

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

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- 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*.
 - 2 Al-Azmeh, *Rhetoric for the senses*; Lange, *Paradise in the Islamic religious imagination*; Lohlker/Nowak, *Das islamische Paradies*; MacDonald, *Islamic eschatology—VI*; Raven, *A Kitāb al-ʿAzāma*; Rosenthal, *Reflections on love*; Schimmel, *The celestial garden*. See also the numerous studies of aspects of paradise in the Quran, for example Horowitz, *Das koranische Paradies*; Jenkinson, *Rivers of paradise*; Lange, *The discovery of paradise*; Neuwirth, *Reclaiming paradise lost*; O’Shaughnessy, *Eschatological themes*, 76–107; Tubach, *Schönheiten*; Wendell, *The denizens of paradise*.
 - 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, *Ĝahannam und al-nār*; Radscheit, *Höllensbaum*; 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.⁴ The more recent *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (2001–6) shows a more balanced approach, but still favors paradise (sixteen columns) over hell (twelve columns).⁵ Scholarly symposia and museum exhibits in the area of Islamic eschatology likewise gravitate toward the upper regions of the otherworld.⁶

1 Why (Not) Hell?

There are two reasons, in my view, for this neglect of hell in Western Islamic Studies.⁷ 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.⁸ 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."⁹ 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

4 Gardet, *Djanna*; idem, *Djahannam*. Both entries were published in 1965. The entry on "al-Nār" (1995) deals exclusively with fire as one of the four elements.

5 Kinberg, *Paradise*; Gwynn, *Hell and hellfire*.

6 The symposia and exhibits that have come to my attention are "The Here and the Hereafter: Images of Paradise in Islamic Art" (Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 26 March–19 May 1991); "Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam" (Göttingen University, 27–31 May 2009); "Gardens of Eternity: Visualizing Paradise in Islamic Art" (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, forthcoming). As regards art exhibits, the focus on paradise should not come as a surprise, as it seems that we are currently a long way away from an appreciation of the esthetics of the Islamic hell. A 2002 colloquium held in Keszthely, Hungary, was optimistically titled "Paradise and Hell in Islam," but of the 17 contributions to the published proceedings (see Dévényi/Fodor [eds], *Proceedings*), only one is devoted to hell proper (Tottoli, What will be the fate), while another five touch on both otherworldly realms in equal measure, including notably Jones, *Heaven and Hell in the Qurʾān*; and Szombathy, *Come Hell or high water*.

7 Here I repeat, in summary form, an argument that I have proffered elsewhere. See Lange, *Justice, punishment* 115–7; idem, *Where on earth is hell?*

8 For similar comments regarding the lack of interest in popular eschatology in the study of ancient Christianity, see Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell* 4.

9 Meier, *The ultimate origin* 103.

with much of the eschatological literature in Islam), it is dismissed as “baroque” or even, to quote Meier again, “bizarre.”¹⁰ Hell only seems to compound the problem. Lacking the esthetic appeal of paradise, as well as the lofty promise of spiritual ascent, hell is a supremely messy and ugly place. Islamic literary traditions about hell, its inhabitants and their punishments are convoluted, often shockingly violent, and frequently obscene.

There are good reasons for scholars, however, to pay serious attention to religious discourses of pain and violence. Robert Orsi has underscored “the importance of studying and thinking about despised religious idioms, practices that make us uncomfortable, unhappy, frightened—and not just to study them but to bring ourselves into close proximity to them, and not to resolve the discomfort they occasion by imposing a normative grid.”¹¹ Such an approach may in fact reveal that representations that, at first sight, one may find distasteful or even repugnant follow a certain logic of representing human suffering, and projecting it on others. To quote Orsi again, “to work toward some understanding(s) of troubling religious phenomena is not to endorse or sanction them ... but we cannot dismiss them as inhuman, so alien to us that they cannot be understood or approached, only contained or obliterated.”¹² The discourse on hell in Islam is no exception in this regard. As is amply demonstrated by the contributions to this volume, hell occupies an important place in the Muslim religious imagination. As such, the function and the meaning of hell in a variety of Muslim discourses deserve to be studied, not in order to sanction phantasies of violence and pain but to understand the conditions and consequences of their flourishing.

The second reason why hell has been largely absent from the map of Islamic Studies is the common perception among scholars that Islam is a religion of mercy; put differently, that it is a religion in which salvation is easily obtained, a religion in which hell, therefore, has no place. According to Gustav von Grunebaum’s classic formulation, Islam does away with the idea of original sin and reduces salvation to obedience to an all-powerful God, thus making salvation “a door that is easily unlocked.”¹³ Earlier, Ignaz Goldziher wrote about the “pure optimism” of Muslim soteriology,¹⁴ a view that one finds repeated

10 Ibid., 104. Also Carra de Vaux, *Fragments* 5, speaks of the “merveilles bizarres” of Islamic eschatology.

11 Orsi, *Jesus Held Him So Close* 7.

12 Ibid.

13 Von Grunebaum, *Ausbreitungs- und Anpassungsfähigkeit* 15: “... wird Gehorsam das Tor zur Erlösung, ein Tor, nicht schwierig zu erschließen.”

14 Goldziher, *Richtungen* 160.

in the recent scholarly literature.¹⁵ Such perceptions, of course, are not without basis. The absence of original sin, and the minimal requirements for faith stipulated in mainstream Islamic theology, have often been noted by scholars. It bears pointing out, however, that characterizations of Islam as a religion of mercy and ready access to paradise have the unfortunate corollary of reinforcing a stereotypical dichotomy between “difficult” and “easy” religions. In this dichotomy, Christianity is presented as a difficult religion, the line from Matthew 7:14, “for the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few,” being used in support of this claim. Conversely, Islam is characterized as a religion that encourages an attitude of self-indulgence. Islam, wrote Riccoldo of Monte Croce (d. 1320 CE), one of the most influential European late-medieval polemicists against Islam, is the “easy and wide road” (*lata et spatiosa via*), quoting Matthew 7:13, “the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.”¹⁶

The precise degree to which the certainty of salvation characterizes the Islamic tradition remains a subject of debate, despite all generalizations to the contrary. As scholars of Islam gradually discover hell to be a topic worthy of their attention, a more nuanced picture will begin to emerge. This volume is conceived as a contribution to this process of putting hell on the map of Islamic Studies and of locating it in a variety of Islamic traditions. In the remainder of this introduction, I aim to provide a brief reassessment of the assumption of absolute salvific certainty in Islam, followed by a general overview of the hell imagery in Islamic traditions.¹⁷ Though covering a broad spectrum of intellectual and literary history in Islam (Sunni and Shi‘i, Quranic, traditionalist, mystical, philosophical, modernist, etc.), the contributions in this volume cannot address all aspects of the Islamic hell that deserve study, and they do on occasion presuppose familiarity with some basic givens of the tradition. This introduction, therefore, aims to sketch out this background. In the pages that follow, I shall also highlight certain areas in the infernology of Islam that I consider worthy of further investigation. Along the way, I shall weave in references to the contributions in this volume, even though I will refrain from offering a précis of each of them.

15 Van Ess, *Flowering* 42; Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding* 81.

16 On Riccoldo and medieval European polemics leveled at Islamic soteriology, see Daniel, *Islam and the West* 177–80.

17 This overview is an updated and, in places, an expanded version of Lange, Hell.

2 Hell and Salvation Anxiety

The Quran stresses both God's heavenly reward *and* punishment in hell. As Navid Kermani remarks, "in the Quran God is represented in many facets of mercy; however, as in the Bible, these facets are inextricably linked with His violence, His malice and His terror."¹⁸ Opinions are divided among scholars as to how much space *exactly* hell claims in the Quran in comparison to paradise. One scholar counts 92 "significant passages" about hell and 62 about paradise;¹⁹ another identifies about 400 verses relating, in a meaningful way, to hell and about 320 relating to paradise.²⁰ Others, however, claim that paradise occupies "significantly more space" in the Quran than hell.²¹

Be that as it may, the imagery of hell is relatively well developed in the Quran.²² It is noteworthy, as Tommaso Tesei shows in his contribution to this volume, that hell in the Quran, like paradise, is conceived to lie immediately ahead; it is *now*, or almost there already. This explains the apparent lack of interest that the Quran shows in the state of souls between death and resurrection. In the Quran there is the notion that souls fall asleep at death, an idea that Tesei traces to a multitude of late-antique, Christian precedents. Indeed, the picture of hell in the Quran is the result of a confluence of several traditions of eschatological thought of Late Antiquity. There is also, as some scholars contend, a gradual development toward a more Biblicized version of hell in the Quran. Thomas O'Shaughnessy, for example, has suggested that in the middle Meccan period, the Quran largely abandons the term *jahīm* to designate hell, from now on using more frequently the more Biblical term *jahannam* (the "valley of Hinnom", Hebr. *gē-hinnōm*, see Joshua 15:8, Jeremiah 7:31, 32:35).²³ Christian Lange, in his contribution to this volume, traces a similar pattern, testing the Nöldekian hypothesis of a gradual development of the Quranic hell

18 Kermani, *Schrecken Gottes* 161; cf. See Neuwirth, *Form and Structure* ii 258a–b.

19 Jones, *Paradise and hell* 110.

20 Lange, *Paradise and hell*, ch. 1 (forthcoming).

21 Neuwirth, *Koran* 439. Tellingly, the index in Neuwirth's study has an entry for "paradise," but not for "hell." Similar statements can be found in Neuwirth, *Reclaiming paradise lost* 333; Madigan, *Themes and topics* 91; Sviri, *Between fear and hope* 323; Andrae, *Ursprung* 234. Michael Sells contends that it is a "standard stereotype about ... the Qur'ān ... that Islam is a religion of fear." See Sells, *Approaching the Qur'ān*, 23. Rosenthal, "Sweeter than hope," 79, leaves the question open.

22 See Gwynne, *Hell and hellfire*; Lange, *Paradise and hell*, ch. 1 (forthcoming). See Murata/Chittick, *The vision of Islam* 211: "No scripture devotes as much attention as the Koran to describing the torments of hell and the delights of paradise."

23 O'Shaughnessy, *The seven names* 451–5.

discourse in four phases, based on an analysis of the terms and ideas used in connection to the punisher-angels in hell. Also Simon O'Meara's chapter in this volume can be read this way, describing as it does a gradual infernalization of the pre-Islamic jinn in the Quran, a process which results in a reconfigured (and appropriately monotheistic) hierarchy of spiritual beings.

In the centuries that followed its proclamation, the Quranic image of hell was greatly elaborated in scores of short narratives traced back to the Prophet or his Companions. These hadiths, from the third/ninth century onwards, were compiled into special eschatological handbooks, from the works of Sa'īd b. Janāh (Shi'i, *fl.* early 3rd/9th c.) and Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (Sunni, d. 281/894) to those of al-Ghazālī (Sunni, d. 505/1111), al-Qurṭubī (Sunni, d. 671/1272), al-Suyūṭī (Sunni, d. 911/1505), al-Baḥrānī (Shi'i, d. 1107/1695–6), al-Saffārīnī (Sunni, d. 1189/1774), Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (Sunni, d. 1307/1890) and Muḥammad b. Yūsuf Aṭfayyish (Ibādī, d. 1332/1917), among others.²⁴ Some of these compilations are devoted exclusively to hell;²⁵ most, however, combine traditions about hell with descriptions of paradise. Mention should also be made of a number of anonymous, popular compilations, in particular the *Daqā'iq al-akhbār fī dhikr al-janna wa-l-nār*²⁶ and the text known as *Qurrat al-'uyūn*.²⁷ It is typical of these popular manuals that they were later posthumously connected to (usually) famous authors. Thus, the *Daqā'iq al-akhbār* is variously attributed to Abū l-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 373/983), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), or a certain, otherwise unknown 'Abd al-Raḥīm al-Qāḍī (*fl.* before 11th/17th c.); the *Qurrat al-'uyūn* is often (and equally mistakenly) said to be the work of al-Samarqandī. Noteworthy about the *Daqā'iq al-akhbār* and the *Qurrat al-'uyūn* is that they both have a lot more to say about hell than about paradise. For example, ten chapters in the *Daqā'iq al-akhbār* deal with the former, only five with the latter. The series of articles of John MacDonald on Islamic eschatology,²⁸ a translation of the *Daqā'iq al-akhbār* with some added commentary, completely misses out on this important aspect. This is because MacDonald used a manuscript that happened to lack the hell section

24 Cf. the bibliography.

25 See, for example, Ibn Abī l-Dunyā, *Ṣifat al-nār*; Ibn Rajab, *Takhwīf*; Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān, *Yaqẓat*. On the development of the genre of traditionist eschatology, cf. Bauer, *Islamische Totenbücher*; Lange, *Paradise and hell* ch. 2 (forthcoming).

26 See on this text, Tottoli, *Muslim eschatological literature*; Lange, *Paradise and hell*, ch. 3 (forthcoming).

27 Another specimen is the text known as *al-Durar al-ḥisān*, commonly (and probably mistakenly) attributed to al-Suyūṭī. There is also debate about the correctness of the ascription of *al-Durra al-fākhira* to al-Ghazālī.

28 MacDonald, *Islamic eschatology I–VI* (1964–66).

of the text.²⁹ As for the *Qurraṭ al-ʿuyūn*, all ten of its chapters offer discussions of mortal sins and their punishments in hell. Only in the last chapter does one find a vision of paradise, which connects awkwardly to the rest of the text and may be a later addition.

For those reading or listening to the Quran and the hadiths on the afterlife, therefore, fear of hell was rather difficult to avoid. Of course, many Quranic verses and certain hadiths strike a more optimistic tone. One should also note that theologians of the formative and classical period developed an arsenal of concepts that were apt to mitigate the anxiety the believers may have felt. This included a broad, belief-based definition of faith (*īmān*), the affirmation of the possibility of repentance (*tawba*) for sins, and the doctrine of the intercession (*shafāʿa*) of the Prophet. Nonetheless, salvation anxiety was hardly absent in Islamic theology, as one realizes when studying Muslim doctrines of sin and salvation. Here, much depends on the definition of the major sins, the *kabāʾir*, which are opposed to the *ṣaghāʾir*, or minor sins (cf. Q 18:49). As in the Christian tradition, these major sins were held to constitute a ticket to hell, whereas the *ṣaghāʾir*, according to the majority position, would be of no consequence. However, how many major sins should one reckon with? Traditions counting three, four, or seven major sins³⁰ could not prevent the emergence of longer lists, a process that culminated in the discussion by al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) of seventy-five, and by Ibn Ḥajar al-Haythamī (d. 974/1567) of 467 major sins. The often-quoted definition attributed to the Companion, Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/686–8), that a major sin is “everything for which God has prescribed a fixed punishment (*ḥadd*) in this world and the Fire in the hereafter”³¹ was hardly apt to restrict the scope of the major sins. One should note that there was a near consensus among Muslim theologians of the later periods that punishment for Muslim grave sinners would only be temporary; eventually, after a purgatory sojourn in hell’s top layer, they would be admitted into paradise.³² But hell *was* where they were destined. Over the course of the centuries, the discussion came to center not on whether there would be punishment of Muslims, but on how long and how violent this punishment would be.

There was also the question whether God could forgive unrepented grave sins, and whether in practice He would do so. Theologians, particularly those

29 Similarly, Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire*, 108–10.

30 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-adab* 6, k. *al-shahādāt*, bāb 10; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-īmān* 144. Hadiths in al-Bukhārī’s and Muslim’s collection are cited according to Wensinck, *Concordance*.

31 Dhahabī, *Kabāʾir* 6.

32 On the emergence of the idea of a temporary hell in early Islam, see Hamza, *To Hell and back*.

belonging to the Ash'arite school of theology, tended to assert that God's mercy, as one could read in a hadith, would overcome the wrath He directs at human sinfulness, even in the absence of repentance. In contrast, Khārijite and Mu'tazilite theologians of the early centuries generally insisted on the punishment of sinful, unrepentant believers. As noted above, the dominant narrative in scholarship on Islamic theology has been that the Khārijite and Mu'tazilite position was lastingly defeated and erased by the salvific optimism of the mainstream. However, also in later centuries theologians reached different conclusions as to whether God could "renege on the threat" (*khulf al-wa'īd*) that is leveled at Muslim sinners in the Islamic revelation.³³ For example, the Meccan Māturīdī scholar, al-Qārī al-Harawī (d. 1014/1605), who dedicated an epistle to the question of *khulf al-wa'īd*, affirmed the general necessity for God to punish Muslim sinners, although he also granted that God did not have to punish them *in each case* (thereby parting ways with the more rigorous stance of many Mu'tazilites).³⁴ At the other end of the theological spectrum one comes across notions of universal salvation even for non-Muslims. Mohammad Hassan Khalil and Jon Hoover, both of whom are contributors to this volume, are to be credited for recently having brought these strands of universalist thinking to the attention of a broader audience.³⁵ In his chapter, Khalil revisits the eighth/fourteenth-century debate about Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 728/1328) doctrine of the "demise of hell" (*fanā' al-nār*). Hoover pursues the doctrine's reception in later centuries, particularly in the work of the Yemenite Ibn al-Wazīr (d. 840/1436).

The fear of hell is also integral to the renunciant and ascetic strands of Muslim religiosity. According to a tradition reported by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/998), after a thousand years of punishment, only those Muslim sinners who are "more highly esteemed in the eyes of God" are let out of hell. The pious exemplar of the early second/eighth century, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), supposedly commented: "O, that I might be among these men!"³⁶ Other renunciants (*zuhhād*, sg. *zāhid*) of the early centuries are on record for expressing what Christopher Melchert has characterized as "exaggerated fear."³⁷ In his contribution to this volume, Melchert collects traditions that showcase instances in which the renunciants focused their fear on hell in particular.

33 See on the rejection of *khulf al-wa'īd*, particularly among Māturīdī theologians, the comments of Gardet, *Dieu* 304; Lange, *Sins*, expiation 160–67.

34 Qārī, *Qawl* 46–7.

35 Hoover, *Islamic universalism*; Khalil, *Islam*. See also Pagani, *Vane speranze*.

36 Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb* (tr. Gramlich) iii, 221.

37 Melchert, *Exaggerated fear*.

As one learns from Melchert's piece, several of the *zuhhād* allegedly wept, fainted, or even died on the spot when passing blacksmiths working a forge, overwhelmed by the thought of hell-fire.³⁸ Such behavior resonated closely with a Quranic motif. "Have you not considered the fire that you light?" the Quran rhetorically asks, and then exclaims: "We have made it a reminder (*tadhkira*)!" (Q 56:71–3). There are also cases reported of *zuhhād* who passed away upon hearing the Quran's hell verses (*āyāt al-wa'īd*) recited to them.³⁹

Zuhd motifs of the fear of hell also survive in later Sufi works. "Your coming unto it [hell] is certain, while your salvation therefrom is no more than conjecture", thunders al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in his *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, urging the believer to "fill up your heart, therefore, with the dread of that destination."⁴⁰ Others voiced a certain disregard for hell. Like paradise, they considered hell a distraction from the only valid object of their devotion, that is, God. This explains how a Sufi like Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī (d. 234/848 or 261/875) could assert that God's fire of love burns a thousand times more intensely than the fire of hell, and that God will take the foot of the hell-monster and dip it into the fire of His love, which will obliterate it.⁴¹ Baṣṭāmī is also said to have claimed that he would be able to smother hell with the tip of his frock, thereby saving the rest of humankind from punishment.⁴² The idea of universal redemption from punishment in hell also appears in the thought of a later Sufi, Ibn al-'Arabī of Murcia (d. 638/1240). As Samuela Pagani's contribution to this volume shows, on the one hand Ibn al-'Arabī makes room for hell as the manifestation of God's attribute of "majesty" (*jalāl*), which complements His "kindness" (*jamāl*). On the other hand, Ibn al-'Arabī predicts that punishment in hell will eventually come to an end. However, instead of moving on to paradise, hell's inhabitants will remain in hell, attached to it, and in a certain way enjoying it, like natives prospering in their homeland (*mawṭin*), albeit in a state considered abject by all others.

Yet other Sufis developed strategies of internalizing hell. The Persian mystic Hujwērī (d. 465/1073 or 469/1077), for example, wrote that man's lower soul (*nafs*), the seat of carnal appetites, corresponds to hell, "of which it is a type in

38 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf* xiv, 5, 8; Ibn Ḥanbal, *Zuhd* 320.

39 See the biographies collected in al-Tha'labī's *Qatā' l-Qur'ān*. Cf. Kermani, *Gott ist schön* 378–9; Meier, *Abū Sa'īd* 196–7. Famous among the "verses of threat" (*āyāt al-wa'īd*) were 4:37, 23:104, 39:46, 54:46, as well as suras 67 and 102.

40 Ghazālī, *Ihyā'* v, 156 (tr. Winter 220).

41 Sarrāj, *Luma'* (tr. Gramlich) 529–30.

42 See Ritter, *Aussprüche* 237.

this world.”⁴³ The Khurasani ‘Azīz-i Nasafī (*fl.* middle of 7th/13th c.), a follower and interpreter of Ibn al-‘Arabī, describes an ethical hell, in which “all the disapproved words and deeds and all the blameworthy manners are the gates of hell”,⁴⁴ a notion that one also encounters in the writings of al-Ghazālī and Rūmī, among others.⁴⁵ In addition, Nasafī outlines an intellectual, or noetic hell: this comes about when the human faculties of perception and understanding (the outer and inner senses) are, as it were, out of balance. If reason (*‘aql*), one of the inner senses, controls the five outer senses, as well as the two inner senses of imagination (*khayāl*) and phantasy (*wahm*), together they are the eight gates of paradise; if however reason is absent, the remaining seven faculties equal the seven gates of hell.⁴⁶

It should not surprise us that this kind of interiorization and intellectualization of paradise and hell also goes on in Islamic philosophy. Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī’s (d. 672/1274) *al-Mabda’ wa-l-ma‘ād*, for example, echoes Nasafī’s scheme closely.⁴⁷ Ṭūsī, in the beginning of his career, was an Isma‘ili; the Isma‘ilis, as is well known, were particularly drawn to Neoplatonic thought. Isma‘ili authors such as Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971) deny the resurrection of bodies;⁴⁸ paradise and hell, for them, is a purely spiritual affair. “Impure” and “dark” souls, in al-Sijistānī’s language, those that are not enlightened by the teaching of the Isma‘ili Imam, suffer the torments of hell already during their earthly lives.⁴⁹ They may also undergo metempsychosis, that is, rebirth in another body or lower material form, a controversial motif in Isma‘ili thought that is explored in Daniel de Smet’s contribution to this volume, a study that provides a useful overview of Isma‘ili speculations about hell and the punishments suffered therein. As de Smet writes, Isma‘ili thinkers such as Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020) believed that the literal (*ẓāhir*) sense of the descriptions of paradise and hell in the Quran and the hadith was “absurd and contrary to reason”, and that one should at all times seek to understand their allegorical (*bāṭin*) meaning.

However, few mystics or philosophers in the Islamic tradition, though often latently critical of the traditional imagery of the afterlife, categorically and outspokenly rejected this imagery. In literary circles, it was on occasion

43 Hujwīrī, *Kashf* (tr. Nicholson) 199.

44 Nasafī, *Insān* 295.

45 See Ghazālī, *Ihyā’* v, 165–6 (tr. Winter 235); Rūmī, *Mathnawī* vii, 68.

46 Nasafī, *Insān* 295–6.

47 Ṭūsī, *Mabda’* 77–8 (§§ 65–6).

48 See, for example, Sijistānī, *Kashf* 120 (§ 7.2.3), 122–4 (§ 7.3).

49 Sijistānī, *Risāla* 45, 48–9.

ridiculed,⁵⁰ but such satire was patently fictional, and functioned within contexts characterized by their relative distance to institutionalized religion. Not only was the mass of details in the Quran and hadith about the material and sensual nature of the afterlife rather difficult to ignore. There was a theological consensus that one should accept the “reality” (*ḥaqq*) of the phenomena in paradise and hell without inquiring into what kind of reality, exactly, these phenomena possessed.⁵¹

In the popular religious literature of the Middle Period and Late Middle Period hell is prominently on display.⁵² Roberto Tottoli’s chapter in this volume provides insights into several of these narratives, albeit in a somewhat unexpected context, that of Spanish Morisco literature. A community under siege in its Christian environment, the Moriscos transmitted several texts about hell. This, as Tottoli shows, is not so much due to a certain Morisco pessimism in the face of their Christian persecutors; it is characteristic, rather, of late-medieval Islamic literature in general. One can also think in this context of the stories about the Prophet Muḥammad’s Ascension (*miʿrāj*), in which, over the course of the centuries, hell (but also paradise) is given more and more space.⁵³ Frederick Colby, in his chapter in this volume, traces a curious development in this body of texts, whereby hell is gradually moved up toward the higher heavenly spheres. Rather than seeing in this the attempt to remove the otherworldly realms from earth, that is, to make them more transcendental, one should probably interpret this phenomenon as the result of a process of literary elaboration of the narrative: the Prophet’s visit to paradise and hell comes at the end of his otherworldly journey because it heightens the dramatic effect and fits more neatly into the chronology of events. In fact, perhaps one should regard the kind of narratives discussed by Tottoli and Colby as skeletal versions that story-tellers performed in public, enriching them with other traditions. It is not difficult to imagine that hell in particular would have offered ample opportunities to do so. In the following two sections of this introduction, I provide an overview of the wide and varied pool of traditions from which story-tellers could draw.

50 An extreme example is Wahrānī, *Manām*.

51 See, for example, Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt* 293, and the credal affirmations of the *ḥaqq* of eschatological phenomena in Watt (tr.), *Islamic creeds* 44 (§ 17, al-Ashʿarī), 52 (§ 8, al-Ṭahāwī), 60 (§§ 20–21, *Wāṣiyat Abī Hanīfa*), 66 (§ 21, *Fiqh akbar 11*), 71 (§ 12, al-Qayrawānī), 77–8 (§§ 17–21, al-Ghazālī), 82 (§ 17, al-Nasafi), 88 (§ 18, al-Ījī).

52 Tottoli, Jesus and the skull.

53 On hell in Ascension narratives, see Vuckovic, *Heavenly journeys* 113–21; Tottoli, *Tours of Hell*; and the contribution of Frederick Colby to this volume.

3 The Topography of Hell

The common belief was that hell, like paradise, coexists in time with the temporal world. Q 3:131, which states that “hell has been prepared (*u’iddat*) for the unbelievers,” was generally taken to mean that, rather than coming into being at the end of time, hell was “already created.”⁵⁴ The fact that the prophet Muḥammad, during his Ascension, had seen the punishment of Muslim sinners in hell was also taken to be proof for hell’s coexistence.⁵⁵ While, as noted above, some theologians held that only paradise was eternal, while hell would eventually perish (*fanā’ al-nār*), the majority agreed that hell too was eternal unto eternity, that is, *a parte post* (*abad*) (cf. Q 4:169, 5:119, *passim*).⁵⁶

Given the temporal coexistence of hell, there was some speculation as to where in the cosmos hell is located. The “seven earths” mentioned in Q 65:12 were interpreted to be the seven levels (*ṭabaqāt*) of hell.⁵⁷ The Quranic *sijjīn* (“a written record,” Q 83:7–9), was commonly thought to be a rock in the lowest earth⁵⁸ on which the whole universe rests.⁵⁹ If, then, hell was (in) the lower part of the globe, it made sense to picture it as a vast subterranean funnel, spanned by the Bridge (*ṣirāṭ*), which the resurrected pass on their way to paradise,⁶⁰ with a brim (*shafīr*) and concentric circles leading down into a central pit at the bottom (*qa’r*).⁶¹ Eschatologists also debated the location of the entry to this subterranean structure. Some related that the sea is the top level of hell.⁶² Others believed that the sulphurous well in the Wādī Barhūt in Ḥaḍramawt (modern-day Yemen), haunted by the souls of infidels, was the gate to the nether regions.⁶³ Still others located the entry to hell in Gehinnom, the Biblical valley of Hinnom, between the eastern wall of the Jerusalem temple precinct and the Mount of Olives.⁶⁴ Further east, a Persian work of the *mirabilia* genre from the sixth/twelfth century locates the entry to hell in a gorge, appropriately called Wādī Jahannam, in the neighbourhood of Balkh in

54 Ash’arī, *Maqālāt* 475; Pazdawī, *Uṣūl al-dīn* 170.

55 Qurtubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 98.

56 Abrahamov, *The creation and duration* 96.

57 Yāqūt, *Buldān* i, 20.

58 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* iv, 287; Muttaqī, *Kanz* xv, 265.

59 Heinen, *Islamic cosmology* 88, 143.

60 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-riqāq* 52; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. *al-īmān* 299.

61 Qurtubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 108.

62 *Ibid.*, 101, 105; Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 411.

63 Fākihī, *Akhbār Makka* i, 41, 43 (## 1106, 1110); *Qurrat al-‘uyūn* 104; Suyūṭī, *Sharḥ al-ṣudūr* 312–3, 317–8, 330. Cf. Rentz, *Barhūt*; *TC* iv, 522.

64 Wāṣiṭī, *Faḍā’il* 23. Cf. Monfarrer, *A propósito* 152.

Afghanistan. The author says of this sinister venue that it “sinks steeply into the ground, and the fearless and ruthless joke that it goes down so deeply that if one throws a stone into the cavity one cannot see it reaching the bottom.”⁶⁵ He also notes that “in this cavity, strange birds have countless nests”, an observation that accords with the notion that the souls of infidels and sinners haunt the gate to hell in the bellies of black birds.⁶⁶ In this account, one also hears echoes of eschatological hadiths which describe the extreme depth of the hell funnel, where a stone thrown from the Bridge falls for seventy years before hitting the ground.⁶⁷ In sum, there is a general trend in the tradition to think of this world and hell as being temporally and spatially coterminous.

Q 15:44 states that hell has seven gates (*abwāb*), which were equated with hell’s seven levels (*tabaqāt*), mirroring the seven levels of paradise. At times, a terminological distinction was made between the levels of paradise, called *darajāt* (stairs upwards), and the levels of hell, called *darakāt* (stairs downwards; cf. Q 4:144).⁶⁸ The name for hell that is most often used in the Quran (some 125 times) is simply “the Fire” (*al-nār*). In the exegetical literature, seven of the other names for hell in the Quran were singled out and correlated with the seven levels of hell. According to the most common model, the descending order of these levels is as follows:⁶⁹ (1) *jahannam* “Gehenna”, a cognate of Hebrew *gehinnom* (Q 2:206, 3:12, passim in 109 places); (2) *al-sā’ir* “the blaze” (Q 4:10, 4:55, passim in fourteen places); (3) *al-ḥuṭama* “the crusher” (?) (Q 104:4–5); (4) *lazā* “blazing fire” (Q 70:15); (5) *saqar* “extreme heat” (?) (Q 54:48, 74:26–7, 74:42); (6) *al-jaḥīm* “the furnace” (Q 2:119, 5:10, passim in twenty-four places); and (7) *hāwiya* “pit, abyss” (Q 101:9). Various similar models exist with a slightly differing order of names. Al-Qurṭubī warns against other, less sound divisions,⁷⁰ possibly referring to models such as that recorded by al-Tha’labī (d. 427/1035), in which the seven layers of hell appear to merge with the seven earths of medieval Islamic cosmology and are called *adīm* (surface), *basīṭ* (plain), *thaqīl* (heavy, onerous), *baṭīḥ* (swamp), *mutathāqila* (oppressor), *māsika* (holder), and *tharā* (moist earth).⁷¹ One may also refer to the concept of Ibn al-‘Arabī and other Sufis of hell as a meganthropos, in which the seven

65 Ṭūsī, *Ajāyib* 293–4.

66 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’* xxiv, 71. Cf. *TC* iv, 523.

67 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 108.

68 *Ibid.*, 89; Suyūṭī, *Budūr* i, 69.

69 Cf. O’Shaughnessy, *The seven names* 444–69.

70 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 90.

71 Tha’labī, *Qiṣaṣ* 6–7.

body parts with which man sins (eyes, ears, tongue, hands, stomach, genitals, and feet) are equated with the seven levels of hell.⁷²

As noted above, hell's uppermost level, called *jahannam*, was seen as a temporary place of punishment reserved for Muslim sinners. In later tradition, one finds the notion that hell has only two levels (*bābān*), an inner one (*al-jawāniyya*), from which nobody ever escapes, and an outer one (*al-barrāniyya*), in which Muslims are kept.⁷³ However, this place of temporary punishment never crystallised into a "third place" between paradise and hell as in the Christian tradition of purgatory. In common parlance, the term *jahannam* continued to be used *pars pro toto*, and it remained a place not outside or above hell, but part of it; it was not to be confounded with *al-a'rāf* (cf. Q 7:46), a residual place or limbo situated between paradise and hell, in which there is neither reward nor punishment.

Hell is so large that one must travel for five hundred years in order to get from one level to the next.⁷⁴ Hell's pitch-black darkness⁷⁵ is only faintly illuminated by the flames of the infernal fire.⁷⁶ Extreme heat predominates, but, according to some traditions, the bottom level of hell is freezing cold (*zamharīr*, cf. Q 76:13).⁷⁷ According to a well-known tradition, the extreme heat in summer and the extreme cold in winter are the two breaths of hell that God grants it as a means to relieve the pressure at work in it, its parts "eating each other."⁷⁸ Mountains, valleys, rivers, and even oceans (filled with fire, blood, and pus) are thought to form the landscape of hell. The Quranic terms *ṣa'ūd* (74:17), *yaḥmūm* (56:43), and *'aqaba* (90:11) were interpreted as names referring to mountains in hell.⁷⁹ Traditions that improvise on multiples of seven are common: hell has seventy thousand valleys, each with seventy thousand ravines, inhabited each by seventy thousand serpents and scorpions.⁸⁰ In hell, there are dry and thorny shrubs, the *ḍarī'* (Q 88:6) and *ghislīn* (Q 69:36). According to Q 37:62–6 and 44:43–6, the tree of *zaqqūm*, commonly identified with the "cursed tree" (*al-shajara al-mal'ūna*) of Q 17:60, grows at the bottom of hell (*fī aṣl al-jaḥīm*), sprouting fruit "like the heads of demons" (*ka-annahu ru'ūs al-shayāṭīn*), which

72 Asín, *La escatología musulmana* 145. See above, n. 42.

73 Muttaqī, *Kanz* xiv, 216.

74 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 93.

75 Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, k. *jahannam* 8; Muttaqī, *Kanz* xiv, 220.

76 Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilya* vi, 139.

77 Cf. Asín, *La escatología musulmana* 152; Tottoli, Case of *zamharīr*.

78 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīh*, k. *bad' al-khalq* 10.

79 Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'* xxiv, 155; Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 114, 119.

80 Ghazālī, *Iḥyā'* v, 157 (tr. Winter 221–2).

the inhabitants are forced to eat as one of their tortures. When the inhabitants of hell eat from it, *zaqqūm* snaps back at them.⁸¹ Commentators debated whether *zaqqūm* is “from this world” (*min al-dunyā*) or whether it is exclusively an otherworldly phenomenon. According to al-Tha’labī, the majority position was that *zaqqūm* is a desert tree known to the Arabs.⁸² All in all, the learned tradition of Islam embraced the notion of a geomorphic hell, as is also attested by the postulation of cities, palaces, houses, wells, and prisons in hell.⁸³

On the one hand, then, hell appears as a rather mundane setting; on the other, the traditionist literature on hell continuously seeks to push the human imagination to its limits. One might say that in this literature the unimaginable is approximated asymptotically. Infinite space, for example, is gauged in terms of distance measured in very large units of travel time. The popular eschatological literature pushes this idea to its extreme, resulting in traditions in which the imagination is “unbound.”⁸⁴ In this volume, Wim Raven provides an impression of just such a popular narrative, an anonymous fantastic cosmology known under the title of *K. al-ʿAzama* (“The Book of Majesty”), which has been ascribed, wrongly it seems, to Ibn Abī l-Dunyā. It is striking how in the *K. al-ʿAzama* the hundreds and thousands of years one encounters in the learned traditionist literature on hell are exponentially increased to multiples of thousands and millions. For example, each tooth of the hell-monster, one learns, “has a length of a billion years, a year being four thousand months; a month being four thousand days; a day being four thousand hours, and one hour lasts as long as seventy of our years.”

4 Hell as a Punitive Institution

The hell-monster Jahannam, which “raises its neck out of the Fire on the Day of Resurrection,”⁸⁵ is just the most prominent among the array of animal punishers in hell. Snakes and scorpions figure prominently,⁸⁶ but the damned also have to do with vermin and “all flying insects, to the exception of bees,”⁸⁷ as in fact all animals that inflict pain on earth, according to one tradition, continue

81 Abū Nuʿaym, *Ḥilya* vi, 11.

82 Tha’labī, *Tafsīr* viii, 146.

83 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 94.

84 Cf. Abu-Deeb, *The imagination unbound*.

85 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* ii, 336; Muttaqī, *Kanz* iv, 17.

86 Tha’labī, *Qiṣaṣ* 6; Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 114 and passim.

87 Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 444. Cf. Canova, *Animals* 65.

to do so in the next.⁸⁸ (By a process of punitive transformation [*maskh*], the sinners also turn into animals themselves, a punishment that serves to dehumanise them.)⁸⁹ The staff of hell, however, is formed first and foremost by an army of fearsome punisher-angels. In a strictly monotheistic system like Islam, there is no place for Satan as the lord of hell; a relatively peripheral figure in Islamic eschatology, he is simply counted among the inmates of hell. According to Q 74:30, there are nineteen guardian angels of hell, who guard the gates of hell (Q 39:71) and are charged with punishing its detainees under the supervision of their chief, called Mālik (Q 43:77). In the exegetical literature and in popular eschatology, these guardian angels (*khazana*) are identified with the “repellers” (*zabāniya*) mentioned in Q 96:8, and their number is expanded *ad infinitum*.⁹⁰ The *zabāniya* have repulsive faces, eyes like flashing lightning, teeth white like cows’ horns, lips hanging down to their feet, and rotten-smelling breath, and they dress in black clothes.⁹¹ Evil demons, the followers of Satan, are punished in hell, along with humans (Q 26:95). The punisher-angels in hell, on the other hand, are on God’s side, as agents of His terrifying but ultimately just use of punishment.

Almost every punishment found in the catalogue of medieval Islamic punishments is also found in the imagined realm of hell. Fire is by no means the only source of suffering.⁹² There are executions by decapitation, gibbeting, stoning, throwing down from heights, drowning, and trampling by animals.⁹³ Corporal punishments, in addition to flogging,⁹⁴ appear in all forms, of which a ninth/fifteenth-century Uighur *mi’rāj* manuscript offers vivid depictions.⁹⁵ Sinners are tied up in torturous positions, left hand chained to neck.⁹⁶ They are hung up with ropes, dangling from their feet, calves, Achilles tendons, breasts, hair, and tongues.⁹⁷ Lips are cut with scissors, corners of the mouth slit all the way back to the neck.⁹⁸ Another important punishment incurred by the sinners is shaming. Already in the Quran it is stressed that the inhabitants

88 Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 445.

89 *Qurrat al-ʿuyūn* 70; Thaʿlabī, *Tafsīr* iv, 57.

90 Samarqandī, *Tafsīr* iii, 494. On the translation of *zabāniya* as “repellers,” see Christian Lange’s contribution to this volume.

91 Ghazālī, *Durra* 17.

92 Pace El-Saleh, *Vie future* 51.

93 Lange, *Justice* 147–8.

94 Abū Nuʿaym, *Hilya* vi, 10–1; *Daqāʿiq al-akhbār* 66.

95 See Séguy, *The miraculous journey*, plates 46–57.

96 *Daqāʿiq al-akhbār* 66.

97 Qushayrī, *Miʿrāj* 47.

98 Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, k. al-taʿbīr 48.

of hell will suffer exposure and humiliation (6:124, 25:69, 40:60). The most obvious illustration of this is the fact that sinners in hell are naked,⁹⁹ but the face, as the seat of honour, is singled out for punishment.¹⁰⁰ Faces are beaten (Q 8:50, 47:27) and “blackened” by the heat (Q 23:104; cf. 3:106). Sinners “will be dragged on their faces into the Fire” (Q 54:48). The hadith elaborates with grotesque detail: The *zabānīya* trample the sinners’ tongues.¹⁰¹ Hellfire is so fierce that the upper lip of the sinner “is rolled up until it reaches the middle of his head, and his lower lip will hang down until it beats on his navel.”¹⁰² On the basis of Q 3:180 (“That which they held on to will be tied to their necks on the Day of Resurrection”), hadith traditions conjecture that sinners will be carrying visible signs of their sins into hell with them.¹⁰³ Spurred by the fact that the Quran speaks of the many chains with which the sinners will be bound (40:71–2; 73:12), many exegetes conceived of hell as a place of imprisonment. Al-Ghazālī imagined hell as a house with narrow walls and dark passageways in which the prisoner (*asīr*) dwells forever.¹⁰⁴ Some exegetes were of the opinion that *sijjīn* was the name of a prison in hell.¹⁰⁵ Finally, hell could also be seen as a place of banishment (that is, from paradise), “the worst punishment of the people of hell.”¹⁰⁶

Assigning certain sinners to hell reinforced a parallel moral hierarchy in the lower world. It is therefore not surprising to see the basic social classes and other divisions of medieval Muslim society reflected in the social stratification of hell, which is populated by common people, members of the learned religious elite, and rulers and their representatives. Traditions enumerating the punishments that await them in hell may well have served the lower classes as a kind of moral catechism. Along with their general condemnation of those who engage in wine-drinking, fornication, sodomy, suicide, and so forth, eschatologists also include among the damned those “who speak of worldly matters in the mosque” or sleep during prayer.¹⁰⁷ A tradition allocates seven types of mischievous scholars (*‘ulamā’*) to the seven different levels of hell.¹⁰⁸ Corrupt

99 Qushayrī, *Mī'rāj* 37; *Daqā'iq al-akhbār* 69.

100 See Lange, “On that day.”

101 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 124.

102 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad* iii, 88; Tirmidhī, *Jāmi'*, k. *jahannam* 5.

103 'Abd al-Razzāq, *Muṣannaḥ*, k. *al-zakāt, bāb ghulūl al-ṣadaqa* iv, 55; Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīh*, k. *al-jihād* 189; Muttaqī, *Kanz* v, 222.

104 Ghazālī, *Ihyā'* v, 156 (tr. Winter 220).

105 Rāzī, *Tafsīr* xxxi, 84.

106 Ibn Rajab, *Takhwīf* 143.

107 Qushayrī, *Mī'rāj* 40, 47; *Daqā'iq al-akhbār* 70.

108 Muttaqī, *Kanz* x, 82.

judges and hypocritical Quran readers are likewise assigned to hell.¹⁰⁹ Other traditions seem, often in oblique ways, to allude to policemen, tax-collectors, and market inspectors, as well as a number of other state officials.¹¹⁰ The ruler himself is not exempted from such threats. Al-Ghazālī cites a report from the Prophet that those rulers who punished their subjects beyond what God commands “will be shown the corners of hell.”¹¹¹ Such traditions suggest that the popular discourse on hell could have the double function of promoting an attitude of quietism and at the same time subverting the social status quo.

There is no shortage in the traditionist literature of patriarchal, at times overtly misogynist statements about women. At its most blunt, this is clothed in the tradition attributed to the Prophet that “most people in hell are women.”¹¹² Descriptions of the punishment of female sinners in hell do not make for pleasant reading.¹¹³ As Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Haddad have noted, these description, however, should not be seen as “the considered conclusion of Muslim theologians ... but rather [as] the attempt to legitimate forms of social control over women.”¹¹⁴ A similar dynamic is at work in hell traditions about non-orthodox Muslim and other minority groups. The apostle Paul (*Bawlus*), according to a Shi‘i tradition, is in hell;¹¹⁵ the atheists (*dahriyya*) and anti-predestinarian Qadarites keep him company there.¹¹⁶ Christiane Gruber’s analysis in this volume of a Safavid hell painting demonstrates how, in her words, “hell played a key role in sectarian politics.” In sum, eschatologists identified and classified sinners in hell in accordance with how they understood and—by reproducing traditions that underpinned them—perpetuated the gender-based, moral, social, political and sectarian hierarchies of medieval Islam.

5 The Islamic Hell and Modernity

The various ways in which modern and postmodern Muslim thinkers of the late nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries have reacted to the

109 Ibid., xi, 179.

110 Abū Nu‘aym, *Hilya* iv, 2, 112; Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 76–7, 130; Muttaqī, *Kanz* iii, 200, vi, 18.

111 Ghazālī, *Naṣīhat al-mulk* 22.

112 Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 460–61.

113 Cf. Malti-Douglas, *Faces of sin*.

114 Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding* 163. On this issue, see also the balanced remarks by Rosenthal, *Reflections on love* 251–2.

115 Majlisī, *Bihār* viii, 483.

116 Qurṭubī, *Tadhkira* ii, 92; Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 423; Majlisī, *Bihār* viii, 353.

modern onslaught on traditional eschatology deserves separate, detailed study. Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Haddad are pioneers in this field of inquiry.¹¹⁷ In conclusion to this introduction, I shall limit myself to some general observations, while seeking to highlight aspects of modern Muslim theology that relate to hell in particular.

Muslim modernists, in the words of Smith and Haddad, experience a “kind of embarrassment with the elaborate traditional detail concerning life in the grave and in the abodes of recompense, called into question by modern rationalists.”¹¹⁸ According to Smith and Haddad, “the great majority” of modern Muslim theologians, therefore, silence the issue, or content themselves with reaffirming the traditional position that the reality of the afterlife must not be denied, but that its exact nature remains unfathomable.¹¹⁹ More radical, skeptical reactions can also be found, however, including ironic reversals of traditionalist eschatology such as one encounters in Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī’s (Iraq, d. 1936) remarkable poem, *Thawra fī jahīm* (“Revolution in hell”), which is discussed in Richard van Leeuwen’s contribution to this volume. In al-Zahāwī’s visionary tale, which is clothed in the form of a dream of his own death that the poet has after eating a dish seasoned with watercress,¹²⁰ hell is where the philosophers and rationalists are, that is to say all the forward-thinking, revolutionary spirits that traditionalist Islam condemns to eternal damnation: Ibn Sīna, Ibn Rushd, and Ṭūsī, but also Socrates, Epicurus, Voltaire, and Spinoza, to name just a few. Fired up by the passionate address of a young male revolutionary, and with the aid of infernal weaponry developed by a group of empirical scientists, the inhabitants of hell storm heaven and threaten to topple God’s Throne—but then the poet wakes up.¹²¹ Al-Zahāwī’s poem unmistakably gestures back to earlier literary tours of the otherworld, in particular al-Ma’arrī’s (d. 449/1058) *Risālat al-ghufrān* (‘Epistle of Forgiveness’),¹²² but updates it and frames it in modern terms.

117 Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding* 99–146. For a recent overview, critical of Smith/Haddad, see Ryad, *Eschatology* (forthcoming).

118 Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding* 100.

119 Ibid.

120 Watercress is the only edible plant that grows in the Muslim hell, viz., in *jahannam*, hell’s uppermost layer where live becomes just about bearable. See Suyūṭī, *Budūr* 480; Majlisī, *Bihār* viii, 479.

121 Zahāwī, *Thawra*.

122 Ma’arrī, *Risāla*. See the new complete translation by van Gelder/Schoeler, *The epistle of forgiveness*.

Others have preferred to continue in the vein of Sufi spiritual and interiorized interpretations of hell.¹²³ An important contributor to this line of thought is the Pakistani reformer Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938). Just as al-Zahāwī updates al-Ma'arrī with modern science, so Iqbal combines the eschatological thought of Ibn al-ʿArabī and Rūmī with the thought of 20th-century Western philosophers such as Henri Bergson (d. 1941). Iqbal sees paradise and hell primarily as metaphors for the inner psychic and intellectual developments of the individual. In Iqbal's take, when the Quran announces that "the fire of God, kindled, ... rises over the hearts [of people]" (Q 104:6–7), this refers to none other than the painful realization of one's failure as a human being. Paradise and hell, in Iqbal's phrase, are "states, not localities."¹²⁴

Muslim theologians seeking a closer alignment with traditional Islamic theology have tended to find Iqbal's proposals insufficiently grounded in the tradition. As Fazlur Rahman criticizes, "the structural elements of [Iqbal's] thought are too contemporary to be an adequate basis for an ongoing Islamic metaphysical endeavor."¹²⁵ Rahman is more sympathetic to Muḥammad ʿAbduh's (Egypt, d. 1905) attempt to "resurrect ... rationalism", such as he finds it in the example of the Muʿtazilites of the early centuries of Islam.¹²⁶ ʿAbduh, in his seminal *Risālat al-tawḥīd* ("Epistle of Unity"), judged that Muslims are not required to believe in the corporeal particulars of the afterlife, even if these are recorded in "clear" (*ẓāhir*) traditions; a general affirmation of the doctrine of life after death, including postmortem rewards and punishment, was enough, in his view, to qualify someone a "true believer" (*muʾmin ḥaqq*).¹²⁷ In ʿAbduh's wake, also Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's "universalist" notion of *fanāʾ al-nār* has found important advocates among Muslim intellectuals and theologians, including the likes of Rashīd Riḍā (Egypt, d. 1935), İzmirlı İsmail Hakkı (Turkey, d. 1946), and Yūsuf al-Qarādāwī (Egypt/Qatar, b. 1926).¹²⁸

In spite of these developments, modern and contemporary eschatologists in the Muslim world often follow the traditional path of collecting hadith, though this endeavor is frequently clothed in modern Arabic and engages, albeit superficially, issues of modernity. The late ʿUmar Sulaymān al-Ashqar (d. 2012) can serve as an example of this trend. A prolific neo-Salafī writer and long-time

123 Smith/Haddad, *Islamic understanding* 127–46.

124 Iqbal, *Reconstruction* 98.

125 Rahman, *Islam and modernity* 132.

126 *Ibid.*, 153.

127 ʿAbdūh, *Risālat al-tawḥīd* 178.

128 On Riḍā and al-Qarādāwī, see Ryad, *Eschatology* (forthcoming). On Hakkı, see Kaya, *İzmirlı İsmail Hakkı*.

professor of Islamic law at various universities in Kuwait and Jordan, al-Ashqar is the author-compiler of a work in three volumes entitled *al-Yawm al-ākhir* (“Endtime”), the last volume of which deals with paradise and hell. Strikingly, though he looks up to Ibn al-Qayyim as a forefather of Salafism, al-Ashqar rejects the doctrine of *fanā’ al-nār*.¹²⁹ In his discussion of the hadith that “most of the inhabitants of hell are women”, al-Ashqar first quotes a long passage from al-Qurṭubī, in which he rehearses the stock repertoire of arguments why women are less likely to enter paradise: they suffer from a deficiency in intellectual ability (*nuqṣān al-‘uqūl*), are too attached to the ephemeral world of the here-and-now, subject to uncontrollable passions, etc. Al-Ashqar then adds that “in spite of this, many women are good and pious (*ṣālihāt*) ... and a great number of them enter paradise, including those who are superior to many a man in terms of the soundness of their belief and their pious actions.”¹³⁰ Such statements only thinly veil the chauvinism that is typical of neo-Salafism. Contemporary traditionalist works like *al-Yawm al-ākhir*, therefore, do not represent a great advance over the medieval manuals, except perhaps in the sense that they are presented in such a way as to make traditional teachings more easily digestible for a broad audience. At the same time, medieval works like the *Daqā’iq al-akhbār* or the *Tadhkira* of al-Qurṭubī are reissued frequently in Arabic lands and beyond, and are widely on sale in bookshops and street corners all over the Islamic world.

In conclusion, this introduction has put into relief the many aspects that make the investigation of the Islamic hell a worthwhile scholarly endeavor. There is no shortage of monographs written about the history of the afterlife in the West.¹³¹ Also hell has been subject of numerous studies,¹³² not to mention

129 Ashqar, *Yawm* 44–6. On attempts by contemporary Muslim theologians to argue that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim actually affirmed the eternity of hell, see Hoover, *Against Islamic Universalism*.

130 Ashqar, *Yawm* 83–4.

131 See, for instance, the recent studies of Casey, *After lives*; Segal, *Life after death*. Both Casey and Segal include chapters on Islam in their surveys; both, however, rely exclusively on the secondary literature on Islamic eschatology. Casey attests Islamic eschatology an “extraordinary ... capacity to find arresting visual images for scarcely graspable ideas.” See Casey, *After lives* 144. Segal suggests that “Islamic views of the afterlife are just as rich and manifold as in Judaism or Christianity, but ... different in some important ways;” he identifies the study of “the whole tradition” as a desideratum. See Segal, *Life after death* 639.

132 In lieu of the many, reference can be made to Minois, *Histoire de l'enfer*; Turner, *History of hell*.

the spate of biographies of Satan in the Christian tradition.¹³³ As noted at the beginning of this introduction, very few comparable works exist in scholarship on Islam. It is hoped that this volume can be a first step toward filling this lacuna.

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