CHAPTER 16

Temporary Hellfire Punishment and the Making of Sunni Orthodoxy

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This chapter is concerned with the development of the idea of temporary hell in early Islam. Almost all of the classical Sunni creeds contain one or two articles of faith that affirm the eventual salvation of a group of people who have been in hell. These individuals are mostly identified as the Muslim grave sinners (ahl al-kabāʾīr), though in certain versions they are ambiguously identified as ‘the monotheists’ (muwaḥḥidūn). The salvation of these individuals, as it is described in the creeds, is tied to, and comes as a result of, the Prophet’s eschatological intercession (shafāʿa); but at other times, the deliverance is simply on account of God’s mercy.1 This is captured by Abū Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935–6) in his creed as follows: “They, the people of the sunna and ḥadīth (sc. Sunnis), believe that by reason of the intercession of God’s Messenger, God will bring out a group of monotheists from Hell, according to what has been related from the Messenger of God.”2 Another similar statement is made by the Mālikī al-Qayrawānī (fl. mid fourth/tenth century): “Through the intercession of the Prophet for the grave sinners of his community, God takes him [the grave sinner] out of Hell.”3

The concept of a purgatorial hellfire was apparently a modification of the Quran’s otherwise explicit depictions of an eternal and unrelenting hellfire for sinners – the counterpart to the paradisal garden of the righteous. This well-known binary opposition in the Quran’s recurring descriptions of the two post-mortem abodes seems to allow for no third eschatological alternative. Indeed it is the eternality of both abodes that reinforces, for the believer, the starkness of the contrast and heightens the rhetorical impact of one of the Quran’s central themes. But by allowing for a purgatorial rehabilitation, and thus

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1 This is true of the Ḥanbalī creeds (for which, see Laoust, Profession; Watt, Creeds 30–1); but also of the creeds of Ibn Māja and al-Tirmidhī (see Watt, Creeds 36; Wensinck, Creed 125), of the Ḥanafīs (Wensinck, Creed, 188), of the Ashʿarīs (Watt, Creeds 44, 50, 53, 78, 88), of the Mālikis (Watt, Creeds 70) and of the Māturīdīs (Watt, Creeds 82).
2 Watt, Creed 44.
3 Ibid., 70.
ultimately the salvation, of the grave sinners of the Muslim community in the next world, the concept vindicated the legitimacy of their membership of this same community in this world: all professing Muslims, whether sinful or not, gravely so or otherwise, would eventually gain admission into paradise. The elaboration of this concept and its consolidation within mainstream orthodoxy was a Sunni project, an anti-sectarian impulse that ultimately neutralized a long standing and intractable early Muslim controversy, first precipitated by the Khārijī schism, over the status of sinning believers.4

The development of this concept of temporary hellfire should be of interest to the historian not only because it emerged gradually over time, that is, at the end of a bitter debate about the status of sinning Muslims (sc. Muslim grave sinners),5 but also because it was not obviously a Quranic idea,6 and it reflects something fundamental about the consolidation of a distinct Muslim worldview, that which would become the majority tradition, and, concomitantly, the crystallization of a distinct Sunni religious identity. The idea of a temporary hellfire punishment for Muslim grave sinners came to circulate in various hadīths from about the second/eighth century and what may be considered the major proto-Sunni group,7 that is, the aṣḥāb al-ḥadīth of the second/eighth to third/ninth centuries gradually incorporated such hadīths into their exegeses of specific Quranic verses, thereby legitimating the concept until it was finally established in the creeds of the classical period. The fact that they went about legitimating this idea in tafsīr, for one, is in itself revealing, suggesting that for Sunni traditionalists the commentarial genre was the discipline par excellence for negotiating and delineating orthodox ideas and, in effect, for creating what for them was orthodoxy itself.8 And yet, for Sunnism the concept of a temporary hellfire punishment was just one of several doctrinal developments

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4 On the question of sinning believers and the significance of the controversy for early Islamic sects, see Crone and Zimmerman, Sālim.
5 An obvious analogy would be the development of the idea of Purgatory in medieval Christianity and its establishment as dogma (see Le Goff, Purgatoire).
6 Though, of course, the proponents of the concept of temporary hell eventually legitimated the idea precisely because they were able to tie this concept to certain exegeses of Quranic verses, as we shall see below in the exegeses to certain key Quranic passages.
7 By proto-Sunnism (on which, see Zaman, Religion) I mean the period before that of Classical Sunnism as it ultimately emerged around the fifth/eleventh century as consisting of the four schools of law (Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfiʿī and Ḥanbalī) and of the two schools of theology (Ashʿarī and Māturīdī).
8 I say this because although the genre of fiqh and hadith collection were undoubtedly important for the articulation of ‘orthodox’ doctrine, in the earliest period tafsīr included both of these elements.