Christian Lange

Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions (Cambridge University Press, 2015, 365 pages)

The work of Christian Lange *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions* is a full research report (*Forschungsbericht*); the cumulative result of years of investigation by a leading and noteworthy scholar in close association with a few researchers sharing a common interest. It is indeed a remarkably rich report, covering the vast majority of the recognizable and salient elements regarding paradise and hell in the Islamic tradition. The larger field to which this study belongs, Muslim eschatology, however important for our understanding of Islamic theology it may be; remains grossly understudied, and our knowledge therein suffers from numerous lacunae and deficits. Lange's work, written with the spirit of a cultural anthropologist, gathers from a broad set of textual sources the essential knowledge and charts a much needed road-map for the student of Islam and Muslim theology, history and culture to navigate through and further explore this field. Lange, who refrains from offering his own speculative views or analyses on the material at any length, did, nevertheless, offer precise suggestions for expanding the scope of the theoretical framework that scholars use to understand Muslim eschatology, by systematically using conceptual tools such as "*merismos*," Dodd's "realized eschatology" and Coleridge's "interfusion" to describe the contiguous relationship that exists between this world and the otherworld.

Based on his close reading of Muslim material, Lange invites his reader to see the essential proximity of the two worlds rather than their categorical distance. The paradigm that Lange proposes is partially formulated in his Introduction, which offers the reader a short, critical and analytical exposition of the history of the study of the field. The concept of *merismos*, 'a whole defined by its two extremes' where this world and the otherworld are conceived as a "synchronic whole" serves as a contrast to the received idea of the essential ontological separation of the two worlds, both spatially and temporally. The reader is first guided through some observations on paradise and hell in the Quranic narrative in the first chapter. This part of the book does not seek to exhaustively cover the Qur'anic eschatological material what it does is comment on the main themes of the eschatology of the Qur'an that enable the reader to appreciate the subsequent development of the Islamic paradise and hell and see how these later developments are anchored in the text itself rather than having been affixed to it retroactively by later exegetes. Lange first sketches the phenomenology of paradise and hell in the Qur'an, treating the text as an internally consistent unity. Although this approach to the text might cause some problems of understanding; as a historical reading of the archive of the early

community under prophetic rule in *status nascendi* requires a more nuanced method, it serves the reader to have a panoptic view of the repertoire of images and representations about the otherworld in the Qur'an. Notwithstanding, Lange's motive of problematizing the assumption of the rhetorical uniformity of the text, and his search for a progressive development in the text's eschatological discourse are welcome exercises.

In the second chapter "The Growth of the Islamic Otherworld," the reader is offered a survey of the development of the Muslim *narrative* literature devoted to the otherworld. The main sources are hadith collections, and are divided into four parts: "The Formative Period", until the 3rd century AH ending with Ibn Abī l-Dunyā; "The Second Period of Expansion" until the 6th cent. AH ending with Ibn al-Jawzī; "The Third Period of Expansion" until the 9th cent. AH ending with al-Suyūṭī, before the chapter caps with an overview of the "Late-Medieval Developments". This Chapter of the book offers the student an overview of key traditional scholars who collected prophetic traditions on the otherworld, with succinct commentary on the contents of their works and their relationship to one another.

The third chapter, "Hope, Fear and Entertainment", focuses on the parenetic uses of traditions pertaining to the otherworld. It is a commonly recognized fact that in Islamic education the purpose of otherworldly rewards and punishment is proper moral conduct in the here and now. As such, the Islamic tradition contains a number of important works that stress this connection between morality and otherworldly results. Lange takes al-Ghazālī's works *Iḥyā' Ulūm al-dīn* as a historical pivot, and offers a historical sketch of the pre- and post- phases of al-Ghazālī's by shedding light on central works like those of Ibn al-Kharrāt, Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Rajab. In the following section "Popular Manuals," the reader is introduced to this genre of literature where edificatory and fantastic narratives are collected for popular use, and less so for reporting prophetic traditions with any degree of historical accuracy. This section is followed by a short one on "The Prophet's Ascension," which treats of the prophet's night journey through Jerusalem to the heavenly realms. Lange, lists the story in this chapter because of its parenetic uses, which is quite legitimate; although the prophet's ascension would have better been treated separately because of its rich revelational content (*apocalypsis*), the important theological implications of its events and its long and rich reception history in the Islamic tradition.

After tracing the scriptural and textual history of the (Sunni) Muslim imagery of paradise and hell, the chapter "The Imagination Unbound" offers a detailed description of the two topoi, an outline of their topography with an inventory of the elements that populate the two realms. That the survey and

inventory are constructed out of the works of the Sunni scholar, al-Suyūṭī, and one Shi'i scholar, al-Majlisī, buttressed by the works of al-Qurṭubī and al-Baḥrānī respectively makes the reading all the more rewarding given the occasions that that creates to contextual theories in specific historical situations for the advanced reader. The author's objective, however, is merely to identify the morphology of heaven and hell, rather than sketch the history of eschatological literature; he is writing as an anthropologist reporting on Islamic eschatological and cosmological literature, and not as a comparative theologian offering an account of the theological differences between the two eschatological corpora. That Lange refrains from offering any such account, reveals his close awareness of the impossibility of a historical contextual reading of the eschatological theology of these works without a detailed map of the political, social and ethical agendas of the authors and a study of the historical contexts in which these agendas functioned. He does however lay the necessary material for future analytical studies. The inventory includes various elements ranging from topography, *al-barzakh*, which figures prominently in Lange's analysis, the angels, the significance of spatial divisions, plants, animals, the inhabitants of the two worlds, demons and incorporeal beings as well as an overview of the conditions of the blessed and the damned. This chapter of the book is a particularly dense inventory that arouses the readers' appetite to cash the metaphors that these representations contain and understand the allegorical significance and discursive aims of the narratives.

Part Two of the book "Discourses and Practices" examines the various theological, mystical, and philosophical interpretations of the topoi of paradise and hell, and their inner-worldly, inner-historical manifestations in Muslim material and intellectual culture. This section demonstrates the multifaceted interpretations of paradise and hell in the Islamic tradition, and raises serious questions about any claim to a common or single Islamic understanding of these topoi. The reader is offered the essential overview of the debate between the *falāsifa* and the *mutakallimūn*, on the ontological nature of the otherworld and the nature of its reality, be it spiritual, ethical or material. The concepts of *khayāl/takhyīl* (cf. *l'imaginaire social, personnel*) play an important role in understanding this debate, which Lange caps with al-Suhrawardī's *ishrāqī* views in relation to al-Ghazālī's distinction between the 'sensible' and the 'intelligible'. The debate regarding the ontological status of the objects populating paradise and hell, that Lange had gleaned from the narrative sources is fully exposed here, and the relevance of his inventory becomes fully apparent in this chapter.

With a rich inventory and a proper set of historical analytical tools, the author revisits what he terms "three common characterizations of Sunni theo-

logical eschatology,” namely, that it stresses the utter “transcendence” of the otherworld in spatial and temporal terms, first; secondly, that it is unfailingly “optimistic” almost always guaranteeing salvation for the believer; and thirdly, that it adheres to a strictly “materialistic” conception of the afterlife. The reader sees here the programmatic nature of Lange’s work, as he succeeds in raising serious criticisms regarding the above views with the arsenal of narrative data and analytical tools he had gathered from the tradition of Islamic eschatology.

Chapter Six “Otherworld Apart” looks into late-medieval Shīʿī eschatology with an eye to the previous history of Twelver- Shīʿī traditionist and theological literature on the otherworld. The chapter also contains a section on eschatological hadith among the Akhbārī traditionists, and a survey of the philosophically inclined eschatology of the Ismaʿīlīs and the relationship between its development and political agendas at the time. Chapter Seven, which deserves special attention, is a careful reevaluation of the common understanding of the Sufi view on the relationship between this world and the otherworld: first, Lange assesses the claim that Sufi authors were concerned with grasping the reality of the otherworld and therefore the present life was of little concern for them. Lange’s observation about *contemptus mundi* and *contemptus ultramundi* in the Sufi literature shows the different views that existed among the authors and the development and difference from early personae like Rābīʿa up to later learned scholars like Ibn ʿArabī. Second, the author examines the proximity and distance of Sufi views to the traditionists’ (mainly Sunni) views from a *longue durée* perspective, with an attempt to chart the influence of various philosophical and theological schools thereon.

The last chapter is a brief look into the innerworldly manifestations of paradise and hell. By looking mainly at Islamic topography, architecture and ritual, the chapter argues that paradise and hell were not idealized or abstracted models of human bliss and suffering, but served as guiding types for society on earth and within history. The author gives examples from architecture, gardens and landscape that were assimilated with homologues in paradise and hell, thus importing the otherworldly “layers of meaning” into this world. In rituals, the example of the pilgrimage to Mecca is adduced as a ritualized enactment of the voyage to the otherworld, where the meanings of the items in the ritual stand as a mimesis of the various significances of the drama of entry into the otherworld.

Lange’s thesis of a “slippage” between this world and the otherworld, an elaboration of the notions of “*merismos*” that he on more than one occasion alludes to in his work, becomes clearly visible in the last chapter. The reader quickly notices the extreme care the author takes importing nuanced concepts from Christian theological eschatology and adapting them for the Islamic case.

Although the concept of “realized eschatology” is explicitly mentioned in the work, the author abstains from making any claims about eschatology-related matters in Islamic theology or even to give an externalist’s account of the sort of eschatological theologies present in Islam. In Lange’s spirit, one may suggest here concept like “inaugurated eschatology” for certain historical applications of otherworldly beliefs in Islamic history such as in the Shī‘ī and Isma‘īlī cases; or “sublimated eschatology”, “axology” and “existential eschatology” for framing the Sufi varieties, it is however impossible to determine the efficacy of these concepts without an in-depth reading of the sources with a panoptic view of their historical contexts and their literary reception and cultural function. Above all, and to be sure, Lange’s work, is on Paradise and Hell, the *topoi*, and their place in Islamic tradition and culture, it is not a work on Islamic eschatology, which, inter alia, typically includes topical items like: death, wars and tribulations, the end of the world, the resurrection of the dead, the anti-Christ, the Messiah, the descent of ‘Īsá, judgment, paradise and Hell, and the world to come. Of these, Lange gives us an overview of Paradise and Hell, with as many elaborations into significant details and excursions into neighboring intellectual and theological traditions as one may be allowed to include within a single work. His findings should compel students of Islam and its history, to re-evaluate their assessment of common (Sunni) eschatology as being strictly of the ‘futurist’ variety (where “the End” is thought to lie in the distant future), often accompanied with the assumption that this form of eschatology can be found in the core canon and was the faith of the first community. This view about Muslim’s eschatological beliefs can be misleading, and sometimes dangerously so, especially in light of the political use of eschatological narratives in the last years, which the author highlights in his short Epilogue.

Lange can only be praised for his work, which remains precise and meticulous even though he uses a very wide-lens, having decided to work on the Islamic tradition as such, and not on a historical period, a school or a theology. “Paradise and Hell in Islamic traditions” is a valuable reference work and an invaluable addition to scientific knowledge of Islamic eschatology and cosmology.

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