

Concerning the Notion of Eternity

by

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 14, Nos. 3 & 4. (Summer-Autumn, 1980).

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Editor's note: The following is a recent translation of the essay, approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon. The essay has also appeared in the book

In the Face of the Absolute (World Wisdom, 1989, 1994).

If one conceives of Eternity according to the proper sense of the word, as being what is beyond duration and therefore having neither beginning nor end, one then understands that this quality could not be attributed to created things. Yet this is what the eschatological dogmas of Monotheism do, or appear to do, when they teach us on the one hand that hell exists and, on the other, that it is eternal; we choose this example at the outset because it is, in practical terms, by far the most paradoxical and the most problematical. In other words, if religion sets out to inform, it also yields to a concern for moral efficacy, to the detriment of the metaphysical exactness of the message; which latter is not, in any case, a matter of urgency from the standpoint of exoterism. We readily agree that the notion of a hell situated in time, and therefore transitory, would lose its constraining power over many men, at least in a certain ethnic sector; but to attribute eternity to the infernal fire is nonetheless a two-edged sword in the long run, as the history of free-thinking proves.

It is true that in Islam the notion of a hell that is all but absolute is mitigated, or even transcended, by reservations that are decisive in themselves but that are not necessarily given priority: thus the Koran calls hell “perpetual” (*khālid*), but adds “unless God should will otherwise”; the Prophet even declares explicitly that hell will have an end.¹ ‘Ashari bases this same idea on the essential Mercy (*Rahmah*) of God which, according to the Koran, “reacheth unto all things,”² and he had the merit of disseminating this thesis among most Sunni Moslems;

¹ The same declaration is made by most doctors of the Torah, whose authority has carried weight in Jewish tradition since antiquity.

² Or “encompasseth” (*wasi‘at*) every thing (Sura “The Heights,” 156). According to this principle of Mercy, the Dhyani-Bodhisattva Jizo (*Kshitigarbha*) makes his beneficent appearance even in the hells.

according to other information though, the theologians do not agree on this point, despite the *hadīth* just quoted.³

Certain followers of the Asharite idea maintain that, while neither the Koran nor the Sunna provides any proof of the cessation of chastisement, neither do Divine Revelation and prophetic inspiration provide any proof to the contrary—the Koran would affirm only the perpetuity of hell and not of its torments—and they conclude from this that the question is better not debated in public. However, apart from the fact that their opinion appears hardly tenable to us, it must be realized that the contrast between the rigor of the Koran and the mildness of the Prophet—if one can so put it—is a dialectical antinomy and not an inconsistency: each of the traditional sources enunciates an aspect of the Real in an almost absolute fashion, as if it were a closed system, in order to forestall either facile solutions or positions of despair.⁴ Ibn ‘Arabi’s conclusion is, in substance, that it is for the sages to break through this barrier of formal and providential incoherences.

In Christianity the preponderant and all but dogmatic view is in favor of eternal hell; sin, it is argued, has something infinite about it by reason of the infinite dignity of God which it offends, and consequently chastisement too has to have something infinite about it. They forget that the sinner for his part has nothing infinite about him and is therefore not even capable of offending God infinitely; they forget above all—and this is the classic objection—that a thing which has a beginning must also have an end, or that a thing created cannot possibly have an attribute of the Increate. We could also say that man does not in fact measure up to the divine gift of freedom since he is capable of so misusing it as to damn himself, which proves that he cannot deserve a chastisement that is symmetrical with the dignity of God. Man is not unlimited; to man’s limit corresponds the limit of chastisement; hell’s limit is man’s.

It seems inconceivable that no reservations should have been formulated in the Christian world regarding the “eternity” of the pains of hell, and in fact we recollect having read something of the sort in Saint Thomas Aquinas; however, supposing that no Christian authority has deemed it useful or possible to lay down such reservations, this does not mean that the motive was only moral opportunism or pure and simple ignorance; for the “eternity” of hell, or “damnation,” does not only mean an endless punishment, it also, and even *a priori*, signifies final exclusion from the human state, this being what Brahmanists and Buddhists understand by “transmigration”; and this is not definitively infernal, but definitively non-human—in worlds other than our own—which in the monotheistic perspective amounts to the same thing; he who in the final count loses the human condition is “damned.” Here, therefore, the word “eternal” is

³ As regards the Koranic reservation, certain persons have interpreted it as meaning simply that God is all-powerful and “doeth what He will.”

⁴ A classic example of this type of antinomy is the complementarity—*a priori* unresolved—between predestination and free will.

synonymous with the word “definitive,” not as regards suffering but as regards exclusion from the human Paradise. This interpretation underlies, in principle and as an esoteric possibility, each of the monotheistic eschatologies.⁵

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But let us to return to the ordinary notion of an endless chastisement: this notion—which aside from its symbolism is specifically exoteric—is not unconnected with the temptation of atheism, and we have already alluded to this. In fact the argument concerning the infinite dignity of God which would, if offended against, demand a sanction proportionate to it—and therefore also infinite in a certain fashion—can only reinforce the position of the atheist who will then contend that a God who is perfect and thus essentially good could not avenge Himself infinitely and needlessly on a creature whose sin consisted only in forgetting God or in yielding to a passion. Our reply will be that the dogmatic image of a God who judges man “from without” is insufficient; in reality this image results from the fact that the sinner judges himself “from within,” that is to say, from his own substance and by virtue of the relationship between cause and effect. On the one hand, man does what he is, and on the other, a particular fault has a psychological consequence entailing particular cosmic consequences, which religious anthropomorphism likens to a “judgment,” and rightly so, since the universal Norm judges phenomena; yet “it is not God that wrongeth them, but they wrong themselves,” the Koran says.

When Saint Thomas says that the chosen do not pity the damned, his intention is to stress the identity, in the damned, between the subjectivity and the perversion,⁶ whereas Buddhist compassion is based, on the contrary, on the phenomenon of suffering alone; both positions are justified from the standpoints that they respectively emphasize; what counts is to know how to put each thing in its place, that is, to conceive of the concrete modalities that these standpoints imply. Let us add that skeptics who deny afterlife, because they believe neither in a virtue that could deserve Paradise nor in a vice that could deserve hell, are fundamentally ignorant of human nature, its substance and its possibilities; it is the postulate of a leveling humanitarianism in whose name the highest human values are denied—those which constitute man’s reason for

⁵ If, in the canonical prayer of Islam—the *Fātiḥah*—“those upon whom is Thy Grace” (*an ‘amta ‘alayhim*) are saved, and “those upon whom is Thine Anger” (*maghdūbi ‘alayhim*) are the damned, “those that go astray” (*ad-dallūn*) could well be they who are cast forth into the endless round of transmigration; that is, according to the inherent meaning and not to a traditional interpretation, which would be unthinkable in a monotheist milieu.

⁶ His purpose is likewise to suggest that nothing can diminish the beatitude of the chosen, which is nourished on the Divine Reality; for in that Reality there can be nothing privative, pure Being coinciding with Plenitude. This, at least, is the essential dimension of Beatitude; in fact, it does not preclude another dimension, turned towards even extra-paradisiacal contingencies, but not moving out of the climate of the “beatific vision.”

being—in order to be able to declare the bad man good; from there on, to claim that he alone is good or “sincere” is but a single step.

From the viewpoint of Islam, a man is damned because he does not believe that God is One; one may well wonder what interest God has in our believing that He is One rather than manifold. In fact He has no such interest, but the idea of Unity determines and introduces a saving attitude of coherence and interiorization which detaches man from the hypnosis, both dispersive and compressive, of the outward and manifold world; without this unifying attitude man becomes inordinately outward and thereby dissipated, hardened and lost; it is man, and not God, who has an interest in believing that God is One. Inwardness, which cannot be imposed at the outset on every man, is foreshadowed in a framework of Law which makes human life coherent in relation to the Universal Norm and in view of the Sovereign Good; every religion takes the measures that are indispensable, but each with different points of emphasis, for the governing idea is not necessarily that of ontological unity as presented by Islam. Clearly it is not the diversity of points of emphasis that needs to be highlighted here, it is solely the fact that after the fall—however one may picture this—man is given over to the exteriorizing and imprisoning powers of the lower *māyā*, so that the only means of saving him is *a priori* a key-idea which opposes this *māyā* and which determines and introduces corrective and saving measures. Man damns himself not solely by reason of having sinned mortally, but because he remains in the initial state of sin—the state that is precisely the nature of fallen man and from which religion alone can deliver him. Man is not damned for not believing that God is One, or that Christ saves or that the world is illusory; he becomes lost because, not believing it, he remains at the mercy of the dehumanizing powers of centrifugal *māyā* which appear to be envious of the unique chance that is offered by the human state. When it is said that it “offends God” not to believe in this or that, this means basically that man courts perdition unless he grasps a particular “lifeline,” as a verse of the Koran says.

“Unless God should will otherwise”: this basic reservation in the Koran concerns not only the perpetuity of hell, but also that of Paradise which will be transcended—or “absorbed”—in the end by the mystery of *Ridwān*, the “Divine Good Pleasure,” and this leads us back to the eschatological cosmology of Origen. In this terminal dimension which in reality is “without beginning and without end,” there can be no diminishment—quite the contrary: beings are reintegrated into their timeless and uncreated essences, into what they have never ceased to be in their quintessential reality. It follows from this that it is far less incorrect to speak of the eternity of Paradise than of the eternity of hell, and this asymmetry is indeed so obvious—when one takes into account the nature of the Sovereign Good—that we see no point in insisting on it with endless arguments of an apologetic trend. It is consequently the eternity of hell that constitutes a great religious problem; not that of Paradise, which opens out onto pure Being, onto That which is.

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Scriptural anthropomorphism does not disturb those who, while not necessarily being metaphysicians, have sufficient perspicacity to grasp intuitively its plausible intentions; but it does disturb those determined skeptics who apply a purely mechanical and therefore even ill-willed logic to the literal meaning of the symbolisms; this has nothing to do with the legitimate critical mind—that is, with the awareness we may have of the imperfection of a particular dogmatic or theological manner of speaking—for this awareness comes not from our ignorance but, on the contrary, from our knowledge of what these expressions imply.⁷ Whatever the case, it is important not to confuse dogmatic expressions with theological explanations; we may accept the apparent contradiction of the former thanks to our intuition, but we are not bound to accept likewise every piece of theological reasoning—such as that of the consequences of the infinite dignity of God—and it is not even possible to do so when the opinion contains a flagrant absurdity, even if imperceptible to the simple believer. It is true that lame arguments are eroded by time, on the one hand because even the fideist is a thinking being, and on the other, because doubt increases with the decline of faith and so of intuition; what is left is mere rationality with no spiritual background and which is unjustified, evidently not because of its logic as such, but because of its superficial and fragmentary nature. It is then that pure metaphysics or gnosis if one will—so long vilified by the spokesmen of fideism—should intervene, for it alone offers the data needed in order to be able to combine the rights of intelligence with those of human weakness.

We should like to insist once more upon the following point, at the risk of repeating ourselves: if ancient or medieval man—these epithets being approximate—found it easy to accept arguments that were naive and on the whole provisional, this was not only because he accepted in advance the dogmas that these arguments set out to illustrate, but also because these arguments themselves had the power to release in him intuitions of truth. But worldliness and material progress ended in weakening piety and therewith faith, hence also intuition.

On the one hand there is the man who is philosophically naive but intuitive as regards the supernatural;⁸ on the other there is the man gifted with critical sense but insensitive to that which transcends him; the ideal, quite clearly, is a discernment that does not result from the merely outward rationality of the logician and empiricist, but from an intellection which, by its very supernaturalness, also coincides, in its dynamic dimension, with the “Faith that can remove

⁷ A marginal note: the images and accounts of the Sacred Scriptures, quite apart from their literal meaning and various symbolical significations of a principial nature, apply equally to an endless series of outward and inward situations; that is to say, they are like archetypes of everything that has a moral or spiritual meaning. Every type of holiness in particular and every saintly destiny is foreshadowed in that iconostasis which is Scripture.

⁸ The sense of the supernatural and the sacred was not lacking in the pagan Semites, for they had an irresistible need to worship something, be it the golden calf or the idols of Mecca; the analogy between the pagans of antiquity and modern disbelievers is therefore only partial.

the Absolute, there would be no contingent order; this is tantamount to saying that the Divine must always be able to make itself perceptible to men, either indirectly in its existential traces or directly through its theophanies. “Water takes on the color of its container,” a Sufi said, and it is thus that Divine Reality, transcendent in itself, enters into the temporal order without leaving its Immutability. “True man and true God”: here is the entire mystery of the “manifestation of the Void” (*Shunyāmūrti*); the sun is unaffected by what it shines upon. The phenomenon of the miracle is ontologically indispensable because the meeting between the Eternal and the temporal is possible and necessary; the archetype of the miracle is the irruption of the Absolute into contingency. And this irruption would not be conceivable if contingency were not, precisely, “something of the Absolute.”