

Can Non-Muslims be Saved? Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya on Universal Salvation

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The Damascene theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) wrote the longest refutation of Christianity in the Islamic tradition, and he is well known for his view that religious interaction between Christians and Muslims should be minimized to protect the integrity of Islam. His foremost disciple Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350) also composed a refutation of Judaism and Christianity, as well as a monumental work on the legal status of non-Muslims in non-Muslim societies. Both scholars' works on Christianity have seen many editions in Arabic, and they have received substantial attention in modern scholarship.¹

There is, however, one aspect of their thought affecting non-Muslims that is not well known: their arguments for universal salvation. There is no evidence that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim broached this question following contacts with Jews and Christians, and they express no interest in our contemporary concern for interfaith dialogue and the theological implications of religious pluralism. Nonetheless, their thought on the final destiny of unbelievers is still instructive. It reveals a deeply human and reflective side to two figures often cited for their harsh views toward non-Muslims, and it shows where their theology of God's mercy can lead.

Toward the end of Ibn Taymiyya's life, Ibn al-Qayyim asked him about the destiny of unbelievers.² Ibn Taymiyya was not sure what to say; apparently he had not thought about the question before. Ibn al-Qayyim brought the matter up again later. This time, he asked Ibn Taymiyya to comment on traditions such as this one attributed to the second caliph 'Umar: 'Even if the People of the Fire stayed in the Fire like the amount of sand of 'Alij [i.e. a large sand track outside Mecca], they would have, despite that, a day in which they would come out'. Ibn Taymiyya responded with a treatise that I have dubbed *The Annihilation of*

the Fire,³ which was the last thing that he wrote before he died.

The Annihilation of the Fire explains that the tradition 'Even if the People of the Fire stayed in the Fire like the amount of sand of 'Alij, they would have, despite that, a day in which they would come out' interprets the Qur'anic witness that those in Hell will be "staying in it for long stretches of time".⁴ Ibn Taymiyya's point is that 'long stretches of time' will eventually come to an end. He also observes that the many Qur'anic references to unbelievers 'abiding in [the Fire] forever' need not be taken in an absolute sense. They need only mean that unbelievers will be in the Fire as long as the Fire lasts. Ibn Taymiyya argues as well from the tradition 'My mercy overcomes my anger' that God's mercy does not allow everlasting chastisement, and he reasons that God could have no wise purpose in chastising any of His creatures forever. Rather, the purpose of chastisement is purification and expiation of sin. Ibn Taymiyya is well aware that he is opposing the consensus of the medieval Muslim scholars that unbelievers will spend eternity in Hell-Fire. However, a medieval consensus is of no account to him because he does not believe that it can be verified. He will only accept a consensus of the early Muslims (the Salaf), which he does not believe exists on this question.

Several years later, Ibn Taymiyya's disciple Ibn al-Qayyim took up this matter in three books dating from 1345 onward. The first two works follow Ibn Taymiyya's *Annihilation of the Fire* closely with Ibn al-Qayyim expanding on the therapeutic qualities of Hell-Fire. He writes, for example, 'Trial and punishment are the remedies appointed to remove maladies. They are not removed by any other means. And the Fire is the Great Remedy'. Despite this, Ibn al-Qayyim cannot quite bring himself to affirm universal salvation without

reservation, and he takes refuge in leaving the matter to God's will. In the third work, however, Ibn al-Qayyim does affirm clearly that chastisement for unbelievers will end, and this appears to have landed him in trouble with the Shafi'i chief judge of Damascus Taqi al-Din al-Subki. Al-Subki and Ibn al-Qayyim had come into conflict on other matters beginning in 1345, and Ibn al-Qayyim had to acquiesce. Then, in 1348, al-Subki wrote a refutation of Ibn Taymiyya's *Annihilation of the Fire* asserting that it was unbelief to oppose the Muslim consensus that unbelievers would spend eternity in the Fire. This appears to have stopped Ibn al-Qayyim in his tracks. His last major work before he died in 1350 briefly affirms eternal damnation for unbelievers and leaves no trace of his earlier deliberations.

Given Ibn Taymiyya's and Ibn al-Qayyim's reputations for polemic and harshness toward non-Muslims, their arguments for universal salvation may come as a surprise. Yet, their theologies of God's wise purpose and mercy led them to the conclusion, albeit hesitantly, that chastisement for even unbelievers will not last forever. This threatened the reigning orthodoxy of the day, and Taqi al-Din al-Subki saw to it that that orthodoxy was sustained.

References

1. For details see my articles, 'Ibn Taymiyya', and 'Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya', in Volume 4 of *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, ed. David Thomas, et al. (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).
2. For full details of what follows, see my 'Islamic Universalism: Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's Salafi Deliberations on the Duration of Hell-Fire', *The Muslim World* 99.1 (2009): 181-201, and 'Against Islamic Universalism: 'Ali al-Harbi's 1990 Attempt to Prove that Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya Affirm the Eternity of Hell-Fire', in *Neo-Harbalism Reconsidered: The Impact of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah*, ed. G. Tamer and B. Krawietz (Berlin: de Gruyter, forthcoming).
3. Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-Radd 'ala man qala bi-fana' al-janna wa al-nar*, ed. Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah al-Samhari (Riyadh: Dar al-balansiyya, 1415/1995).
4. See Sūra 78 (*al-Naba*): 23

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