CHAPTER 1

Introducing Hell in Islamic Studies

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In regard to the afterlife, scholars of Islam in the West have demonstrated a remarkably irenic temper, preferring to give far more attention to paradise than to hell. The Islamic hell, for the most part, has been viewed as no more than the mirror image of paradise, an ugly reflection of the beauties and the joys in heaven. Consequently, it has been considered a phenomenon of secondary logical and ontological order, as well as interest. The few general overviews of Islamic eschatology largely bypass the infernal regions,1 and the dedicated studies of the Islamic paradise, of which there are a fair number,2 cannot be said to be paralleled by the same number of scholarly forays into the Islamic hell.3 While the entry on paradise in the second edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam (1954–2005) counts eleven columns in the printed edition, its entry

1 The most widely cited studies of this kind are Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding*, and El-Saleh, *La vie future*, each of whom pays much less attention to hell than to paradise. Also shorter overviews tend in this direction. See, for example, the classic study by Meier, *The ultimate origin*; or the stimulating essay by Reinhart, *The here and the hereafter.


3 Exceptions include Lange, *Islamische Höllenvorstellungen*; idem, *Justice, punishment*, 101–75; idem, *Where on earth is hell?*; Thomassen, *Islamic hell*. Some studies deal with aspects of hell in the Quran. See Jeschke, *Gahannam und al-nār*; Radscheit, *Höllenbaum*; O'Shaughnessy, *The seven names*. The only book-length study is the PhD dissertation of Jonas Meyer, *Die Hölle im Islam* (Basel 1901). Meyer's study, however, is largely a paraphrase of certain hell sections in a medieval eschatological manual, the *al-Takhwīf min al-nār* of Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī (d. 795/1393), and as such offers little analysis. See also Hamza, *To Hell and back*, which deals specifically with the emergence, in the early centuries, of the theological doctrine of the temporary punishment in hell of Muslim sinners.
on hell is awarded less than one column. The more recent *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (2001–6) shows a more balanced approach, but still favors paradise (sixteen columns) over hell (twelve columns). Scholarly symposia and museum exhibits in the area of Islamic eschatology likewise gravitate toward the upper regions of the otherworld.

1 **Why (Not) Hell?**

There are two reasons, in my view, for this neglect of hell in Western Islamic Studies. The first is quite simply that hell is not a particularly comfortable space to inhabit, whether for sinners or scholars. The stigma of bad religion adheres to it, as if it were a subject not worthy of the academy’s quest for truth and beauty. In fact, unless the subject is sublimated into philosophical, ethical and psychological discourse, any kind of eschatology is regularly met with suspicion by scholars of Islam. “The whole basic view of ultimate origins and the hereafter,” wrote Fritz Meier, “is hidden in Islamic literature behind a decorative structure of baroque traditions.” One recognizes in such statements a preference for “profound” rather than “decorative” structures, for taxonomy and categorization, for theological rationalization of the “ultimate.” When the literature is found to be internally diverse, or even contradictory (as is the case...