Who is the man here below who has never committed a sin, tell me?
He who had never committed one, how could he have lived, tell me?
If, because I do evil, you punish me with evil,
what difference is there between you and me, tell me?

ʿUMAR KHAYYĀM

The eternity of hell is among those issues on which Ibn Taymiyya (d. 723/1328) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350) opted for an original theory, one that is in contrast to established Sunni doctrine. From the perspective of the latter, hell is eternal for infidels, while the faithful dwell there only temporarily. The two Ḥanbali theologians, instead, argued in favour of the eventual annihilation of hell. Numerous recent studies that have analysed this theory have also examined its relationship with that of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), for whom the punishment, but not hell, is finite, thus prompting interesting cues for comparison.

The comparison is legitimate, given that the stance taken by the two Ḥanbalī authors can, in part, be explained as a reaction to Ibn ʿArabī’s theory. Ibn al-Qayyim refers to it explicitly, clearly distancing himself while at the same time implicitly acknowledging his debt. Here, I would like to return to the issue,
focusing on an aspect of Ibn ‘Arabī’s eschatology which may prove useful in comparing the two theories further: the concept of punishment that lies at the root of Ibn ‘Arabī’s theory. What does infernal punishment actually involve? And which legal model of punishment does it match?

Ibn ‘Arabī’s own speculations on the nature of eschatological castigation are part and parcel of his reflections about the notion of punishment, which are in turn a recurring motif in his legal thought. For the topic to be covered suitably, a thorough catalogue and correlation of the many relevant passages scattered throughout Ibn ‘Arabī’s entire works would be necessary. The task would be all the more difficult because Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing is more akin to hermeneutics than to philosophy or theology. His aim, in the field of eschatology as elsewhere, is to disclose the multiple aspects (wujūh, lit. “faces”) of the Revelation rather than giving a systematic presentation of doctrine. Moreover, without having to subscribe to any schools, Ibn ‘Arabī is able to find a wajh ṣaḥīḥ (an aspect that is real and true) in the disparate opinions voiced in Islamic systematic theology (kalām), philosophy (falsafa) and Sufism, including those distrusted by the heresiographers.

My own knowledge does not extend far enough for such an undertaking; I will, however, endeavour to determine major themes. The positions taken by Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim, following the principle that things can be discerned through their opposites, will help identify these themes, that is to say those sensitive points in Ibn ‘Arabī’s outlook that may have triggered a creative response in the two Ḥanbalīs. Among these issues, the notion of punishment appears to me to be of particular relevance.

Thus, prior to illustrating some of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas on the topic (sections 3 and 4), Ibn al-Qayyim’s position will be covered, dwelling primarily on the jurisdictional-political element (section 2). We cannot proceed, however, without first of all covering the essential features of the ongoing debate on the eternity of hell in the realm of Islam before the seventh/thirteenth century (section 1). I make no pretence of exhausting the topic, but doing so will allow me to clarify the approach taken in this paper.

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See Ibn al-Qayyim, Ḥādī 352. Ibn al-Qayyim supports the same theory. See ibid., 383–4. Ibn al-Qayyim remarks that one should not reject the theory of the annihilation of the Fire only because “innovators” have supported it (ibid., 364). In fact, both Ibn ‘Arabī and Ibn Taymiyya limit binding consensus to the Salaf, making room for the adoption of opinions rejected as “innovations” by the majority of the Sunni schools. Finally, it should be remembered that Ibn Taymiyya, at least in his formative years, held a favorable view of Ibn ‘Arabī. See Ajhar, Suṭāl 119–21; Khalīl, Salvation 87; Manā‘ī, ‘Aqīda 101. However, Ibn Taymiyya rejected Ibn ‘Arabī’s views of hell. See ibid., 96; Chodkiewicz, Procès 102.