CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Is God's prescription of eternal hell for *kâfirūn* (infidels) in the Quran evil? Contesting Aijaz's understanding of *kufr* (infidelity) and an analysis of eternal punishment in the Quran

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Abstract

This article concerns the problem of eternal hell in Islam as an aporetic problem of evil with a focus on Aijaz's description of the Islamic soteriology. I contest his description of Islamic culpability and his claim that all non-Muslims are regarded as *kâfir* and consigned to eternal hell. First, I aim to illustrate the pitfalls in his line of argumentation such as crude generalizations and selective reading of the Islamic sources, which seem to render his argument a strawman fallacy. I offer a more accurate analysis of the Islamic view, by arguing that only a limited group of people who fight against truth through evil actions are considered as *kâfir*. Second, building on my analysis of the notion of *kâfir*, I address the question whether God's perfect love and wisdom are compatible with limited salvific exclusivism. Thus, I aim to elaborate on the rationale behind the prescription of eternal punishment for the *kâfir* in the Quran in the rest of the article, by arguing that the *kâfir* is incapable of genuine repentance due to his character formed by his free choices. This, in turn, makes it impossible to achieve retributive justice through a finite punishment concerning the *kâfir*'s evil actions.

Keywords: aporetic problem of evil; eternal hell; Islam; Aijaz; *kâfir*

Introduction

The problem of evil arises from the alleged incompatibility between God's existence and the existence of evil and suffering in the world. It is argued that God, being omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, must be willing to prevent evil and suffering and be capable of preventing it, by knowing how to do it and having the power to do so. Accordingly, the existence of evil and suffering is claimed either to be logically incompatible with the existence of God (logical problem of evil) or at least to provide evidence against the probability of God's existence (evidential problem of evil).[1] The problem of eternal hell is generally considered to be an 'aporetic problem of evil' that is concerned with 'how to square God's existence with the existence of evil' (Van Woudenberg (2013), 177).[2] However, the existence of eternal hell is also taken to be logically inconsistent with

God's existence in terms of the evil entailed by the consignment of some people to eternal suffering in hell. It is argued that if God existed and were omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, he would want to and could avoid eternal hell (McCord Adams (1993)).

The problem of eternal hell as an aporetic problem of evil can also be employed to reject certain concepts of God or the truth of particular religions/religious traditions. In his article 'Belief, Providence and Eschatology: Some Philosophical Problems in Islamic Theism', Imran Aijaz describes the Islamic soteriology as being rigidly exclusivist and incompatible with divine nature, particularly with divine mercy. His main argument for this alleged rigid Islamic exclusivism is based on his view that God's salvation plan contains only a limited group of people, namely Muslims, and the rest of the people are deemed to be infidels, namely *kâfir* (pl. *kâfirūn*, n. *kufr*, v. *k-f-r*), and thus are consigned to eternal punishment simply for not accepting the message of Islam. His argument for the Quran's deeming *kâfir* all the people apart from Muslims is as follows. He claims that *kâfirun* refer to the group of people who has belief in *tawhīd*, defined by him as the belief in 'an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect Creator of the universe', but reject taking this belief 'to be true in [their] practical reasoning when [they] perform action' out of perverse reason (Aijaz (2008), 238). So, his definition appears to have two parts: (i) each person believes that *tawhīd* is true and (ii) each person who rejects it in practical reasoning does so out of perverse reasons. He grounds both parts of this definition on his claim that the Quran presumes a providentially organized universe where everybody discerns signs of *tawhīd* and non-inferentially (out of *fitra*) forms the belief that *tawhīd* is true. For him, the refusal to conform to this belief despite the signs observed in the universe can only be for perverse reasons and is a 'culpable rejection of the truth of *tawhīd*' (*ibid.*, 247). He refers to this view as the traditional Islamic view and disregards it as being either 'simply false' or 'seriously contestable' (*ibid.*). This is because, as he argues, we can prima facie think that non-Muslims do not believe in *tawhīd* and therefore cannot be accused of culpable rejection.

According to Aijaz's analysis, the Islamic view of eternal punishment seems to raise a serious aporetic problem of evil in that all people except a small group are doomed to suffer in eternal hell just because of not being a Muslim. In the present article, I argue that Aijaz's descriptions of the Islamic concept of eternal hell and Islamic culpability are not accurate representations of the Quranic or the traditional Islamic views. I contest his claim that all non-Muslims are regarded as *kâfir* and consigned to eternal hell according to Islam. In doing so, I aim to illustrate the pitfalls in his line of argumentation such as crude generalizations and selective reading of the Islamic sources, which seem to render his argument a strawman fallacy. In opposing his view, I offer a more accurate analysis of the Islamic view, by arguing that only a limited group of people who fight against truth by committing evil actions are considered as *kâfir* in the Quran. The limitation of the eternal punishment to a group of people with evil character constitutes an essential part of the Islamic reply to the problem of eternal hell as an aporetic problem of evil. The question whether God's mercy and wisdom is compatible with a limited salvific exclusivism comprises the second part of the problem. Thus, I also aim to elaborate on the rationale behind the prescription of eternal punishment for the *kâfir* in the Quran in the rest of the article, by arguing that the *kâfir* is incapable of genuine repentance due to his character formed by his free choices. This, in turn, makes it impossible to achieve retributive justice for the *kâfir*'s evil action through a finite punishment.

Kufr, faith and belief, and Aijaz's argument

In the Quran and Islamic tradition, the term *kâfir* appears to be used in contrast with the term *mu'min* (pl. *mu'minūn*, n. *imān*, v. *ā-m-n*), which are generally translated into English as 'disbeliever' and 'believer' respectively in a religious context. The term *kâfir* designates

the group of people[3] who are sentenced to eternal chastisement in hell according to the Quran. Therefore, it is of uttermost significance to elaborate on the notion of *kâfir* as well as on the characteristics of this group of people and to explore whether the *kâfir* is simply a disbeliever before investigating the very logic of the eternal punishment prescribed in the Quran.

Aijaz, following Wilfred C. Smith's view, analyses the Quranic notion of *kufr* not as a term corresponding to disbelief but to a volitional rejection of acting on the belief in *tawhīd* in accordance with *kufr's* literal meaning of 'concealing' or 'covering up' (*ibid.*, 237). As he points out, the Quranic charge against the *kâfir* is his rejection of acting on *tawhīd* despite his belief in its truth, by purposefully covering up this truth (*ibid.*, 238). In his book entitled *On Understanding Islam*, Smith admits that he and many others had been wrong for assuming a tight relationship between belief and faith or confusing them with each other in the translation of the term *ā-m-n*. For Smith, the notion of belief, as understood in modern discourse, suggests incertitude, openness to correction, and a sceptical attitude. However, for him, it does not occur in the Quran as such a religious concept. Similarly, the term *k-f-r* is never used simply in reference to disbelief in Arabic or other languages including Persian, Turkish, and Urdu (Smith (1981), 123).

Beliefs, Smith argues, are uncertain and open to modification in the presence of new evidence and the mental attitude of believing that *p* 'postulates that truth, in the religious field, is not known' (*ibid.*, 132). Furthermore, they are open to modification depending on newly available evidence. For instance, one's belief that God exists is susceptible to being falsified. However, for Smith, neither of these characteristics can be attributed to the state of having faith according to the Quran. On the contrary, 'knowledge comes first – given by God; faith is the positive response to it' (*ibid.*, 130). More precisely, for one to have faith in God's existence implies a degree of certainty in one's belief that God exists. Faith is rather an act of will and belief in God's existence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for it. Here is where the very notion of *kâfir* becomes relevant. For Smith, being *kâfir* does not refer to the state of disbelief; on the contrary, it, like faith, presumes the belief in God's existence as a necessary condition.

Regarding belief as a necessary condition to become a *kâfir* might strike one as odd. However, as Smith suggests, *kufr* is beyond an intellectual attitude towards the fact that God exists. It is an act of volition, that is, 'the act of rejecting God's summons' despite the mind's acceptance of its truth 'out of haughtiness, arrogance, stubborn wilfulness' (*ibid.*, 123). The Quran states this fact in various verses in addressing different groups of *kâfirun*, such as in 27:14 ('They denied them, in their wickedness and their pride, even though their souls acknowledged them as true') and in 2:144 ('Those who were given the Scripture know with certainty [as they recognize their own children 6:20] that this is the Truth from their Lord').[4] So, for Smith and Aijaz, belief and disbelief are not the corresponding concepts for *īmān* and *kufr* and both *īmān* and *kufr* are volitional responses to the belief in religious truth.[5]

So, for Aijaz, having belief in religious truth is a necessary condition for the state of *kufr*. By religious truth, he refers to the doctrine of *tawhīd* and understands this notion not as being specific to Islamic teaching but as a general theistic doctrine that presupposes the existence of 'an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect Creator of the universe' (Aijaz (2008), 233). He further argues that the Quran designates all non-Muslims as *kâfir* for their rejection of acting on their belief in *tawhīd*. For Aijaz, the Quran presumes a providentially organized universe that unambiguously reflects the signs of the existence of God as well as an inherent faculty (*fitra*) in human beings that makes all people form a non-inferential belief in *tawhīd* by the observation of these signs. As he argues, any rejection to act on this belief would thus be a culpable rejection according to the Quran and

this could only be for perverse reasons. So, his definition of the *kufr* appears to be as follows:

> Refusing to act on the belief in *tawhīd* out of perverse reasons despite forming a non-inferential belief that it is true by observing the apparent signs of God's existence in a providentially organized universe.

On the basis on his analysis of the notion of *kufr*, he argues that Islam promotes a rigid salvific exclusivism which identifies all non-Muslims as *kâfir* and therefore as deserving eternal punishment in hell. His argument can be said to draw on two presumptions. The first one is based on his analysis of the relation of belief to *imān* and *kufr* that belief in *tawhīd* is a necessary condition both for *iman* and *kufr*. According to the second presumption, this entails that there are only two kinds of volitional responses to the belief in *tawhīd*, either submitting to it or refusing to act on it *out of perverse reasons.* He attempts to justify why being either *mu'min* or *kâfir* exhausts the categories of people's religious attitudes according to the Quran, by arguing that 'the Qur'an maintains that our world is providentially unambiguous' in a way that 'these signs are such obvious indicators of the reality of the Divine that rejection is simply foolish and perverse'(*ibid.*, 240). So, we can extract the following line of argument relying on his analysis of the notion of *kufr* and providential structure of the universe:

1. In a providentially organized universe, everybody forms the belief that *tawhīd* is true non-inferentially.
2. There are only two volitional ways of responding to the belief in *tawhīd*: submission to the truth of the belief (becoming Muslim) or rejecting it for perverse reasons (becoming *kâfir*).
3. 'Thus, anyone who is not a Muslim, e.g., a Jew or a Christian, is a rejecter of faith' (*ibid.*, 242) out of perverse reasons and is a *kâfir*. (Even, 'epistemically, all non-Muslims are in the same cognitive condition as Satan!' (*ibid.*, 241).
4. 'All rejecters of faith are culpable, and therefore merit the punishment of Hell in the afterlife' (*ibid.*).
5. 'All non-Muslims are therefore culpable and excluded from God's plan of salvation' (*ibid.*, 242).

Aijaz's argument appears to involve serious pitfalls, faulty generalizations, and inaccurate representation as well as selective reading of the Quranic verses. First, he admits that he does not investigate the sufficient reasons in the Quran that deem a person *kâfir* and considers the rejection to act on *tawhīd* only as a necessary condition for *kufr*. Yet, he concludes that all non-Muslims are deemed to be *kâfir* in the Quran for their rejection of *tawhīd* in their actions. He seems to be self-referentially incoherent given that drawing such a conclusion would only be possible for Aijaz if he referred to the rejection of acting on *tawhīd* as a sufficient condition for *kufr*. The Quranic verse 3.85 might be also a reason for him to do so given that he asserts that this verse abrogated all other verses on the salvific inclusivism in the Quran, particularly for the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*), namely, Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans. A critical analysis of Aijaz's claims on abrogation and the status of the People of the Book will be given in the subsequent sections.

Second, Aijaz claims that only Muslims are *mu'min* and all non-Muslims are *kâfir* without offering any textual justification for his claim except his reference to a passage from Toshiko Izutsu's book entitled *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology.*[6] However, the passage he quotes makes a distinction between the two groups of people, namely, those who accept Islam and those who reject it, not between those people who act on *tawhīd* and

those who reject doing so. Furthermore, his claim that the Quran labels all non-Muslims *kâfir* solely based on their practical rejection of *tawhīd* appears to be self-refuting considering Aijaz's understanding of the notion of *tawhīd*. More precisely, there are several Christians and Jews who believe in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect Creator of the universe (and this corresponds to belief in *tawhīd* as described by Aijaz) and act on this belief. So, they should be referred to as Muslims according to Aijaz's analysis.

He even goes so far as to claim that according to the Quran, all non-Muslims are epistemically in the same cognitive condition as Satan (Iblis) who refused to obey God despite his knowledge of God's existence. He makes a crude generalization by asserting that many orthodox Muslims would agree with him on this. Nevertheless, the only reference that he offers is a passage from Frithjof Schuon's text which states that 'average' Muslims tend to consider non-Muslims' rejection of Islam out of 'pure obstinacy' or out of simple ignorance (*ibid.*, 241). However, even his quotation from Schuon does not support his claim but appears to undermine it given that Schuon mentions ignorance as a reason for rejecting the truth of *tawhīd*. Aijaz incautiously refers to all reasons of rejection as being equally perverse and does not elaborate on this very crucial issue.

His claim that Islam considers the belief in *tawhīd* as a non-inferential belief constitutes one of his argument's premises and must properly be supported through Islamic sources. However, he does not seem to provide any justification for this claim, either. Indeed, this view is not even among the main Islamic views in the Islamic tradition. The Quran puts a great emphasis on the use of reason to encourage people to read the signs of wisdom in the universe.[7] This emphasis suggests that the epistemic capacities of human beings are so ordered as to correspond to the providential structure of the universe. So, from a Quranic perspective, it is *epistemically possible* for human beings to *derive* the existence of the unique and wise creator from the signs in the universe by reasoning. Nevertheless, such a metaphysical possibility does not entail that every individual either can or has to discern the truth of God's existence under each epistemic condition. In mainstream Islamic theology, there are two different views on the responsibility of a person in using her reason to explore the existence of the unique and wise creator. Despite accepting its metaphysical possibility, the *Ashʿarī* view rejects its necessity and therefore the culpability of any person without her access to the divine message sent through prophets.[8] This view is mainly based on verse 17:15, which states that '[n]o soul will bear another's burden, nor do We punish until We have sent a messenger'. According to the other mainstream view, namely the *Māturīdī* view, the reason is not only capable of deriving the existence of God from the signs of wisdom, but also responsible for doing so in the absence of revelation.[9] However, even *Māturīdī*'s appeal to reason and claim of culpability do not correspond to Aijaz's conception of the necessity of belief in *tawhīd* mainly because it does not consider the formation of the belief in God's existence to be non-inferential. On the contrary, the *Māturīdī* emphasis is on the reasoning faculty of human beings. It also does not exclude the possibility that epistemic conditions of an agent can hinder or manipulate her ability to derive the truth of God's existence by reasoning. This may, in turn, remove the culpability of a person in not accepting the truth of *tawhīd*.

On the basis of his argument examined above, Aijaz contests the Quranic picture of the world as construed by him in a mistaken way. It seems to me that Aijaz's argument involves the strawman fallacy in that it depicts a false picture of the Quranic view and attacks it instead of properly addressing the real issue. In the following sections, I will offer a more accurate picture of the Quranic notion of *kufr* based on a holistic analysis of the related Quranic verses with a reference to some mainstream views in the Islamic tradition. I will examine whether becoming a Muslim or a *kâfir* are exhaustive options in responding to the belief in God's existence by analysing the characteristics of the

kâfir as well as the attributes of the People of the Book as depicted in the Quran. My analysis will be restricted to the case of the People of the Book since the case of the rest of non-Muslims is controversial and requires an additional in-depth analysis that space does not permit. However, I will briefly address their cases when examining the epistemic conditions for the culpability of rejection.

The Quranic description of the *kâfir*'s characteristics and the paradigmatic case of Iblis

As explained in the previous section, the belief that God exists or the belief in the truth of religious message is one of the necessary conditions for becoming a *kâfir* and the rejection of acting in accordance with this belief out of perverse reasons was also mentioned among the necessary conditions. Let me now elaborate on these perverse reasons and the characteristics of the *kâfir* as specified in the Quran that disqualify them from deserving eternal punishment in hell. The paradigmatic example of the *kâfir* is Iblis (Satan), the first rational free agent to reject God's summon as narrated in the Quran. Iblis's narration of rebellion is associated with the creation of the first human being, namely, Adam. According to the Quran, there are two species of rational, free, and therefore morally responsible agents, which are human beings who were created out of clay, and *jânn* (sing. *jinn*) who were created out of a smokeless fire (55:15). Iblis is of the latter kind who used to reside in heaven prior to the creation of Adam, namely, prior to being tested for its faith in God. Subsequent to the creation of Adam, Iblis is ordered by God to prostrate before him along with angels. He refused to do so by saying 'I will not bow to a mortal You created from dried clay, formed from dark mud' (15:33) and claiming that 'I am better than him: You made me from fire, and him from clay' (38:76). The Quran describes Iblis's rejection as transgressing the commandment of his Lord (18:50) out of arrogance (2:34; 38:74).

According to the Quranic narration on Iblis, his refusal to obey God's command not only proved the lack of his faith but also led him to expose his real character once tested. Apparently, he has had belief in God's existence by being directly addressed by him and being a former resident of heaven. However, his faith in God was not tested until the creation of Adam. His refusal to submit to God's command was followed by his articulation of an evil intention. After being driven off from heaven due to his arrogance, he asked God to postpone his punishment to the day of resurrection, so that he could cause humankind's progeny to perish except for a few (17:62) and to make them live an evil life (38:82). So, Iblis appears in the Quran as an open enemy of God and human beings, being the embodied form of evil. His case is a paradigmatic case of *kufr* in showing that a rational free agent can reject the truth out of perverse reasons and evil motivation despite his close acquaintance with it and being aware of the consequences of his actions, namely, the eternal punishment in hell. As will be argued subsequently, this attitude, which is also a general attitude of the *kâfir*, renders the eternity of hell reasonable at least for some persons, by illustrating that some souls are irrevocable due to their volitional insistence on the unrightfulness.

As the Quran states, the misguidance of Iblis and his partners can be effective only for those people who have disease in their hearts (22:53), namely, an acquired tendency to choose evil over righteousness (83:14). The following attributes are among the attributes of the *kâfir* that are mentioned in the Quran: like Iblis, they break their covenant with God (2:27; 4:155), become *kâfir* after having had faith in God (3:90) and spend their wealth to avert people from the way of God (8:36), desiring to extinguish the light of God with their mouths (9:32). In doing so, they fight against God, his angels, and his messengers (2:98), causing corruption on the earth (2:11), killing prophets unrightfully (3:112), and driving

them as well as believers out of their lands (4:13). Thus, the *kâfir* is the one who is not a simple disbeliever but is motivated by evil intentions in refusing to submit to the belief in God and acts accordingly whenever there is an opportunity to do so. Apparently, this is an extreme attitude of being against the divine truth and does not seem to exhaust all the ways of refusing to submit to the truth as will be analysed in the following section, which examines the case of the People of the Book in relation to *kufr*.

The People of the Book and *kufr*

For Aijaz, the Quran promotes a rigid salvific exclusivism according to which only Muslims are eligible to go to heaven. He bases his claim partially on verse 3:85, which states that 'If anyone seeks a religion other than [Islam] complete devotion to God, it will not be accepted from him: he will be one of the losers in the Hereafter' as well as on the so-called 'long-established tradition' which 'maintains that the exclusivist passage of the Qur'an 3.85 "abrogated" all those verses which support salvific inclusivism'. Yet, he does so without any specific reference to the traditional Islamic scholarship nor to the context of this Quranic verse (Aijaz (2008), 242). In contesting Aijaz's view, let me refer to the Quranic discourse on the status of the People of the Book in relation to the notion of *kufr*, and then briefly introduce the soteriological views on this group of people in the classical Islamic tradition.

For Aijaz, the Quran identifies Muslims – understood as the group of believers after the prophet Muhammad – as the only group having faith and the People of the Book as *kâfirûn* without making any distinction among non-Muslims. However, the Quran distinguishes the People of the Book into two groups, namely, those people who have faith and those who are *kâfirûn* according to their personal attributes. For instance, in verse 3:75, some of them are described as being so trustworthy that a Muslim could entrust them with a great amount of wealth without any further consideration, whereas some of them are so demerited as being not trustable even with a silver coin due to their belief that they could not be blamed for their misbehaviour towards people outside their religious community – 'a lie they attribute to God'. Similarly, verse 3:113 explicitly states that not all the People of the Book are the same, some of them being upright and prostrating to God in the night. The *kâfirûn* faction among them is depicted as manifesting the similar characteristics of the general *kâfir* attitude. They conceal and manipulate the truth after the truth becomes clear to them (3:70); they transgress the limits of their religion beyond the truth (5:77); they break their covenant with God, by denying and killing messengers as they consider their messages to contradict their desires (5:70); they struggle to avert the people of faith from their submission to the truth, by making the message seem crooked despite their belief in its truth (3:99); they collaborate with other groups of *kâfirûn* to hold an unjust war against the people of faith and to drive them out of their lands for their faith in truth (59:11). According to the Quran, only the infidel or faithless faction among the People of the Book deserves to be counted as the people of eternal hell (98:6).

Given their characteristics, it would be unjust to equate these two factions among the People of the Book with each other and to consider the former group as deserving the same punishment in hell as the latter group. The Quran neither equates these two groups with each other nor consigns them to the same punishment. There are various verses in the Quran which emphasize that whoever reflects the characteristics of a *mu'min*, namely, submits to God in a sincere way, believes in the resurrection day, and is the doer of good, will be rewarded by him without having any fear or grief (2:112; 5:69). But, to return to Aijaz's claim, how should we then understand verse 3:85, which states that no religion other than Islam will be accepted by God? Does it really abrogate salvifically inclusivist verses and render the People of the Book equal in degree and punishment? In order to

give an accurate analysis of the verse, two issues should be clarified, namely, the reference of the term 'Islam' and the context of verse 3:85 in the light of verses that come before and after it.

Let me start with the context of verse 3:85. In the previous verses of the same chapter, we read a part of Jesus' story that he was sent as a prophet, confirming Torah and perceived the resistance of *kâfirûn* of his time against the truth. As he asked for company against *kâfirun*, his disciples confirmed that they were with him as being 'the Muslims'. Subsequently, we come across a verse, namely, the Quranic invitation to the People of the Book that asks them to agree on a common word in not worshipping anyone except God, not associating any partner with him, and not holding anyone else as lord besides God. The following verses mention a futile discussion between Jews and Christians about the religion of Abraham, stating that Abraham was also a Muslim and referring to the prophet Muhammad and his followers as having the best claim to Abraham. The latter verses concern the attitudes of the faithless faction of the People of the Book towards the prophet Muhammad's and his followers' being Abraham's true followers in terms of sharing the common word. They are designated as consciously misleading the people, confusing truth with falsehood, and concealing the truth despite their belief in truth. They are also accused of trading their covenants with God for a temporary gain, altering the Scriptures by attributing lies to God, and asserting that Jesus, angels, and prophets are the objects of worship. At this point, the Quran asks this group of people the question whether they would like to become *kâfir* after being Muslims and whether they desire a different religion from what God desires due to their attitude. Finally, it comes to God's warning to this group of people that no religion except Islam will be accepted by God in our controversial verse 3:85. As this chapter of the Quran also suggests, God designates the previous prophets and their followers as Muslims based on a common word that they accept, and those people among the People of the Book as *kâfirûn* who strive to alter the Scriptures according to their desires and manipulate people by concealing the truth. So, verse 3:85 does not seem to suggest a complete salvific exclusivism for non-Muslims as the term is understood today when considered within the context of the previous verses of the same chapter, but prescribes it only for those people belonging to the category of *kâfirûn* among the People of the Book who refuse to agree on a common word and act like a *kâfir*.

In the third chapter of his book *Qur'anic Hermeneutics: Between Science, History, and the Bible*, Abdulla Galadari outlines the traditional discussions on the reference of the term Islam in the Quran and investigates whether verse 3:85 entails a salvific exclusivism. He mentions the names of two Salafi scholars, namely Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Abī al-'Izz, as the defenders of the view that the term 'Islam' does not refer to the particular religion that was brought by the prophet Muhammad. For Ibn Taymiyyah (1996), Islam is defined as 'sincerity to God combined with generosity and good works with faith' and verse 3:85 does not abrogate the inclusivist verse 2:62 that states 'Indeed, the believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabians – whoever "truly" believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good will have their reward with their Lord. And there will be no fear for them, nor will they grieve' (Galadari (2018), 69). Similarly, Ibn Abī al-'Izz (1998, 534) understands the term Islam as the core of all religions that were revealed to all prophets, while accepting the differences between religions as to the specific laws concerning their time. As Galadari rightly argues, the salvific exclusivism, particularly for the People of the Book, would not be a justified interpretation of the Quranic attitude in the presence of various verses implying the salvation of a certain group of people with certain characteristics as described above and in the absence of any agreement in the Islamic tradition on the existence and the extent of the abrogation concerning the Quranic verses (Galadari (2018), 71).

Even though it would be inaccurate from a Quranic perspective to equate all the People of the Book with each other regardless of their characteristics as well as to exclude them all from God's salvation plan, the Quran paradigmatically presumes the superiority of the last message over the previous ones. In other words, the logic of the revelation of a new or updated religion is associated with the corruption of the previous revelation and the people who have access to the newly revealed message are responsible for responding to it. Thus, all the People of the Book who have access to the Quranic message have the burden to form an attitude towards it. The attitude of the *kâfirûn* among the People of the Book is the rejection for perverse reasons as discussed previously. However, could there be any reason for the People of the Book with faith (in a common word) to reject the Quranic message which, according to the Quran, approves what they believe in? Or would the rejection of this group of people exclude them from the salvation plan and degrade them to the level of *kâfirun*?[10]

Al-Ghazālī's views on salvific inclusivism as analysed by M. Hassan Khalil in his book *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* seem to provide answers to these questions and illustrate the inclusivist attitude within the classical Islamic tradition.[11] As Khalil points out, al-Ghazālī introduces three categories of non-Muslims:

> 1) A party who never heard so much as the name 'Muhammad' . . . 2) A party among those who lived in lands adjacent to the lands of Islam and had contact, therefore, with Muslims, who knew his name, his character, and the miracles he wrought. These are the blasphemous Unbelievers. 3) A third party whose case falls between these two poles. These people knew the name 'Muhammad', but nothing of his character and attributes. Instead, all they heard since childhood was that some arch-liar carrying the name 'Muhammad' claimed to be a prophet, just as our children heard that an arch-liar and deceiver called 'al-Muqaffa' falsely claimed that God sent him (as a prophet) and then challenged people to disprove his claim. (al-Ghazālī (2002), 126)

The first category is associated with the *Ash'arī* principle that the unreached people, including all groups of non-Muslims, are not culpable because of their lack of faith. The second category designates the *kâfirûn* who reject the message despite their close acquaintance with its truth. The third category concerns the rest of the non-Muslims – at least among the People of the Book – who do not submit to the message of the Quran despite being reached.[12] Al-Ghazālī appears to divide the non-Muslims in this category into two further groups, namely, those people with a lack of epistemic clarity concerning the message and those sincere truth-seekers who remain unconvinced by the message despite attaining epistemic clarity (Khalil (2012), 35). For al-Ghazālī, the former group is *on a par* with the non-Muslims of the first category in terms of being epistemically manipulated and not being given 'enough incentive to compel them to investigate [Muḥammad's real character]' (al-Ghazālī (2002), 126). He does not equate the latter group of people to *kâfirun*, either, but holds them among the saved group of people. He considers their attitude of being unconvinced to be a result not of their indifference or hostility to the truth but of their failure 'to appreciate the gravity of religion [dīn]' (al-Ghazālī (2002), 127). So, as Khalil points out, for al-Ghazālī, the eternal punishment is an exception and limited to a certain group of non-believers, namely, to *kâfirun*, and divine mercy will predominate for the salvation of the rest of the people (Khalil (2012), 42).[13] However, it is important to note that in Islam there is not a strict bifurcation between salvation and eternal hell, that is, a person's not being damned to eternal punishment in hell does not guarantee his being saved from a temporary punishment in hell, neither for Muslims nor for other groups mentioned. Many people may well still be culpable and enter hell for purification and retribution before being accepted to heaven.

To sum up, Aijaz's approach to the Quranic distinction between *mu'minun* and *kâfirûn* as a rigid bifurcation which qualifies all non-Muslims as infidels deserving the eternal punishment in hell is to be justified neither through a Quranic analysis nor by appeal to the Islamic tradition. First, there is a controversy over the status of unreached people and the dominant view is that they will not be held responsible for lacking faith based on verse 17:15, which states that God never punishes people unless he sends a messenger to warn them. Second, a good number of verses in the Quran reflect an inclusivist salvific attitude towards the sincere believers despite lacking faith in Islam as the last religion. Moreover, an inclusivist reading of the Quranic verses has considerable support among highly influential classical Islamic scholars, including al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyyah. Third, the eternal chastisement seems to be restricted to the group of people who reject the truth despite their belief in it and do this out of perverse reasons as stated in the Quran as well as suggested by the scholars mentioned. So, Aijaz's second premise appears to be unjustified by entailing the falsehood of (3) and (5) and the God of Islam cannot justifiably be depicted as being unreasonably cruel, desiring to punish all non-Muslims in eternal hell simply for their disbelief in the Quranic message.

The rationale behind God's prescription of eternal chastisement in the Quran

So far, I have argued that only a limited group of people who become enemies of divine truth for perverse reasons despite their belief in it and act unjustly in accordance with their rejection by committing evil actions in the world are to be threatened by eternal punishment in Islam. Despite being limited to a small group of people, existence of eternal hell may still raise the question of the compatibility between God's mercy/goodness and his allowing eternal damnation for a certain group of people.

The defenders of the problem of evil – both probabilistic argument and logical argument from evil – seek to illustrate the incompatibility of the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent God with the existence of suffering and evil in the world. Simply put, they argue that suffering and evil in the world could/had to be prevented by divine goodness, wisdom, and power, if God existed. Thus, the existence of the former rules out the existence of the latter either logically or probabilistically. Apparently, the existence of eternal hell suggests eternal suffering at least for a certain group of people and the problem of hell raises the question whether God would be morally justified to consign some people to hell forever for retribution of evil for the finite crimes they committed. The problem of evil asserts that eternal suffering of people cannot be justified for any reason and cannot be compatible with God's perfect nature through the following argument:

(1) God is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent.
(2) God consigns a certain group of people in the Quran to eternal hell as the consequence of their evil actions.
(3) Consigning a certain group of people to eternal chastisement for the consequences of their finite actions is evil.
(4) If God were omnipotent, he could avoid it.
(5) If God were omniscient, he would know how to avoid it.
(6) If God were perfectly good, he would want to avoid it.
(7) God does not avoid it.
(8) God is either not omnipotent, omniscient, or perfectly good.[14]

This is a valid argument. So, if all premises are true the conclusion must follow. For a Muslim, the first two premises are true, whereas (3) is not.[15] In the rest of the article, I

will offer an argument to contest the third premise based on the characteristics of the *kâfir* described above. My argument will focus on the notions of genuine repentance in the Quran and retributive justice. I will claim that the *kâfir* forms such a character by his free will in this world that makes him incapable of having genuine repentance and thus hinders retributive justice through a finite punishment. In doing so, I will refer to the Quranic case of Pharaoh's repentance and a small thought experiment. I will also elaborate on the implications of not prescribing an eternal punishment for the *kâfir* concerning God's nature. I will argue that this would be incompatible with God's mercy.

Character formation, genuine repentance, and retributive justice

The *kâfir* forms a character by his free actions throughout his lifetime that makes him deserve an eternal punishment after his death. This seems to be the rationale behind eternal punishment according to the Quran and the classical Islamic tradition, that is, the impossibility of the retribution of the sins of the *kâfir* through a finite punishment is mainly about his irrevocable character that is formed by his insistent fight against truth, which he would never stop volitionally. Accordingly, Al-Rāzī argues that the eternal punishment concerns the *kâfir*'s being resolute in his injustice:

> A group of people argued that God's punishment is finite meaning it will end and they used the verse, 'they will tarry in [hell] for ages'. This is because the injustice of sin is finite and so its punishment with something infinite is injustice . . . There is no injustice in this because a non-believer is resolute, entrenched and bound in his belief as long as he is alive and hence, he is perpetually punished. No punishment is perpetual except on something that is perpetual. *In this way, 'the recompense is fitting.'*[16]

Similarly, Ali al-Qārī considers the chastisement in eternal hell to be proportionate to the irrevocable character of the *kâfir*, by arguing that the everlasting punishment concerns not only a retribution of the sins committed within a finite lifespan, but also the character and intentions of the *kâfir*. That is, the *kâfir* would never give up his insistent fight against the truth and acting accordingly in transgression, were he to live an eternal life (Ali Al-Qārī (2001), 1:273). Said Nursi also refers to the *kâfir*'s soul as a corrupted substance and argues that the corruption of the substance is irrevocable.

The Quran refers to this issue with the following verse:

> If you could only see, when they are made to stand before the fire, how they will say, 'If only we could be sent back, we would not reject the revelations of our Lord, but be among the believers'. No! The truth they used to hide will become all too clear to them. Even if they were brought back, they would only return to the very thing that was forbidden to them – they are such liars!

Indeed, one might raise the objection that the charge of eternal punishment appears to be based on a hypothetical assumption on the intentions of the *kâfir* in this verse, and such an assumption lacks certainty. It is also a general principle in Islam to judge people only based on their actions. But it seems to me that this verse does not aim to emphasize that the eternal punishment of the *kâfir* is justified through his probable unperformed misdeeds. It rather highlights the character of the *kâfir* who cannot show a genuine repentance since he does not mean to do so. For, according to the verse 35:37, they were given 'a life long enough to take warning if [they] were going to [repent]'. But how can we understand the genuine repentance and why does not the *kâfir*'s repentance count as a genuine

one in the Quran? Does the lack of a genuine repentance justify the eternal damnation in hell, and would not an insincere repentance suffice to save the *kâfir* from the eternal punishment if God is omnibenevolent? Let me start with the notion of genuine repentance.

The case of Pharaoh in the Quran helps us to understand the notion of genuine repentance. The Quran describes Pharaoh as a *kâfir* and a tyrant who considered himself a god (28:38). He persecuted the Children of Israel by killing every new-born male child as he saw them as a threat to his dominion. According to the Quran, he was warned by Moses, 'a noble messenger' (44:17), repeatedly through various signs (miracles) to abandon his transgression and oppression. However, this only caused him to become more obstinate in his *kufr* as well as to get harsher in his oppression. For instance, he is said to have executed his magicians in the severest way – by cutting off their hands and feet on the opposite sides and then crucifying them – because they immediately had faith in God upon seeing Moses' miracle against their magic (26:49). His arrogance is finally said to have led Pharaoh to the decision of executing the Children of Israel altogether. He pursued them with his army to the seashore where he saw them taken across the sea. As he attempted to follow them through the sea with his soldiers, he and his soldiers were taken by the waves of the sea. At the very moment of his drowning, he said, as the Quran states, that he had faith in the one God in whom the Children of Israel believed, and he was one of the 'Muslims' (10:90). Yet his repentance was not accepted.

There are a few significant points in Pharaoh's case. First, Pharaoh appears to have a belief in God's existence despite his rejection of Moses' warning as otherwise he would not appeal to God in the moment of his despair. Second, he had fought against God's messenger fiercely until the moment when he knew he faced his end. The Quran points towards the insincerity of such a repentance in 4:18 by stating that 'It is not true repentance when people continue to do evil until death confronts them and then say, "Now I repent", nor when they die defiant'. Third, he does not repent by expressing any regret for what he had done. For instance, prophet Jonah, as narrated in the Quran, faces a moment of despair under sea after having failed to act in accordance with God's orders. Unlike Pharaoh, however, he is said to have immediately realized his mistake and repented by calling out 'There is no God but You, glory be to You, I was wrong' (21:87) at the time of his despair. So, according to the Quran, the *kâfir* forms a character by his actions that makes it impossible for him to repent genuinely for what he did.

But it is still unclear whether a finite punishment would not be sufficient for the *kâfir* despite his incapability of genuine repentance. Let me elaborate on this question with a small thought experiment. Consider a planet P1 where people live for 200 years and then are transferred to another planet P2 to live for thousands of years. The life conditions in P2 are determined according to the character of the persons that they form in P1 with their free actions. The state grants a prosperous life to virtuous people. They enjoy each other's company in P2. The people who commit evil actions and form an evil character have different conditions in P2 varying according to the degree of the corruption of their characters. The place they will reside in P2 is separated from the place of the virtuous people and they endure either temporary or permanent punishment there. The constitution envisages severe punishments to be executed in P2 for dreadful crimes committed in P1. There are two types of criminal people: the people whose crimes can be retributed and those people whose crimes cannot be retributed through a finite punishment. The years of punishment for the first group of people vary according to the severity of their crimes. The second group of people have permanent punishment in P2. The latter category applies only those people whose characters become irrevocably evil as a result of their actions in P1. A person's character is irrevocably evil only if he commits dreadful actions throughout his life and never stops committing evil actions

by his own will insofar as he has an opportunity to do so. Additionally, he never feels and would never feel any genuine regret for his evil actions.

John and James used to live in P1. They have completely normal noetic and psychological structures but possess different degrees of criminal minds as a result of their previous free choices. They committed various atrocities. However, there is a critical distinction between them. John never felt any regret for the crimes he committed and cares about nothing except his own desires and interest, whereas James feels often guilty for his misdeeds/for acting against what he believes to be morally right, and this feeling causes him to have more difficulty in engaging in an act of crime compared to John. John plans to kidnap some children to kill them, being perfectly aware that his plan is horrendously evil. He asks help from James in arranging transportation. Being desperately in need of money, James accepts his offer without questioning the purpose behind his action. Despite being aware of the horrific nature of his plans and the consequences of his actions, John, with a false hope of getting away with it, still commits the horrific crime he planned with James's indirect help. The families of the children who were killed by John are left in deep sorrow and pain for the rest of their lives in P1. After clearly seeing the result of his help and how much pain it caused, James regrets deeply, whereas John keeps inflicting harm on others for the rest of his life without showing any sign of regret.

After John and James complete their stay in P1, they are transferred to P2. Upon their arrival, they are brought before a judge to determine the conditions that they will have in P2. Every single action of theirs in P1 has already been recorded for the judicial process in P2. The victims of their crimes, including families of the children who were killed, are also present in the court. Both John and James state that they regret the crimes they committed in P. In order to discern the extent of their regret, chips are inserted in John's and James's brains that expose their characters and make them unable to hide their real emotions, thoughts, and intentions when asked. Having the honesty chip inserted, John confesses that he has no regret for his crimes at all but feels only joy, particularly whenever he remembers what he did to the children and would not hesitate to do it again if he had another chance. James, on the other hand, expresses his regret for many of his actions, yet he confesses that his weakness, which is a result of his bad habits, would lead him to repeat some of his misdeeds. James is sentenced to a thousand years of punishment for purification and retribution. James shows the capacity for spiritual purification, by genuinely regretting his misdeeds. So, the punishment is meant to purify his soul, on the one hand. It is foreseen by the all-knowing and wise judges that 300 years of punishment would suffice for this purpose. On the other hand, purification is not the only purpose of the punishment. There is a need for the retribution of his crimes for their victims. So, he is consigned to additional 700 years of punishment to this end. After his punishment ends, James will join the virtuous people and be granted a lifelong prosperous life by the state.

John's case is different from James's case. He is sentenced to thousands of years of punishment without parole. This is because he formed such a character that makes him incapable of truly regretting and repenting his crimes and the incapability of genuine repentance is a hindrance both to soul purification and to retributive justice through a limited punishment. For, the intention and desire to become a good person is among the necessary conditions of the soul's purification for free agents. If a free agent does not desire to become a good person by his own will, no punishment could make him desire this by an external force. Similarly, repentance for evil actions that one committed is a necessary condition for becoming a good person. It seems to me that retributive justice cannot be provided through a limited punishment for a person who cannot regret his crimes, since the victims would never feel compensated with a finite punishment unless they see the regret of their oppressor. Consider that John is faced with the families of the

victims after a thousand years of punishment and asked whether he regrets what he did. Having inserted the honesty chip, he does not show any sign of regret for his horrendous action, his only sorrow being his inability to get away with his crime without a punishment. This being so, the victims would not want him to join the virtuous people and to be granted by the state an eternally prosperous life among them.

There might be two possible objections to this view. First, one may question the compatibility between retributive justice and divine mercy/love, by claiming that God's mercy and love require the ultimate salvation of everyone. However, as Said Nursi argues, love and mercy shown to vicious and cruel people mean oppression of innocent and virtuous people. So, unconditioned mercy and love do not seem to be coherent notions and genuine mercy to the innocent people entails the retributive justice for the oppressors. Furthermore, prescribing a limited punishment in hell followed by an everlastingly prosperous life among virtuous people for the group of people who act against the truth by committing horrendous evil when occasion serves is incompatible with God's mercy for the following reasons. This would not only encourage the people with evil intentions to commit transgression, but would also make them, and the virtuous people, fail to appreciate the severity of the sin committed. This, in turn, would weaken the struggle of the good people against committing sin. But a merciful God would want to prevent people from acting in the wrong way. As a second objection, annihilation instead of everlasting damnation in hell could be the alternative option that the critic of eternal hell would offer. However, it seems to me that the prescription of annihilation as the punishment for *kufr* could contribute to the transgression of the enemies of truth. More precisely, had a person of such character known that he would be annihilated for the crimes he committed, he would want to spend his time before annihilation to commit as many atrocities as possible because annihilation does not come in degrees with respect to the amount and quality of crimes and the person has no hope of getting freed from the suffering. So, their actions would cause more suffering for the innocent people. Considering the first two objections, a third one may be raised as to whether God could prescribe the eternal punishment only to dissuade people from committing evil actions but would not ultimately carry it out. However, this would suggest attributing to God a lie, something which is totally against the essence of Islam and again would hinder retributive justice. Given all these issues, it would not be compatible with God's mercy to prescribe either a temporary punishment followed by a prosperous eternal life or a complete annihilation after death for those people with an evil nature.

Finally, one may question the accuracy of the analogy between John and the *kâfir* in two respects. First, can the *kâfir*'s crimes ever be as horrendously evil as those of John? Indeed, it can even be much worse, particularly with the development of the material conditions that allow the severest atrocities such as the murder and suffering of millions of children, innocent women, and men in the wars for the power struggle of a small group of people. Apart from the finite suffering that the *kâfir* inflicts on the people, it seems to be a greater evil that he, as in the case of Iblis, leads people to live a life that ultimately qualifies them for a permanent and even eternal punishment. Destroying the eternal life of people seems to be as at least as evil as making them suffer in their finite lives. Second, the punishment in our analogy is not eternal. However, as the analogy also suggests, the amount of punishment only matters for those people who can genuinely regret their crimes and can be purified through punishment. It would not matter how many thousands of years John would endure punishment; the retributive justice would never be provided due to his character. Had people lived in P2 an eternal life, John's punishment would last eternally.

So, I have argued, as opposed to Aijaz's view, that the Quranic prescription of the eternal punishment is limited to a small group of people who choose not to act on their belief

in truth out of perverse reason and commit evil actions. The rationale behind the eternal chastisement of this group of people seems to be associated with their irrevocable character, which they form through their free choices, and this makes them incapable of genuine repentance. This, in turn, hinders the retributive justice for their evil actions and granting them an eternally prosperous life would mean oppression for their victims, being incompatible with divine mercy.

Notes

1. For instance, see: Rowe (1979), McCloskey (1960), Mackie (1955).
2. See also: Buckareff and Plug (2013).
3. I will be using the phrase 'a group of people' in a broad sense throughout the article to incorporate *jinn* (*jann*), which is the other rational species mentioned in the Quran to have freedom of will and moral accountability, by including *mu'min* and *kâfir* members.
4. For the quotations from the Quran, I use the English translation by Abdel Haleem (2010) throughout the text.
5. Smith's reading of the notion of *kufr* is not quite a novel interpretation of the term, but as he also suggests, it is only a realization of its original connotation. For instance, Al-Baghawī defines *kufr* as the concealment of the truth as a consequence of the volitional rejection of the truth in his Quranic exegesis (al-Baghawī (1988), 1:64).
6. Izutsu's respective assertion is as follows:

> *Îmân* . . . and *kufr* . . . – or the corresponding personal forms, mu'min . . . and kâfir . . . – are two of the most important terms in the Koran. They constitute the very center of the whole Koranic thought . . . The Koranic system reveals a very simple structure based on a clearcut distinction between Muslims and Kâfirs. All Muslims are members of the community . . . And they stand in sharp opposition to those who . . . refuse to listen seriously to Muhammad's teaching and to believe in God. In this simple structure there is no place for confusion or ambiguity. The ummah or (Muslim) community . . . divides men neatly into two opposing sections. Man is either Muslim or *Kâfir*. (Izutsu (1965), 7–8)

7. See for instance: 12:105; 13:2–4; 22:22, 46; 25:74; 27:93; 96:1.
8. For instance, see al-Taftazānī (1998), 263; al-Shahrastānī (1993), 115.
9. For instance, see al-Māturīdī (1970), 137; al-Nasafī (2014), 100.
10. For a thorough analysis of the Islamic supersessionalism without a triumphalist reading and thus without presuming ultimately an exclusivist position for the salvation of the People of the Book, see Winter (1999).
11. In addition to al-Ghazālī, Khalil includes three other prominent Islamic scholars, namely, Ibn Arabī, Ibn Taymiyyah, and Rashid Rida, and eloquently explores their inclusivist positions on the issue of salvation.
12. As Khalil points out, al-Ghazālī neither explicitly excludes nor includes the non-Muslims except the People of the Book under this third category.
13. Chowdhury's analysis of the discussions in the classical Islamic tradition concerning the extent of inculpable rejection suggests a similar conclusion in pointing towards the restrictive scope of damnation to a certain group of people and the epistemic lack or ambiguity's being the basis of the inculpable rejection. See Chowdhury (2021), 157–171.
14. For a similar formulation of the argument, see Adams (1993), 301–303.
15. Even though the eternity of the hell is the prevalent view among the Islamic scholars, some scholars, including Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, argue that hell is not eternal (Abrahamov (2002)).
16. Al-Rāzī, Mafātih al-Ghayb, as cited in Chowdhury (2021), 136.

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