Taqī al-Dīn al-Subkī, a fierce critic of both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim, produced a well-known damnationist refutation—and a model for later refutations²⁷—called *al-I'tibār bi-baqā' al-janna wa-l-nār* (Considering the permanence of the Garden and the Fire). In it, al-Subkī presents universalism as a heretical and irrational innovation. The everlastingness of the Fire, he notes, was agreed upon by the consensus of Muslim scholars according to the fifth/eleventh century Andalusian scholar Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064). Therefore, the reports of the Prophet's Companions that appear to support a universalist paradigm are either unreliable or necessitate reinterpretation. Furthermore, the Quran contains dozens of ostensibly unqualified passages that depict the damned as being unable to escape their chastisement.²⁸ It is with this in mind that one should assess the passages invoked by Ibn Taymiyya when arguing for universalism.

Al-Subkī attempts to demonstrate the fundamental flaws of Ibn Taymiyya's exegesis. According to numerous exegetes, the exceptions in Q 6:128 and 11:106–108 (“unless [God/your Lord] wills otherwise”) do not suggest that damned unbelievers may be saved: these exceptions may simply refer to the period of time preceding damnation, in which case they should be retranslated as, “except whatever [period of time God/your Lord] wills.” Alternatively, even if the exceptions signify the termination of chastisement in the Fire, they do not signify the termination of chastisement itself: hell consists of other forms of punishment, including the *zamharīr*, the extremely cold abode of torture. And while it is true that the transgressors will remain in hell “for ages” (Q 78:23), we have no reason to think that these “ages” are finite (even if each individual “age” consists of a limited number of years); these could be ages followed by ages *ad infinitum*.²⁹

Al-Subkī also addresses Ibn Taymiyya's claim that God's names reflect His everlasting essence, and that He never calls Himself by a name that connotes wrath. To the mind of al-Subkī, we should consider terms such as “severe in punishment” (*shadīd al-iqāb*) divine names. Furthermore, referencing the most widely known version of the list of ninety-nine “most beautiful names of God,” al-Subkī observes that God's names include the Subduer (al-Qahhār) (Q 12:39) and the Compeller (al-Jabbār) (Q 59:23)—though here one might

27 See Khalil, *Islam*, 88–9.

28 Subkī, *Rasā'il* 196–8, 201.

29 Ibid., 201–4.

question whether these terms *necessarily* connote wrath; the Avenger (al-Muntaqim)—though the Quran (in 44:16) simply uses an indefinite (and plural) form of this term when referring to God on a “day” that lies ahead; and the Humiliator (al-Mudhill)—though the Quran (in 3:26) simply states that God humiliates. Al-Subkī here could just as easily include the name the Harmer (al-Ḍārr), though this too is *derived* from the Quran, specifically 6:17, which refers to God touching people with “harm” (*ḍurr*). As should be clear by now, various names that appear in the most popular list of ninety-nine are not taken verbatim from the Quran. Be that as it may, al-Subkī points to another possible problem in Ibn Taymiyya’s claim: if the divine names connote *eternal* realities, and if God calls Himself the Creator (al-Khāliq) (Q 59:24), this would mean that the universe must be infinitely old—a notoriously heretical doctrine in ‘mainstream’ Islamic theology.³⁰

According to al-Subkī, God is indeed overwhelmingly merciful, and this mercy is enjoyed by the righteous; however, on account of God’s justice, damnation must be everlasting for the truly wicked. While it is true that His mercy “encompasses all things,” it is ordained only “for those who are conscious of God” (Q 7:156), not for Satan and Pharaoh. Those who choose evil and die in a state of evil cannot expect purification after death: “no soul will profit from faith if it had none before” (Q 6:158).³¹

3 Closing Thoughts

The three passages that Ibn Taymiyya invokes to argue for universalism are all traditionally classified as “Meccan” (meaning, revealed before the Prophet Muḥammad’s *hijra* [emigration] from Mecca to Medina [then called Yathrib]). There are in fact other Meccan passages that Ibn Taymiyya might have invoked to support his case for universalism but for whatever reason did not. Perhaps the most significant is Q 7:40, which states that “those who rejected” the message arrogantly “will not enter the Garden until the camel [or, according to an alternative translation, rope, Arab. *al-jamal*] passes through the eye of the needle.” The qualification “until the camel passes through the eye of the

30 Ibid., 206–8.

31 Ibid. According to Ibn al-Qayyim, the statement in Q 7:156, “[God’s] mercy encompasses all things,” is general in nature, while the latter segment of the verse, “I shall ordain”—literally, “I shall write out” (*aktub*)—“My mercy for those who are conscious of God,” is in reference to a special form of mercy awaiting the righteous. See Ibn al-Qayyim, *Shifā’* ii, 242.

needle” might in fact be taken to be a sign of hope. We encounter a comparable and widely known statement in the Gospels: “It is easier for a camel [or: rope] to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Revised Standard Version, Mark 10:25). According to a popular interpretation of this passage, the rich will encounter additional hurdles on the road to glory, but they will not necessarily be barred from the kingdom of God. As we read in the clarification two verses later, “all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27).

As for the depictions of hell in suras classified as “Medinan” (meaning, revealed after the *hijra*), one passage that Ibn Taymiyya might have invoked but did not is Q 57:13, which states that a “wall with a gate will be erected” between the people of the Garden and the people of the Fire. One could argue that the mere existence of this “gate”—established *after* the initial entry into paradise—suggests that the barrier between heaven and hell will never be permanently impenetrable.

As al-Subkī shows us, however, the matter is not this simple. Indeed, universalists must account for the fact that their reading of scripture has not been obvious to most theologians and exegetes. If we assume that even some of the Prophet’s Companions were universalists, why is it that a few centuries later, damnationism was regarded by at least some to be the “consensus” view? But here one might imagine a universalist response: prevailing scriptural interpretations are potentially fallible and often shaped by historical impulses.

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