

***Fanā' al-Nār* Within Early Kalām and Mysticism. An Analysis Covering the Eighth and Ninth Centuries**

Marco Demichelis

INTRODUCTION THE ESCHATOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND SOME UNRESOLVED ISSUES

The *status quaestionis* is whether there will be a time in the foreseeable future when the Islamic version of Hell (*jahannam*) will be empty or close to no longer being inhabited. This eschatological issue was partially addressed by M. Hassan Khalil in *Islam and the Fate of Others*,¹ who continued the analysis which began with the work of the paradigmatic author al-Ghazālī and his *Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa bayna al-Islām wa al-Zandaqa* (The Decisive criterion for distinguishing Islam from Masked Infidelity),² continued through a study focusing on Ibn ‘Arabī by Ibn Taymiyya, and was to reach its current status with the work of Rashīd Riḍā. This essay, although remarkably informative with regard to al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyya’s analysis, is found wanting in relation to the centuries proceeding the life of the ‘Asharite’s reviver, in particular concerning those authors within kalām who had previously addressed the annihilation of Hell issue (topic) (*fanā' al-nār*).

However, before we embark on an investigation into the first *mutakallimūn* of the eighth, and ninth centuries, it is not only important to emphasize the *status quaestionis* in relation to the exegetical understanding, but also the historical and theological framework from which this orthodox – unorthodox hypothesis derives. Although the Holy Qur’ān is essentially restrained in relation to this subject, highlighting the eternal nature of punishment, it leaves room for doubt, as indicated in reference (11: 104–8):

We are delaying it only for a specified period, and when that Day comes, no soul will speak except by His permission and some of them will be wretched and some happy. The wretched ones will be in the Fire, sighing and groaning, there to remain for as long as the heavens and earth endure, unless your Lord wills otherwise: your Lord carries out whatever He wills.

¹ Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others. The Salvation Question*.

² Sherman A. Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa*.

The Meccan sura 78: 21–23 states: “Hell lies in wait, a home for oppressors to stay in a long, long time.” And, finally, the less literal verse of the Sura al-Qaṣaṣ (28: 88) reports: “Do not call out to any other god beside God, for there is no god but Him. Everything will perish except His Face. His is the Judgement and to Him you shall all be brought back.”³

An approximate literal interpretation of these verses might suggest an emphasis on the option of being in the presence of a non-eternal punishment; however, this article does not in any way seek to focus on Islamic exegesis, but addresses the historical, theological and philosophical understanding that was current during the early centuries of Islām in relation to both the eternal and temporary afterlife. Academic discussion on this topic began early in the twentieth century, with James Robson, in his 1938 article: “Is the Moslem Hell Eternal?”⁴ arguing that within the Aḥmadiyya Islamic circle of Muḥammad ‘Alī (1874–1951) discussions about the possibility of entering Hell remained quite paradigmatic in relation to the Muslim traditions attributed to Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal: “Allah’s apostle said, As for the people of Hell who are (really) its people, they will not die and they will not live. And as for the people to whom Allah wishes (to show) mercy, He will cause them to die in Hell and bring in intercessors for them.”⁵ In addition, the Muslim Ḥadīth records: “Allah’s apostle said, No one will enter Hell who has in his heart the weight of a mustard-seed of faith, and no one will enter Paradise who has in his heart the weight of a mustard-seed of pride.”⁶ Traditional beliefs increased the confusion surrounding the topic. However, J. Robson’s article, probably the first in the contemporary age to challenge the accepted position on this issue, is, by his own admission, quite shallow,⁷ arguing that M. ‘Alī, in both his commentary on the Qur’ān and in his work “The Religion of Islam,” supported the idea of the purification of the human soul within Hell, thus increasing the possibility that at some point in the future Hell would become empty.

“Purification being the great object, the man who has wasted his opportunity here must undergo the ordeal of Hell in order to obtain it. Various great considerations lead to the same conclusion. In the first place, such great prominence is given to the attribute of Mercy in God that he is spoken of as having “ordained mercy on Himself” (VI, 12, 54); the divine Mercy is described as encompassing all things (VI, 148; VII, 156; 40, 7), so that even those who have acted extravagantly, against

³ M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*.

⁴ James Robson, “Is the Moslem Hell Eternal?,” 386–93.

⁵ Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 2: 369.

⁶ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, 5: 172.

⁷ James Robson, “Is the Moslem Hell Eternal?,” 393.

their own souls, should not despair of the mercy of God (XXXIX, 53); and finally it is laid down that for mercy did He create all men (XI, 119). Such a merciful Being could not chastise man unless for some great purpose, which is to set him again on the road to the higher life, after purifying him from evil.”⁸

This twentieth century concept of a purification process reflects, nevertheless, the clear influence of Sufism and early Islamic mysticism,⁹ an issue to which we will return in the fourth section of this article. Fritz Meier, on the contrary, in “The Ultimate Origin and the Hereafter in Islam,”¹⁰ focuses his attention not on the relevance of the Human soul (*nafs*) but on the divine creation of Paradise and Hell and its “natural” evolution. As a matter of fact, the biblical fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise, or more specifically the Garden of Eden, is directly related to an indeterminable date in the future when the entire world will be removed and all human beings will be brought back to life by God as part of a second extraordinary act of creation. At that point, they will be judged by God’s court of law and, depending on the balance between their good and evil deeds, they will either be restored to Paradise or cast into Hell. However, this orthodox eschatological understanding raises a relevant issue concerning the fact that the creator of the world is also the creator of the afterlife and that without the intercession (*shafā’a*) of the Prophet, which has the power to release a sinner from Hell and place them in Paradise, God’s decision is irrevocable and the fate of man is, in principle, eternally sealed.

A cycle which originates with God in Paradise and ends with God in Paradise ... or in Hell, as described by Meier, fails to take into account that everything is created, has a beginning and, therefore, should have an end. This is a prominent deliberation, which involves a cosmological and theological ratiocination, unrelated to the Soul’s purification as described above.

A second relevant passage reflects on the role of the Devil as master of Hell,¹¹ which has been historically and theologically placed above the role of God, as Lord of Heaven. Meier is correct in his reflection emphasizing that the Devil will be annihilated at the end of the world (see the *Dajjāl*) and, as with the rest of mankind, there will be no possibility of him playing a significant role in the afterlife.

One consideration which encourages further questions relates to the ownership issue: If the Devil is not the Lord of Hell, Allah, as creator of it, is also the master

⁸ Muḥammad ‘Alī, *The Religion of Islam*, 230.

⁹ Gavin N. Picken, *Spiritual Purification in Islam: the life and works of al-Muḥāsibī*, 123; Margaret Smith, *Al-Muḥāsibī. An early mystic of Baghdad*; Al-Muḥāsibī, *Kitāb al-Tawāḥḥum*.

¹⁰ Fritz Meier, “The Ultimate Origin and the Hereafter in Islam,” 96–112.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

of it, and if God is the owner of the “inferno,” this place can not then be without hope, in the same way as Allah is not without Mercy. “Nobody in whom there is even a glimmer of belief in God and Muḥammad will remain in Hell forever, but he will, after a certain time, be raised to Paradise. On the other hand, once in Paradise, no one will ever be subsequently thrown into Hell.

Some noted theologians admit that the infidel will remain in Hell “forever.” Nevertheless, it is also possible that Hell, in contradistinction to Paradise, will one day come to an end, because God’s mercy is considered greater than his wrath and consequently, the field in which His anger manifests itself must end one day.¹² Such a position, however, is still to be proved.

If, as expressed in the Qur’ān (55: 26–27): “Everyone on Earth perishes; all that remains is the Face of your Lord, full of majesty, bestowing honour,” to which annihilation of God’s world is the writer referring? The *Fanā’* of life on Earth is, in this case, quite likely to be the focus of attention, or the reference could be to a second annihilation, one that reflects the total destruction of God’s creation, Heaven and Hell included.

THE ḤANAFITE – MURJI’A ESCHATOLOGICAL EVOLUTION AND JAHN IBN SAFWĀN’S EARLY ANNIHILATION

Hypocrisy is one of the most used words in the Qur’ān and Sura 63 is entirely devoted to this issue. From the second half of the seventh century onwards Islām, in a very different way from Christianity, began to develop a theology of Hypocrisy, accompanied by an eschatological key that points directly to the afterlife. This is the starting point and the acknowledgment behind an Islamic eschatological thought that initially affected the debate on the status of the sinner.

The Khāridjites (Nadжда) argued that the killing of women and children was prohibited in Islām.¹³ This notion is rooted in the belief that every child is born in the *fiṭra*:¹⁴ the natural basis of true religion. “Every child is born in the *fiṭra*; it is his parents who make of him a Jew or a Christian or a Parsi.”¹⁵

Al-Nawawī (1233–77), a Shāfi‘ī Sunnite author from Damascus who debated the fate of children who die before reaching adulthood, points out:

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ ‘alā Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 5: 260.

¹⁴ D. B. MacDonald, *Fiṭra*, 2: 931–32.

¹⁵ A. J. Wansinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 42.

The Doctors of some authority are agreed on this point, the children of Muslim parents, who die, will be of the inhabitants of Paradise, because they have not been under the obligation of the law¹⁶ ... as to the children of the infidels there are three options. According to the majority of the doctors, they will go to Hell, like their fathers. Others they take up an attitude of reserve. The third group – whose opinion is the right one – thinks these children will go to Paradise. This opinion is supported by various arguments; by a reference, for instance, to the tradition according to which Muhammad saw Abraham in Paradise surrounded by children. When those were present exclaimed: Even by the children of the infidels? Muhammad answered: Even by the children of the infidels.¹⁷

It is relevant that in such an historical period when conflicts and attacks were quite ordinary occurrences, the salvation of children was particularly important in a formative eschatology that distinguished the Sinner's status by direct reference to decisions concerning what was permissible and what was not.

The intermediate status of the *munāfiq* (the hypocritical), as interpreted by the Murji'a and subsequently supported by the Mu'tazila and the entirety of Sunni orthodox theology, was established as the antithesis to the violence of those who supported the position that every grave sin led to damnation and the loss of status as a Muslim (the Khāridjites Azāriqa, in particular), which caused a great deal of controversy in an already critical historical phase when local insurrections in the entire region of the Near and Middle East were taking place (7th–8th centuries). "... Whosoever sayeth: There is no God but Allah and dieth in this belief will enter Paradise. Even if he should have fornicated and stolen? He answered: Even if he had fornicated and stolen. Even though Abū Dharr¹⁸ turns up his nose."¹⁹

The discussion on the status of the *munāfiq*, which claims the status of being a fairly moderate position, overlaps with the concept of "fear of God," as expressed by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 728) in *Al-Istighfārāt al-Munqidha min al-Nār* (Prayers for Forgiveness that Save from the Hellfire),²⁰ in which the famous author provides more than seventy short prayers for every believer who seeks the forgiveness of God. This litany of requests for clemency is already rooted in atonement and physical deprivations (such as to pass an entire night without sleep),²¹ but

¹⁶ Al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ 'alā Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 261.

¹⁷ A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 43.

¹⁸ Abū Dharr was a Muslim intransigent, a spiritual father of the early Khāridjites, who was exiled by the third Caliph al-Rashidūn 'Uthmān for his hardcore positions.

¹⁹ Al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ 'alā Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1: 147.

²⁰ 'Allāma Quṭb al-Dīn al-Ḥanafī, *Prayers for forgiveness. Al-Istighfārāt al-Munqidha min al-Nār*.

²¹ Ibid., 28.

also addresses the possibility of repeating the same sin: “Oh Allah, I seek your forgiveness for every sin for which I repented to You, but which I then returned to, breaking the covenant between me and You, out of my insolence and my knowledge of your Abundant forgiveness.”²²

Any request for forgiveness is exclusively based on God’s mercy and not on the actual human capacity to obtain Allah’s clemency, and this is the case even without making reference to the position of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī on Islamic Theodicy and Free Will, from which the early Mu‘tazila were instructed to seek guidance (even if many doubts remained as to the actual application).²³ It is, therefore, important to stress that at the beginning of the eighth century Islamic awareness in relation to eschatology was predominantly used to establish a community with limited tenets of faith: the salvation of the *munāfiqūn*, without whom there would be no Islamic *umma*, and the Mercy of God, without which there could be no salvation. This was a clear basis for limiting extremist tendencies.

Notwithstanding this, a different theme arose during the same century. In the *Fiqh Akbar I*, art. 7 expresses a sensationally different position from that portrayed earlier in relation to the risks associated with divergent views within the community: “Difference of opinion in the community is a token of divine mercy.”²⁴ However, this first example of Islamic *‘aqīda* remains difficult to understand and only partially relevant; art. 9 on the actual presence of God in a specific place creates confusion by presenting contrasting opinions that are clearly not reliable, while art. 10, the only one with an eschatological background, introduces the reader only to a first conjecture in relation to the main topic.²⁵ The sentence below provides us with more of an attack on the Jahmite sect, which we will discuss shortly, rather than any real speculation on the punishment of the tomb, about which the holy Qur’ān is extremely limited in relation to references (9: 102; 52: 47; 23: 21, all speak of different punishments, but there is no clear identification of chastisement associated with the tomb).

Disputes as to the identity of the actual author of the *Fiqh Akbar I* have been explored by Wensinck²⁶ and it is important to underline that the Ḥanafite source seems to have been confirmed, even if there is a Murji’ite view (the anti-Khāridjite inclination of the first articles is clear); therefore, it is important to emphasize the

²² ‘Allāma Quṭb al-Dīn al-Ḥanafī, *Prayers for forgiveness*, 44.

²³ Ali Suleiman Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History*, 203.

²⁴ A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 104.

²⁵ Ibid. “Whoso sayeth, I do not know the punishment in the tomb, belongeth to the sect of the Djahmites which goeth to perdition.”

²⁶ Ibid., 122.

line of continuity between the first theological positions of Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and that of the author of this text.

Alternative information about the afterlife that emerges from the *Waṣāyāt Abī Ḥanīfa* are relevant in order to provide a better understanding of the Islamic theological position during the eighth and ninth centuries; while art. 18–19 confirms the existence of punishment in the tomb led by the two angels, Munkar and Nakīr, art. 20 confirms the existence of Paradise and Hell prior to the arrival of human beings, in contrast with the Jahmite position which emphasizes the creation of both by God "... at the time of the separation of the two groups."²⁷ In response to the Quranic verse (28: 88): "Everything will vanish, except the face of Allah" this position suggests that everything will be annihilated, apart from God's essence: "All things besides His essence are contingent; all that is contingent vanishes, and, as compared with His essence, is not existent."²⁸

It is clear that Paradise and Hell are included as being real and physical, in strict accordance with the literal understanding of the Qur'ān, as confirmed in art. 27, in which the categories of people in Paradise and Hell (the person charged with having committed a mortal sin) are clearly defined, with the apparent confirmation that neither of these places will vanish.

A similar understanding of the Islamic interpretation of the afterlife is confirmed in the *Fiqh Akbar II*, in which articles 20 and 21 demonstrate that God's creation of Paradise and Hell, is established as perpetual; however, in the *Fiqh Akbar III*, God is described as being the creator and originator of the World, without end or division; Allah is neither substance nor accident, existing without form and place, etc. This is in contrast with an Islamic geography of the Afterlife which has been shaped by God.

Finally, in art. 20 God is described as being free to make the whole world disappear and to make it return, while in art. 26, the author writes: "Everlasting reward and punishment in Paradise and in Hell. The latter are created."²⁹ This appears to be a quite contradictory statement: if recompense and chastisement are eternal, how can the place where it happened be considered to have been created?

The historicizing process embodied in these texts, as reported by A. J. Wensinck,³⁰ sheds light on the development of an Islamic formative theology and orthodoxy during the early centuries. This focuses on the Ḥanafite position which emerged as a challenge to the Khāridjites (and in support of the Murji'ites) in *Fiqh*

²⁷ Ibn Ḥazm, *Kitāb al-Fiṣal fī'l-Milal wa'l-Ahwā' wa'l-Nihāl*, 5: 42.

²⁸ A. J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, 166.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 268.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 264.

Akbar I, in opposition to the anti-Mu‘tazilite attitude in the *Waṣīyat Abī Ḥanīfa*, more pro-Mu‘tazilite than Ash‘arite in the *Fiqh Akbar II*, with the tendency to harmonize kalām’s views by referring to a text that was probably developed in the tenth century. The *Fiqh Akbar III*, attributed to the eleventh and twelfth century Ḥanafite-Māturīdite authors, is eschatologically less clear than the earlier ones, referring in particular to the eternal nature of damnation.

From the very beginning, i.e., in the eighth century, Jahmites, Khāridjites, Qadarites and Mu‘tazilites all rejected the popular eschatology associated with the punishment of the tomb, which stemmed from a limited number of traditions, but was also based on a literal understanding of the Qur‘ān.

However, the position of Jahm Ibn Safwān (d. 746) at the time of *Fiqh Akbar I*, who was one of the leading figures of early Islamic theology, became particularly controversial and increasingly difficult to classify. Allah, for him, is the only Active power in the Universe; everything which moves has been created by God. This represents a doctrine of absolute *tawḥīd*, which has been rejected by the Mu‘tazila itself. As the only creator in the world, God must necessarily remain as the only being in the world once he ceases to preserve it.³¹ It is, therefore, in relation to this assumption that Jahm Ibn Safwān was the first to use the term *fanā’*, as reported by al-Khayyāt in the *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*,³² al-Baghdādī, in *al-Farq bayna al-Firaq*³³ and al-Ash‘arī, in the *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*.³⁴ All these assumptions seem to rely on the concept that Allah is not a thing (*shay’*) and is an infinite being, as described by Richard M. Frank with reference to the Enneads of Plotinus. For him, God is without limit; no boundaries or terminology can be used to define him: “He is not described or known by any attribute or act ... He is not grasped by mind and whatever may occur to your thought as a being, He is contrary to it.”³⁵

Jahm rejects the notion that nature in itself is capable of producing motion and actions in the same way that can be achieved by human activity; in a major difference of opinion with the early Mu‘tazila, the Jahmites argued that man has no power (*qudra*), no will (*irāda*) and no freedom of choice (*ikhtiyār*). God is the creator of all human actions, which are later attributed to his creatures, as

³¹ Ibid., 120.

³² ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār. Le livre du Triomphe et de la refutation d’Ibn al-Rawāndī l’hérétique*, 10.

³³ ‘Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī, *Al-Farq bayna al-Firaq*, Pt. 2: 13; Josef Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra: Eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens im frühen Islam*, 5: 218–19.

³⁴ Abū al-Ḥasan Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn wa Ikhtilāf al-Muṣallim*, 148–49, 289; Josef Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 5: 218–19.

³⁵ Richard M. Frank, “The Neoplatonism of Gahm Ibn Safwān,” 402.

if they were inert objects. The act of *qudra* is in itself a tangible object, even if it is immaterial; it is important to note that God's power of existence is a *shay'* other than Allah but dependent on him, located outside the undifferentiated absoluteness of his unity, a kind of *hypostasis* analogous to the World Soul or the *Nous* of the neo-platonists.³⁶

There is a clear analogy between Jahm's understanding of an omnipresent and always active monotheistic divinity in the world and the all-permeating activity of the World Soul in the Plotinus awareness of earlier centuries. The main difference, for which it is difficult to identify common ground, concerns the connection between this omnipotent God (or World Soul) with an individual soul, which is immaterial, and the crude physicality of creatures, including human beings.

For that reason, the sources tend to be univocally centred on the distinction between God's Knowledge and the object known, and also between God's act of knowing and the reality which He Knows.³⁷ Al-Ash'arī in the *Maqālāt*, argues that Allah's act of knowing is created; for him, God knows all things prior to their actual existence which he achieves by knowing ahead of time what he proposes to create.³⁸ This act of knowledge is related to its content and the latter can only be different from the Knower. The essence of the Knower, while not the same thing, is understood through the subject of the act of knowing, a facet which may be due to errors and misunderstandings; but this is not the focus of this article.

On the contrary, it is clear that the act of knowing takes place outside of God and not within Himself, in order to limit the risk of creating a *hypostasis*, immaterial and distinct from God and material creatures. "It is argued that His Acts of knowing cannot be subsistent (*qā'im*) in Him since this would imply a substrate (*maḥall*) for accidents and events; whatever is a substrate for accidents and events is a body and God is above that, since the demonstration of the real existence of the Creator rests on the temporal coming to be of the world."³⁹

In conclusion, it is clear that Jahm Ibn Safwān and his successors argued that whatever is composite is not capable of being the First, thus necessitating the search for the source of its existence.

Devoid of real eschatological thought, but in harmony with the compulsory nature and inevitability of our human acts, which altogether deny our power to act, Jahm interprets the existence of Paradise and Hell as physically real and therefore pointing to a double annihilation (*fanā'*), at which point God will decide. No act

³⁶ Ibid., 407.

³⁷ Ibid., 408.

³⁸ Abū al-Ḥasan Ash'arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, 494, 10–12.

³⁹ Richard M. Frank, "The Neoplatonism of Gahm Ibn Safwān," 409.

or deed belongs to anyone other than God.⁴⁰ As reported in the Qur’ān (55: 26; 57: 3) “Everyone on Earth will perish” and “He is the First and the Last.”

The annihilation is therefore an expression of the temporal finiteness of the World, which must end in order for it to return to God; however, this argument is unclear and not presented in detail: the temporal creation of Heaven and Hell, as with the Mu‘tazila, which was established by God at the appropriate time, i.e., before the Judgement but not at the point when He created the Earth, is symptomatic of the limited duration of these two determined geographies.

Al-Malaṭī, in his *Kitāb al-Tanbīh*, states that: “Jahm argued that Heaven and Hell will cease, and the inmates of Hell will leave their domicile and so will the obedient leave Heaven after a long stay: Heaven will pass away with its delights and so will Hell and its tortures.”⁴¹ The same author states that some of the Jahmites denied that God uses scales to weigh human deeds, the existence of the Bridge over Hell, the Prophet’s intercession and the torture of the tomb and, finally, that the angel of death takes away the souls of men;⁴² this represents a complete denial of the “popular” Islamic eschatology which emanates from the Qur’ān, and yet, if Jahm emphasizes the annihilation of the afterlife, it is because he considers it to be created and material, with both being liable to end.

MU‘TAZILA AND *FANĀ’*: KALĀM AND THE AFTERLIFE

The connection between the early Mu‘tazila and Jahm ibn Safwān is attested through reference to some unknown disciples of ‘Amr ibn ‘Ubayd, who, on reaching Khorāsān before the Jahmite’s execution (d. 746), probably had the time to dispute with each other. However, the development of an elaboration on the temporality/eternal nature of the afterlife, previously chaotic and based on the unclear sources of Jahm’s *fanā’*, did not become any clearer under the Mu‘tazilite school between the eighth and ninth centuries.

The protagonists in the first discussion were Ḍirār Ibn ‘Amr (d. 815), al-Aṣamm (d. 816–817) and Abū al-Hudhayl (d. 841); for all of them, the reason, in spite of small variations of opinion, was that the prophetic word of God reigns everywhere and this un-predestinarian approach is clearly in contrast with the Jabrite (*jabr*, predestination) line of Jahm ibn Safwān and his disciples.

The first debate on *al-wa‘d wa al-wa‘īd* (the promise and the threat) was between al-Aṣamm and the Murji‘ite, Bishr al-Marīsī (d. 833), in which the latter,

⁴⁰ ‘Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī, *Al-Farq bayna al-Firaq*, 2: 13.

⁴¹ Ibn Aḥmad Malaṭī, *Kitāb al-Tanbīh wa-l-radd ‘alā ahl al-ahwā’ wa-l-bida’*, 134.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 96.

following the line adopted by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, argues that no Muslim, whether hypocrite or sinner, would remain in Hell eternally.⁴³ He argued that the eternal “Inferno” is reserved only for unbelievers and for those (including Muslims) who have committed a Mortal Sin, and are thus classified as enemies of God. Even if the definition of a Mortal Sin remains uncertain, the attempt to reconcile not entirely incompatible positions between early Mu‘tazilites and the Murji‘a is apparent.

However, it is only with the arrival of Abū al-Hudhayl that the issue of the existence of a distinctly separated soul and body is opened up for discussion: the distinction between the body as an entity created by God and a soul (*nafs*: Soul, while *rūḥ*: Spirit), when attributed to human beings, but of unknown origin, was opened up for debate at the beginning of the ninth century as part of the discussion on Divine attributes. Stemming from the assumption that there is no analogy between the created being and the Creator, God cannot be recognized by reference to the human spirit and the attributes turn out to be only an attempt to humanize the divine. All created beings represent a composite and, as such, are finite,⁴⁴ in contrast to God, the Eternal, who is infinite in the absolute simplicity of his essence (*māhīya*). The human body is a composite, with a finite sum of elements.

At any given instant its being is complete and perfect in the created actuality of the total sum of its accidents and its history, to the extent that we may legitimately speak of such, in the sum of the discrete moments of its existence: the total of those accidents that have belonged to it as having been created in the specific body which is the thing, from the moment of God’s initiation of its existence. Its entire being, from the beginning to the end, taken at any point, is in every respect the finite sum of a determined multitude of discrete elements.”⁴⁵

Abū al-Hudhayl, nevertheless, takes advantages of this incompatibility between the Creator and the created to nullify the existence of Divine attributes, but also to emphasize the finiteness of the world as being composed of a finite number of accidents. One of the most relevant statements from al-Hudhayl’s thesis is that “there must come a term to the production of new being, a moment in which the acts and movements of the blessed and the damned will be consummated in a permanent state that is the sum of the blessedness and damnation of each.”⁴⁶ The creation of new being cannot continue indefinitely.

⁴³ Josef Van Ess, “Lecture a Rebours de l’Histoire du Mu‘tazilisme,” 25; Idem, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 5 : 229.

⁴⁴ ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Khayyāṭ, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, 14.

⁴⁵ M. Richard Frank, *The Metaphysics of Created Beings in Abū l-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf*, 23–24.

⁴⁶ Idem, “The Divine attributes according to the teaching of Abū l-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf,” 473.

Al-Khayyāt underlines this as Abū al-Hudhayl stresses the evident difference among the eternal and the contingent, the latter being composed of parts, the former as being divine and known by God, something that has come to be and will come to be in the future.⁴⁷

Richard M. Frank holds a similar position to Origen's in relation to the *apokatastasis* and the consumption of the human body, as already reported by Morris S. Seale in *Muslim Theology: A study of origin with reference to the Church Fathers*,⁴⁸ in which the author directly compares Jahm and the Church father of the second century. As for Jahm, Abū al-Hudhayl seems to interpret the Islamic afterlife as the expression of a physical landscape for both the blessed and the damned, in which every action associated with praise and rest, and also torture and pain, will eventually be ended and annihilated by God: a *fanā' al-nār* in *itinere*. Nevertheless, Abū al-Hudhayl modifies his conclusions: the movements of those dwellers will end and they will become tranquil (*baqā'*), the dwellers of Paradise always taking pleasure and the dwellers of Hell always experiencing pain, but both abodes will continue to exist. Indeed, Abrahamov's analysis fails to clarify Abū al-Hudhayl's position on the metaphysics of the creation in early *kalām* and to explain the temporality of accidents within an eschatological dimension: "everything which shall be will one day be described as having been, and consequently one must affirm that there is a finite whole and totality of what has been and what shall be. Any kind of infinitude of created being is unthinkable."⁴⁹

It is important at the same time to highlight the fact that Abū al-Hudhayl lived in the same historical period and geographical area as Ḍirār Ibn 'Amr, who had already elaborated an understanding on God's nature, supporting the clear distinction between the *annīya* and the *māhīya*: the existence, which human beings should seek to know, and its essence, which is impossible to discern. Only in Paradise might it be possible to feel God's essence, a speculation that Ḍirār and the Mu'tazilites will never admit, particularly concerning the Beatific vision of Allah;⁵⁰ a sight, that will probably not be visual and material, but spiritual. As with Abū al-Hudhayl, Ḍirār was directly influenced by Jahm: Heaven and Hell are creations and, as with all created things, are temporary. Human beings might be disappointed, particularly those who are expecting a big reward for their good

⁴⁷ Ibid., 476.

⁴⁸ S. Morris Seal, *Muslim Theology: A study of origin with reference to the Church Fathers*, 69.

⁴⁹ M. Richard Frank, *The Metaphysics of the created being according to Abū l-Hudhayl al-'Allāf*, 25ff.

⁵⁰ Josef Van Ess, "Lecture a Rebour de l'Histoire du Mu'tazilisme," 34.

behaviour. However, they do not deserve more than this: the reward is temporal, as are the good deeds they performed when alive.⁵¹

The majority of the Mu'tazilites, however, were not in support of this eschatological approach. Their ethical understanding is completely at odds with such a position and Ḍirār, too, supports the notion of a distinction: *a parte post*, within a new created World, the World of the afterlife, where eternity is an option; *a parte ante*, on the contrary, where eternity is clearly open to discussion but improbable.⁵² The Mu'tazila (with the possible exception of Abū al-Hudhayl) and Ḍirār argue that Heaven and Hell will be created prior to Allah's final Judgement, following the actual annihilation of human life on Earth. If this is the case, Jahm's statement becomes untenable, while Ḍirār's assertion that the afterlife will be created as necessary and not at the beginning of life on Earth will also be rationally supported by the Mu'tazilites Hishām al-Fuwaṭī (d. 845) and Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī (d. 915).⁵³

Ḍirār's assertion, however, opens up a further discussion in relation to the existence of the Garden of Eden, out of which Adam and Eve were driven in the biblical story. Is it possible, therefore, to have a created Eden from the beginning of time but not a Paradise? Or is the *janna* completely different from Eden: the first material, the second spiritual? These are important questions, but ones that will not be addressed within the scope of this article.

It is clear that if the *fanā' al-nār* (and also *janna*) was theologically conceived as early as the eighth and ninth centuries as a result of the work of Jahm ibn Safwān, it is only later with the Mu'tazila that there comes a deeper realization, but also a contraposition, in relation to the same assumption. Above all, awareness regarding the annihilation in early kalām is narrowly encompassed by the rational, though still pedantic, severe, unclear and limited influence of *falsafa*. It is however only in the ninth century that a real dispute on this topic, and also in early Islamic mystical thought (see the section before the conclusion), emerges as part of a wide-ranging debate.

As reported by al-Khayyāt, Al-Nazzām (d. 845), the nephew of Abū al-Hudhayl, confirms that the Annihilation is possible. If God decides to perform an act, it is clear that this will happen; the *fanā'* refers, therefore, to life on Earth, not to the afterlife. In the Qur'ān is also written (93: 3–4): "... your Lord has not forsaken you, nor does He hate you, and the future will be better for you than the past" and (12: 109) "... For those who are mindful of God, the home in the

⁵¹ Ibid., 35; Josef Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 5: 367.

⁵² Idem, "Das Begrenzte Paradies," 122.

⁵³ Ibid., 114.

Hereafter is better ...”⁵⁴ However, in the *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, al-Nazzām, as well as making comments on the suffering of the people of Hell, which is not described as physical but as belonging to the Soul,⁵⁵ argues that the Nature of Light and Darkness and their geographical landscapes, since created, cannot be eternal.⁵⁶ The same author also adds that the non-alteration of physical bodies corresponds to the non-alteration of the soul and, in agreement with the early Murj’ia, al-Nazzām argues (as Bishr al-Marīsī)⁵⁷ in favour of the position that the damnation of the sinner is not eternal if he remains a Muslim. He does not express an opinion on the *ahl al-kitāb*.⁵⁸

The Mu‘tazilite Mu‘ammar Ibn ‘Abbād al-Sulamī (d. 842), who has been defined as a rational opponent of Abū al-Hudhayl,⁵⁹ disagreed with other Mu‘tazilites, who maintained that God is the creator of bodies and accidents. He differed from them by supporting the position that God is the creator of bodies but not of accidents, which he considers to be either the natural or voluntary creations (*ikhṭirā‘āt*) of such bodies.⁶⁰ Accidents are considered to be natural as, for example, when a fire burns or the sun generates heat. He also sees them as being voluntary, for example in the situation where an animal moves. This includes the senses, life and death, health and infirmity, or any state or condition experienced by animals such as human being.⁶¹ So, we could argue about the Annihilation of a body in the same way that we consider a seed.⁶² Bodies and Souls are completely different and Mu‘ammar was one of the first to define Soul as an expression of the highest being, as indivisible, as the possessor of knowledge, power, life, will, aversion, although not contiguousness, contrast, motion, or rest. Furthermore, it acts as an agent (*mudabbir*) in the world; it transcends bodies and accidents and the visible body surrounding it is just a mould or an instrument.⁶³

⁵⁴ ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, 16.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁷ Abū al-Ḥasan Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, 149.

⁵⁸ Josef Van Ess, “Lecture a Rebours de l’Histoire du Mu‘tazilisme,” 217; Idem, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 6: 10–11.

⁵⁹ G. Anwar Chejne, “Mu‘ammar Ibn ‘Abbad al-Sulamī, a leading Mu‘tazilite of the eight – ninth centuries,” 319.

⁶⁰ Abū al-Ḥasan Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, 2: 348.

⁶¹ Ibid., 2: 548; ‘Abd al-Raḥīm Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, 17; ‘Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī, *Al-Farq bayna al-Firaq*, Pt. 1: 116.

⁶² G. Anwar Chejne, “Mu‘ammar Ibn ‘Abbad al-Sulamī,” 315.

⁶³ Abū al-Ḥasan Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, 2: 331; ‘Abd al-Karīm Al-Shaharastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal. Le livre des Religions et des Sectes*, 1: 234–35; Josef Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 5: 254.

It is within the framework of the doctrine of *ma'ānī* that Mu'ammār appears to view the issue of bodies and accidents. To clarify: any manifestation that is an accident, emanating from any animated or inanimate thing, is an act of the thing according to its nature. On Mu'ammār's idea of annihilation, Al-Khayyāt emerges as being confused, supporting the view that in the first half of the ninth century discussions on *fanā'* were quite common among the early Mu'tazila. In the *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, the author emphasises the fact that there were supporters of the belief that God's annihilation was part of the process of formalizing a new creation (an afterlife or a new world); others believed that if God wished to annihilate the world, He would not feel the need to create another one. Finally, and this is probably one of Mu'ammār's most interesting suggestions, he argues that God created a state in which bodies could exist and that if Allah wished to annihilate these bodies, he would need to extinguish the existence in which the bodies lived.⁶⁴ Therefore, we are faced with the prospect of an annihilation of the world, of physics, and of human bodies; however, Mu'ammār did not accept the eradication of the Hereafter, first of all because he did not believe it possible that God would want to be alone, and secondly because he questioned whether God would choose to create Heaven and Hell and then wipe out its inhabitants.⁶⁵

Al-Jāhiz (d. 869) maintained, on the contrary, that it was impossible to annihilate the bodies because while God is able to create a thing, He is not capable of extinguishing it. In addition, He cannot remain alone once he has shaped a creation in the same way that he was alone before he created it; a position reported by both al-Khayyāt and al-Baghdādī.⁶⁶ However, the author's attitude on this topic remains quite unclear as does his view on the non-annihilation of Heaven and Hell. Al-Jāhiz says that Allah does not annihilate either, in particular Heaven's pleasures and Hell's tortures (again a physical understanding) but He does have the power to do so; for him, these two afterlife locations are equally eternal in nature.⁶⁷ As also reported by al-Shaharastānī, the Mu'tazilite author concurs with Mu'ammār in believing that the issue is not God's power, but God's will in relation to the annihilation of what He has previously created.⁶⁸ Heaven and Hell attract their own blessed and damned people, without the need for divine intervention, because as in the case of fire, for example, it is Hell by its very nature (*bi ṭibā'ihā*) that attracts (*tuṣayyiruhum ilayhā*) people to the Fire within it; punishment is not eternal, but it is a philosophical characteristic of nature

⁶⁴ 'Abd al-Raḥīm Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, 17.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 83–84; 'Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī, *Al-Farq bayna al-Firaq*, Pt. 1: 180.

⁶⁷ 'Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī, *Al-Farq bayna al-Firaq*, Pt. 1: 181.

⁶⁸ 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shaharastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal*, 257.

which, even without God's intervention, is capable of attracting the pre-ordained. Such a theory creates strong doubts in relation to al-Jāhīz's understanding of a physical human body and the idea of an afterlife, emphasizing on the contrary the existence of one able to attract only human souls. Al-Baghdādī, in *Uṣūl al-Dīn*, writes about the Mu'tazilite theory using these words: *innamā l-nār tajdibu ahlahā ilā nafsihā bi-ṭab'ihā*,⁶⁹ in which the term *nafs* is indicative that the author is not referring to the physical body.

It is relevant to note that philosophy is assuming an increasingly important role in the theological debate, emphasizing a clear distinction between the physical and the spiritual.

Finally, al-Jubbā'ī (d. 915) and Abū Hāshim (d. 933) argue that God's will does not reflect a private (personal) will, or, as supported by al-Ash'arī, an eternal will; God wants everything that it is possible to wish for as He knows everything that it is possible to know. Generally, it is impossible to know, except through the Will which He creates. God's will thus becomes an accident and Annihilation is one of the desired accidents.⁷⁰ The bodies cannot be annihilated, except by an annihilation created by Allah in no particular place (*lā fī maḥall*) if God decides to extinguish the entire world, rather than just a part of it.⁷¹

It is clear that al-Jubbā'ī and Abū Hāshim argue that before the Resurrection God will annihilate the World, which, in contrast with al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) and different proto-Sufite authors, would constitute the first one, i.e., the physical annihilation, not the second *fanā'* that Jahm Ibn Safwān, Abū al-Hudhayl and a number of others refer to as the hereafter in the beginning (probably under Patristic influence).

However, the Mu'tazilite reflection on the topic reveals some differences. Al-Khayyāt, in the *Livre du Triomphe*, asserts that Allah has the power to annihilate the bodies without it being an accident; for others, such as al-Ka'bī al-Balkhī (d. 931), God will eradicate the world by ceasing to create an opposite accident (*baqā'*), while for al-Jubbā'ī this will happen through a specific accident. The main problem that persists is that for some of the Mu'tazila, such as al-Jubbā'ī, this *fanā'* will occur without the creation of a new place; in other words, the physical world will be annihilated but there will be no creation of a new physical earth; an understanding more philosophical than properly theological.⁷² Ibn al-Rawandī (d. 911), a Mu'tazilite who later rejected his affiliation to this school, diverges from al-Jubbā'ī's opinion by supporting the argument that God could not

⁶⁹ 'Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-Dīn*, 239.

⁷⁰ 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shaharastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal*, 265–66.

⁷¹ 'Abd al-Qāhir Baghdādī, *Al-Farq bayna al-Firaq*, Pt. 1: 204–5.

⁷² 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shaharastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa-l-Niḥal*, 266–67.

entirely annihilate His own creation; this is a similar position to that of the above Mu'tazilite master, which takes into account that it is possible in some way to envisage an accident or a substance having no location, a place of stagnation. Both *mutakallimūn* argue the case for an accident which has the main characteristic of the Intellect, which without a location is identifiable in the separate Intellect or the Universal Soul (the World Soul of Plato).⁷³

The entire ninth century promotes an on-going understanding of God's metaphysics, which leads to an increase in Islamic theological and philosophical awareness. For al-Kindī (d. 873) metaphysics is theology, because it provides an explanation of things that subsist without matter, even though they may co-exist with things that do have matter.⁷⁴ In the same century, while the Mu'tazila were arguing in relation to the Annihilation of the World, al-Kindī, influenced by Philoponus, supported the position that a finite world could not be eternal and that it was beyond God's power to make the Earth eternal *ex parte ante*; however, it was possible, as argued by the Mu'tazila, to achieve an eternal existence *ex parte post*.

It has then been made clear that time cannot be infinite, since there cannot be a quantity, or anything that has a quantity, that is infinity in actuality. Thus all time has a limit in actuality, and body is not prior to time. So it is impossible that the body of the universe be infinite, because of its being (*li anniyatihī*); the being of the body of the universe is necessarily finite, and the body of the universe cannot have existed only.⁷⁵

Al-Kindī's contribution to an understanding of the Soul, occurring in the same historical century as the Mu'tazila elaboration on annihilation, was important in increasing awareness and establishing a connection between kalām and early *falsafa*. The Arab philosopher established that the body alone is not essentially alive because it is not the possession of a body that explains why one is alive; on the contrary, it is the fact that one has a soul, which is the quiddity of life in the body, that emphasizes the presence of an incorporeal substance essentially related to the living being. However, al-Kindī refers to the soul not only as the form of the living being, but the intellectual form of the living thing, a denominator of the human being species.⁷⁶ The following passage sets out to itemize the

⁷³ Josef Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, 6: 432–33.

⁷⁴ Peter Adamson, *Al-Kindī*, 32. On the relationship between al-Kindī and the Mu'tazila, consider the same text, from p. 21, and also from p. 102 on the Miḥna.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 108–9. Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 82.

characteristics of the human soul which, through reference to Plato's *Republic*, lists them as simple, incorruptible and immaterial, i.e., qualities which acquire a different value in opposition to the lusts and the aggressiveness when it is uniquely connected with the body.

The Soul is separated from his body and different from it, and its substance is a divine, spiritual substance, as it seen from the nobility of its nature and its opposition to the desires and the irascibility that befall the body. This is because the irascible faculty moves man at some times, and incites him to commit a serious transgression. But this soul is opposed to it, and prohibits the anger from committing its act, or from pursuing rage and its vengeance and restrains it. And this is a clear proof that the faculty by which the man becomes angry is not this soul As for the desiring faculty, it longs at certain times for certain desires, and the intellectual soul considers that it is a mistake, and that it leads to a deplorable state, and thus it prohibits this and opposes it.⁷⁷

The Intellectual Soul, therefore, is the actual soul, rather than only being one of the soul's parts: the lower faculties are thus the expression of the interrelationship between the Soul and the body. Other faculties are connected with the Soul alone and it is these "simple substances" that can survive the death of the physical body and go on to live the life that is best for it: pure intellectual contemplation. Druart in "al-Kindī's Ethics" points out that the Arab philosopher is influenced by Plato (*Theaetetus*) in his view that it is in our interest to achieve a state of "likeness to God" and, as supported in the *Discourse*, "the intellectual soul achieves knowledge of the noble things" in the intelligible world as it seeks to attain an imitation of the Creator.⁷⁸

Being close to the divine is not an expression of complete union (annihilation) or identity with God, but is simply about acting in a similar way to God. Al-Kindī explains that the soul is a divine, spiritual substance, which emanates from the same substance as the Creator and, acting in the same way as the sunlight that facilitates the visualization of all things, the Intellectual world is God's light that enables the person to know all things.

Such a position does not consider the *fanā'*, even though it emphasizes the close relationship between the human soul and the divine emanation. It was to be Ibn Sīnā who increased our understanding in relation to this close association.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 115.

⁷⁸ T. A. Druart, "Al-Kindī's Ethics," 336–39.

ISLAMIC EARLY MYSTICISM AND THE *FANĀ'*

The ninth century, however, not only witnessed an expression of the theological-philosophical elaboration of annihilation, but also of an increasing analysis of the *fanā'* within early Islamic mysticism.

In a theosophic article by Farid Jabre,⁷⁹ the author underlines the point that the annihilation of the human intellect within God's *tawḥīd* (Unity), in parallel with the ascension of the human intellect, and the need to be purified (from materiality) is necessary in order to achieve ecstasy due to the reunion within *nous* (Pure intellect).⁸⁰ Concepts relating to purification, contemplation and union, reached new highs as a result of the process that began in the ninth century, specifically stemming from the works by authors such as al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 857) and al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 869), who lived in the Iraqī area under the 'Abbasid dynasty.

It is al-Muḥāsibī's *tazkiya al-nafs* (the purification of the soul) theory which emerges as of particular interest for our analysis, and in which we find the initial facets of ideas that were to emerge in al-Ghazālī a few centuries later. The *tazkiya*'s process includes an expression of the union of three elements: the divine, the prophetic and the human. The emphasis on the first is relevant because it is directly linked to a rational understanding (an awareness of al-Muḥāsibī's work within early kalām theory is clear from both historical and geographical standpoints)⁸¹ of the direct connection between the human soul and the Unity of God; it is, however, the physicality of the body that increases human resistance in this process of reconciliation.

And flee to God the Exalted and seek shelter in Him regarding all of your actions and demonstrate your poverty, your desperate need and your refuge in Him, as you have no stratagem [to save you] and there is no power save through Him. And ask God the Exalted to give you victory over him [Satan] through striving and finding pleasure in weeping and humility, by day and by night, secretly and openly, privately and publicly, until combating your soul becomes insignificant in your eyes because of your knowledge of your adversary [i.e., Satan] and due to God granting you success, as indeed he [i.e., Satan] is the enemy of your Lord.⁸²

⁷⁹ Farid Jabre, "L'Extase de Plotin et le Fanā' de Ghazali," 101–24.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 109.

⁸¹ Margaret Smith, *Al-Muhasibi. An early mystic of Baghdad*, 9.

⁸² G. Pickens, *Spiritual Purification within Islam. The Life and Works of al-Muḥāsibī*, 170–71; Al-Muḥāsibī, *Sharḥ al-Ma'rifa wa Badl al-Naṣīḥa*, 34.

God's assistance, as the first prominent facet to achieve purification, as well as human trust in the possibility of rising against the *tawhīd*, are determinants of success in achieving *tazkiya*. The second element, the prophetic role, is rooted in the figure and role of Muḥammad, who became a living example to follow; al-Muḥāsibī encourages the examination and study of the knowledge associated with the narrations of the Prophet, since this has a direct effect on the soul, being an alternative to the mundane, worldly and quite often sinful discourse offered by the rest of humankind.⁸³ The emulation of the Prophet became something that in every action could be turned into real praxis.

Finally, the third facet concerns the process of *tazkiya*, the human being's activism, which presents the individual as being personally responsible for undertaking the task of purification by employing the above-mentioned facets and by exerting his own efforts. He is required to subjugate the negative qualities of his soul while enhancing its positive potential.

In summary, it is therefore essential to highlight the fact that God's will needs to be supportive of the process of the human Soul's purification, with the Prophet becoming the inactive supporting rock which provides, through his work and his life a universal symbol of inspiration; the attempt by the human being to purify himself emphasizes al-Muḥāsibī's non-predestinarian approach to the Purification theory.

However, the *al-nafs* duality in relation to good and evil is an option that al-Muḥāsibī could not deny; the lower affiliation of the human soul with the body could also lead to physical appetites and desires and these are the primary sources and causes of disobedience, being the result of heedlessness, which allows the desires to flourish and ultimately cause the corruption of the worshipper's intentions, motives and deeds.⁸⁴ In this regard, al-Muḥāsibī provides a working definition of the desires, which he describes as follows, "The attachment of the soul to its appetites (*al-shahawāt*) and its inclination to ease and comfort. Thus, according to the strength of the appetites, the soul will be afflicted with weakness and then the desires (*al-hawā*) will overpower it."⁸⁵ Such a person risks being consumed by those physical desires that are pivotal to the growth process, as well as a number of negative possibilities which bring the human soul into conflict with: malice (*al-ghill*); envy (*al-ḥasad*); ostentation (*al-riyā'*); having a bad opinion [of someone] (*sū' al-ẓann*); believing in the evil of the conscience (*i'tiqād sū' al-damīr*); fallacious flattery (*al-mudāhana*); the love of praise (*ḥubb al-maḥmada*); the love of accumulating wealth (*ḥubb jam' al-māl*), etc.⁸⁶

⁸³ Ibid., 171.

⁸⁴ Al-Muḥāsibī, *Risālat al-Mustarshidīn*, 79; al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Tawahhum*, 49.

⁸⁵ G. Pickens, *Spiritual Purification within Islam*, 175.

An appropriate response to all this vileness resides in the intellect, (*al-'aql*) which God awakens, and through which human beings are able to make their desires acquiescent by overcoming the emotions of the soul with the light of reason. This position is not too dissimilar from that of some of the Mu'tazilites, such as al-Murdār (d. 841), even if in this case al-Muḥāsibī promotes a proto-Sufi approach in which human intellect and rationality need to be dominant as the antithesis to the lower physical desires.

It is concerning this dual understanding that the author under examination depicts Hellfire as being surrounded by appetites that directly attract human souls following the physical death; an attraction that we have already touched on in relation to the work of al-Jāḥīz (a contemporary of al-Muḥāsibī).

Al-Muḥāsibī comments, "So whoever leaves what his heart desires (*yahwā qalbuḥu*) and his soul wishes for (*tashtahī nafsuḥu*) from that which his Lord, the Mighty and Exalted, dislikes then he has protected himself from hellfire and brought about proximity to God."⁸⁷

As with the soul's desires (*al-hawā*), the appetites of the soul (*al-shahawāt*) are equally destructive and, indeed, there can be only one outcome that results from pursuing them – annihilation in hellfire.⁸⁸ Such a purgative annihilation in the "Inferno" is reported by Margaret Smith in her essays on the same author,⁸⁹ which, however, needs to be considered by Allah as the expression of a request for forgiveness from the damned soul: "My servant, I'm against thee as full of wrath; on you there is my curse. I will forgive you for the vastness of your actions even if I will not share any of your actions. But, did you recognize them? Yes, all, oh my omnipotent. And He, full of wrath against you, for my Power, you will not reside with them for my Punishment. And will order to the Zabānya to take him."⁹⁰

André Roman in his commentary on the eschatological text *Kitāb al-Tawahhum* argues that in the annihilation of Hellfire, Muḥāsibī could have been inspired by Jahm ibn Safwān, but this opinion cannot be categorically confirmed.

Instead, there may be a closer connection between al-Muḥāsibī's eschatology and al-Ghazālī's elaboration of the hereafter,⁹¹ while the appreciation by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) has been reported in the *Majmū'at al-Fatāwā*: "He possessed

⁸⁶ Ibid., 175.

⁸⁷ Al-Muḥāsibī, *al-Ri'āya li Ḥuqūq Allāh*, 85.

⁸⁸ G. Pickens, *Spiritual Purification within Islam*, 178.

⁸⁹ Margaret Smith, *Al-Muhasibi. An early mystic of Baghdad*, 47.

⁹⁰ Al-Muḥāsibī, *Une Vision Humaine des Fins Dernières – Le Kitāb al-Tawahhum d'al Muḥāsibī*, 24, 52.

⁹¹ Margaret Smith, *Al-Muhasibi. An early mystic of Baghdad*, 290.

knowledge, virtue, asceticism and discourse regarding the spiritual realities (*al-ḥaqā'iq*), which has been widely celebrated.⁹²

If al-Muḥāsibī might have inspired al-Ghazālī and could be considered as one of the first contrivers of a theory of annihilation in proto-Sufism, al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, as reported by Genèveve Gobillot, could have stimulated Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350/750), a paradigmatic supporter of the *fanā'al-nār*: “if the human soul could enter in the body, it could also become subtle and turn completely to a spiritual substance, transfiguring in a spiritual entity, as the flame in the flint.”⁹³ In “Quelques stéréotypes cosmologiques d’origine pythagoricienne chez les penseurs musulmans au Moyen Âge,”⁹⁴ the French academic emphasizes the influence of Pythagorean stereotypes on Muslim thinkers, underlining in particular the presence of two topics: the first has to do with the subtle nature of the celestial bodies and their intelligence, the second with the postulate of the pre-existence of souls and a number of the direct consequences arising from this, such as the fall, metempsychosis, the return to celestial origin and apocatastasis. In this article, our interest will of course be more focused on the second of these topics. The questions arising from the area covered by this subject occur in the writings of philosophers such as al-Kindī, al-Rāzī and al-Farābī, as well as in the works of the mystic al-Tirmidhī, a relevant author for our works.

During the process of creation, the knowledge of God casts the brightest stars of human beings which are the un-physical spiritual substances of the *fitra*: the original nature of the creature’s spirit flooded by divine wisdom. It is not a process of emanation, or even mediation, but a sort of egalitarian continuity from the Creator to the created nature. Like Origen, Evagrius Ponticus and Plotin, al-Tirmidhī conceives the transition to materiality as a primary judgement by God on his creature: granting them the free will to decide about the possibility to univocally contemplate the divine, or abandoning Him, descending into the physical world. The first judgement became the Genesis of the World and the *fitra*, preserved in the heart of every human beings, continues to preserve the knowledge of God, even if surrounded by a new dimension: the material world.⁹⁵ It is the concretization of Adamic mythology: the soul is immersed in the physical body and for a long time, the human being will independently act in continuity or discontinuity with God’s decrees. Three moral categories will be formed during

⁹² Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū'at al-Fatāwā*, 6: 521.

⁹³ Genèveve Gobillot, “Corps (badan), ame (naf̄s) et esprit (rūh) selon Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya à travers son Kitāb al-Rūh. Entre Theologié rationelle et Pensée mystique,” 244ff.

⁹⁴ Eadem, 161–92.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 171–72.

this period: those who eventually denied and forgot the existence of a superior entity (*kufīr*), the hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*) and those who have not forgotten the aim to the One (*muwāhhidūn*). It is important to highlight how al-Tirmidhī's classification is identical to that of Ḥasān al-Baṣrī (d. 728/109).⁹⁶ It is the return to God, however, that is of more explicit interest in this analysis. Al-Tirmidhī's speculation about this "return" is rooted in the assumption that there are some human beings who, due to a more specific sensitivity of their heart, are able to learn by heart about the day of the decisions, to abandon the contemplation of the One. The Islamic mystic defined this attitude with the term *qalab*: the ability to read in the mould through the use of his individual heart.⁹⁷ In spite of this, we have some human "moulds" that during its physical life (a pre-existence after the first existence of the *fitra*) has remained more faithful to God and his message. This remembrance is also made possible by the presence of *khatm al-awliyā'*, the seal of the saints, which is possible to be reached by human beings in the Heart through a tentative of spiritual return towards the previous *status*.

The importance of the analysis of al-Tirmidhī, nevertheless, is dual: on the one hand, he confirmed that human beings could reach this capability only towards a free will that ratified their superiority on angels who remained submitted as the *jinn*, to God; on the other hand, he clarified an eschatological awareness of the afterlife: the choices adopted by human souls during their physical pre-existence in the world followed man after the finalized consumption of the body; Paradise or Hell are expressions of the result in connection with the choices made. There is no metempsychosis, God draws on whether those who, through the "eyes of the heart" have expressed a keen desire for reunification to Him, while, the others who have continued to choose the "clay" until the "purification" of the fire, in Hell, even God, one by one, will call them to Him in relation to their request to be merciful. The author is talking of a phased apocatastasis – *fanā' al-nār*, in which a plural – universal vision is already clarified without a real distinction between religious affiliation or dissimilarities between Christians, Jews or Muslims.⁹⁸

Such an analysis not too dissimilar from that of his colleague, al-Muḥāsibī.

⁹⁶ A. Badawī, *Histoire de la philosophie en Islam*, 1 : 39; Al-Baghdādī, *Al-Farq bayna al-Firaq*, Pt. 1: 117–20.

⁹⁷ G. Gobillot, *Les livres de la profondeur des Choses*, 193; Al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb al-amtāl*, 89.

⁹⁸ Al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb al-amtāl*, ch. "On the Life of People of Hell," 297; Idem, *Kitāb al-Furūq wa-man' al-tarāduf* (Les Livres des nuances ou de l'impossibilité de la synonymie), 147–53.

CONCLUSION. RATIONAL ANSWERS

The Annihilation of the Fire is not an orthodox Islamic doctrine that is unanimously supported by the majority of Muslim experts. However, from the eighth century onwards, the *fanā' al-nār* is often reported in the Islamic doxography of the early kalām and mysticism. It is, therefore, important to emphasize that the majority of the authors named in the article knew each other, their works and theological positions, as they were probably familiar with the apokatastasis of the early and late Christian Patristic.⁹⁵ A clear distinction must be drawn, however, between those who argued in favour of the physical annihilation of the fire (and of Heaven too) as an expression of a neo-platonic understanding of the world (Jahm ibn Safwān and Abū al-Hudhayl, in particular) and those who, in kalām and in early Mysticism, argued in favour of the *fanā'* of the Human soul. The ninth century witnessed the expression of a preliminary theological awareness of the soul's independence from the human body, which became easy to explain in proto-Sufism, but more difficult with kalām. It is for this reason that al-Muḥāsibī and al-Tirmidhī are also rationally able to explain the concept of Soul-Annihilation and its purification process in Hell, while the *mutakallimūn* found it difficult to provide a realistic description of the afterlife (also for reasons related to God's theodicy and, in particular, the Mu'tazila). In spite of this, it is during the ninth century, that we can begin to foresee the theological insights and problems that would emerge in relation to the *fanā' al-nār* during the following centuries. Al-Ghazālī's idea of the afterlife, as it appears in the *Kitāb dhikr al-mawt wa-mā ba'dahu*, is a union of the rational and esoteric positions that appear in this article.

An interesting question emerges as to whether it is God's mercy that facilitates the purification process or whether it is the physical tortures within Hell that bring about the expiation process. Or better still, is it the non-material torture of the human soul that, within an unpredictable future, will support the emptying of Hell?

In the ninth century, a concrete focus on the fate of the *ahl al-kitāb* is missing, which only emerges with al-Ghazālī. Nevertheless, the *status questionis* of the Introduction can be treated as an attempt to clarify some passages. The neo-Platonic understanding of early Islamic theology, which focuses on the necessary end of what has been created by God, is confirmed both if, as supported by the Mu'tazila, Allah creates the Afterlife after the last judgment, or whether, as argued by the Ash'arite, God designed Heaven and Hell from the beginning. In addition, if the Devil is annihilated, as is eschatologically implicit in all Semitic religious traditions before the *yawm al-dīn*, it is rationally impossible that He can be the master of Hell. This means that God, besides being the creator of Hell, is also its Master.

Finally, even more confusingly, the eighth and ninth century authors highlight the presence of a double annihilation within Islamic eschatology: the first, physical,

and platonically connected with God's creation, the second (still unclear, even if totally spiritual), related to the annihilation of human souls in the unity of God though a process of purification concerning the souls of the damned.

This represents a fascinating hypothesis that was to become more explicit in the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries through the works of Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) and al-Ghazālī.

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