



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The unreality of traditional Islamic theism's views on belief, providence, and eschatology: a rejoinder to Tabur

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Abstract

In a previous work, I argue that traditional Islamic theism's understanding of the world, when juxtaposed with key facts of our world's religious diversity, is implausible. On this understanding, roughly, the truth of *tawhīd* (Islamic monotheism) is universally evident, as is belief in its truth. Faithful Muslims act appropriately on knowledge of *tawhīd* and are rewarded with heaven, whereas non-Muslims culpably refuse to do so and are eternally punished in hell. Such a view of the world, I argue, is not borne out by empirical observation and philosophical reflection. In a recent article, Ayşenur Ünügür Tabur criticizes this argument, presenting a number of objections to it. In this rejoinder, I argue that her objections, which primarily consist of misstatements and irrelevancies, fail to refute my argument. Since traditional Islamic theism's understanding of the world includes the view that some people will be eternally punished in hell, Tabur augments her discussion of my argument by attempting to solve the Problem of Hell. In my rejoinder to Tabur, I further argue that her proffered solution to this problem is woefully inadequate.

Keywords: Islam; Tabur; Problem of Hell; religious diversity

Introduction

An air of unreality surrounds traditional Islamic theism's account of the demographics of religious belief in our world. By 'traditional Islamic theism', I mean the doctrinal core of Sunni orthodoxy as primarily understood in the Qurʾān, *aḥādīth* (reports of sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), and the general tenor in classical Muslim interpretations of these sacred texts. From this religious vantage point, the account of the global religious landscape, put simply, goes something like this:

Everyone in the world believes that Islamic monotheism is true. Only faithful Muslims practically adhere to this belief. Non-Muslims refuse to do so and are culpable rejecters of faith. There is no non-belief in the truth of Islamic monotheism because God has providentially ordered His creation to make its truth evident to all. Faithful Muslims, individuals who practically adhere to their belief in Islamic monotheism, are rewarded with heaven. Non-Muslims, individuals who refuse to

adhere practically to their belief in Islamic monotheism and culpably reject faith, are punished in hell.

Among Muslim thinkers who defend traditional Islamic theism, there is, to be sure, substantive discussion and refinement of this account. Still, most of it is in the service of upholding its essence. For many outside Islam and some reflective Muslims, it is undoubtedly difficult to believe that this account accurately reflects reality. It strains credulity for several reasons, not least of which is the phenomenon of religious diversity. For instance, despite all appearances to the contrary, are we really to think that Buddhists in Cambodia, followers of Shinto in Japan, and secular humanists in Norway believe that Islamic monotheism is true, culpably reject it in their actions, and are bound for hell?

In ‘Belief, Providence and Eschatology: Some Philosophical Problems in Islamic Theism’ (Aijaz 2008; hereafter abbreviated as ‘BPE’), I contend that viewing the world’s religious diversity using traditional Islamic theism as a lens creates serious difficulties stemming from empirical observation and philosophical reflection. More specifically, I argue that many reasonable people, including plenty of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, atheists, etc., do not believe that Islamic monotheism is true, and there are many to whom its truth is not evident, even after sustained reflection. I further argue that it is implausible to think such non-Muslims culpably reject Islamic faith and are bound for hell. I conclude my argument in BPE by stating that traditional Islamic theism’s understanding of the demographics of religious belief in the world ought to be rejected. This rejection need not involve an outright dismissal of the Islamic religion. It can, instead, be seen as clearing the ground to investigate more plausible Islamic responses to religious diversity.

In response to my argument in BPE, Ayşenur Ünügür Tabur presents an Islamic apologetic that principally contests my analysis of how non-Muslims are perceived in traditional Islamic theism (Tabur 2023). Additionally, even though I do not include a direct assessment of the Problem of Hell as part of my argument, she extends her apologetic efforts to show that God’s existence is compatible with the eternal suffering of some people in hell. In this article, I argue that Tabur’s Islamic apologetic fails to accomplish its intended aims. I will first reply to her criticisms of my core argument in BPE. Then, I will address her attempt to solve the Problem of Hell.

My core argument in BPE

In BPE, I present an argument against traditional Islamic theism that hinges on the concepts of belief, providence, and eschatology found in the Qur’ān. Here, I will give a summary of the argument.

A straightforward reading of the Qur’ān, which takes its apparent meanings at face value, gives us a picture of the world in which the concepts of belief, providence, and eschatology feature prominently (BPE, 233–242). In this picture, all human beings believe that *tawḥīd* (frequently and roughly translated into English as ‘Islamic monotheism’), arguably the most essential doctrine in Islam, is true. This includes human beings who have *’īmān* (faith) as well as those who do not; the Qur’ān refers to the latter as individuals who are guilty of *kufr*, a term that it uses throughout its verses as the antonym of *’īmān*. Central to the Qur’ānic notion of *kufr* is the act of intentionally ‘concealing’ or ‘covering up’ what one knows to be true. The reference to knowledge here is significant. If *S* knows that *p*, then *S* also believes that *p* (since believing that *p* is a necessary condition for knowing that *p*, a point generally agreed upon by epistemologists). In the Qur’ān, the *kāfir*, one who is guilty of *kufr*, knows that many religious propositions are true, including those about the truth of *tawḥīd*, but culpably rejects them in practice. Since the *kāfir* knows that *tawḥīd* is true, he or she also believes that it is true, as does the one who has

ʾimān, the *muʾmin*. Knowing that *tawḥīd* is true does not, however, entail believing in *tawḥīd*, where 'believing in' is understood in a *fiducial* sense.¹ Herein lies a crucial difference between the *kāfir* and the *muʾmin*. The *muʾmin* practically adheres to the knowledge of *tawḥīd* by conforming to the fundamental divine imperative to worship God alone. In contrast, the *kāfir* does not, violating this imperative in some blasphemous manner.² Although the Qurʾān details significant practical differences between the two, these responses are nevertheless conceptually connected to epistemic and doxastic states shared by the *muʾmin* and *kāfir*: knowledge and belief that *tawḥīd* is true. *ʾImān* and *kufr*, both of which entail the belief that *tawḥīd* is true, jointly exhaust the possible stances mentioned in the Qurʾān that one can adopt about God. It follows from this that, according to the Qurʾān, everyone believes that *tawḥīd* is true.

The Qurʾānic explanation for the universality of belief in the truth of *tawḥīd* is that God has created a providentially unambiguous world. Our world exhibits 'signs' or *ʾāyāt*, which are ubiquitous, unambiguously present for all, and evince the truth of *tawḥīd*. The faithful (Muslims) respond appropriately to religious knowledge obtained through these signs, while the rejectors of faith (non-Muslims) do so inappropriately. Whether the formation of religious knowledge in these cases is inferential or non-inferential appears incidental to the Qurʾānic narrative, as its primary emphasis in discussing the signs of God is that all human beings know that *tawḥīd* is true.

Since all human beings possess knowledge of *tawḥīd*, there is no inculpable non-compliance with it due to factors such as ignorance, conscientious rejection, etc. If one is not a *muʾmin* (a Muslim) who responds appropriately to this knowledge by practically adhering to it (e.g. through worshipping God alone), one must be a *kāfir* (a non-Muslim) who culpably refuses to adhere to it in practice (e.g. choosing to worship an idol instead of, or alongside, the true God). In the Qurʾānic account of eschatology, such culpable rejection is a characteristic feature of non-Muslims eternally punished in hell. On the other hand, faithful Muslims rewarded with entry into heaven are described as having practically adhered to their knowledge of *tawḥīd*. How one responds to the knowledge of *tawḥīd* undergirds the salvific exclusivism derived from a plain reading of the Qurʾān.

In BPE, I argue that this basic Qurʾānic picture of the world featuring the concepts of belief, providence, and eschatology is false. My criticisms include the following three points, which are interconnected. First, belief in the truth of *tawḥīd* is evidently not universal. Second, our world is not providentially unambiguous but, instead, is religiously ambiguous. Third, one cannot reasonably maintain that all non-Muslims know the truth of *tawḥīd*, culpably refuse to act on its truth, and merit eternal punishment in hell (BPE, 242–247). Given its strong association with the basic Qurʾānic picture I discuss in BPE, I also present these criticisms as a critique of traditional Islamic theism. As my criticisms are directed against a particular *interpretation* of Islam, even if a traditionalist one, I conclude my discussion in BPE by exploring how one might reinterpret the Qurʾānic concepts of belief, providence, and eschatology in a way that is congruent with our understanding of the world and at least some aspects of the Islamic religion (BPE, 247–249).

An assessment of Tabur's criticisms of my core argument in BPE

Tabur's criticisms of my core argument in BPE rest, by my count, on five main objections that can be distilled from her discussion. In assessing her criticisms, I will list each objection and my response.

Tabur's first objection begins by noting that my discussion of the Qurʾānic account of *kufr* focuses only on a necessary but not sufficient condition for *kufr* to occur. This necessary condition is having knowledge of *tawḥīd*. From this correct observation, she

misattributes an inference to me, stating I '[conclude] that all non-Muslims are deemed to be *kāfir* in the Quran for their rejection of *tawhīd* in their actions' (Tabur 2023, 4). In BPE, I argue that an analysis of Qur'ānic verses in which *kufr*, the *kāfir*, and the *kuffār* are discussed reveals that knowledge of *tawhīd* is a necessary condition for the applicability of these concepts. I do not, however, present any argument to conclude that, in the Qur'ān, those who practically reject *tawhīd* are *eo ipso* guilty of *kufr*. Instead, I look at Qur'ānic data that either explicitly identifies cases of *kufr* (e.g. the case of Satan in 2:34) or else implies it (e.g. the case of Abraham's condemnation of idol worship in 21:51–70 strongly suggests that devotion to idols is *kufr*). When such confirmed cases of *kufr* obtained from Qur'ānic data are analysed, it is clear that possessing knowledge of *tawhīd* is common among them. Tabur's claim that my analysis of *kufr* is 'self-referentially incoherent' due to foregoing an investigation of the sufficient conditions for *kufr* to obtain is, therefore, ill-considered (Tabur 2023, 4). In BPE, I focus on knowledge of *tawhīd* as a necessary condition for *kufr* to support two key points: (1) according to the Qur'ān, belief in the truth of *tawhīd* is universal – even the *kāfir* believes that it is true (BPE, 240); and, (2) one cannot legitimately apply the Qur'ānic account of *kufr* to non-Muslims in our world who do not believe that *tawhīd* is true (BPE, 246–247).

In the Qur'ānic narrative, as I note in BPE, the only alternative to being a *mu'min* (Muslim) is being a *kāfir* (non-Muslim). Tabur's second objection is that I do not offer any textual justification for this claim other than a passage from Toshihiko Izutsu's *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology*. In this book, Izutsu explains that the Qur'ān assigns humanity into two categories through a simple disjunction: a person is either Muslim or *kāfir* (Izutsu 1965, 7–8). Tabur does not contest Izutsu's analysis but claims it only distinguishes between those who accept Islam and those who reject it, not between those who act on *tawhīd* and those who do not (Tabur 2023, 4–5). But this point is neither here nor there, as it leaves intact my point that the Qur'ān portrays only the Muslim as a *mu'min* and only the non-Muslim as a *kāfir*. The *mu'min-kāfir* dichotomy pervades the Qur'ānic narrative and is made clear in several verses, such as Qur'ān 64:2: 'It is He who created you, and among you is the *disbeliever* [*kāfir*], and among you is the *believer* [*mu'min*]. And Allah, of what you do, is Seeing' (emphasis mine).³ Elsewhere, Izutsu explains that this dichotomy is plain to see in the Qur'ān:

That *kufr* is the exact antithesis of 'belief [*īmān*] is a point which requires no laboring . . . [I]t is this basic antithesis between *īmān* and *kufr* that furnishes the ultimate yardstick by which all human qualities are divided, in Islamic outlook, into two radically opposed moral categories . . . Everywhere in the Qur'ān this fundamental opposition is perceptible. (Izutsu 2002, 187)⁴

As indicated previously, the *mu'min* practically adheres to the knowledge of *tawhīd*, whereas the *kāfir* does not.

Tabur raises a third objection to my argument in BPE, motivating it by (mis)using my analysis of *tawhīd*. She begins this particular objection by repeating the claim she misattributes to me in her first objection, viz., that 'the Quran labels all non-Muslims *kāfir* solely based on their practical rejection of *tawhīd*' (Tabur 2023, 5; emphasis mine). As I have explained in response to that objection, this is not what I claim or argue. Tabur alleges that my position is 'self-refuting' given my understanding of *tawhīd*. Why? Because, she says, there are several Jews and Christians who believe in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect Creator of the universe (a belief that Tabur claims 'corresponds to belief in *tawhīd*' as described by me) and act on it. This fact, Tabur goes on to object, means that such individuals should be referred to as Muslims, according to my

analysis (Tabur 2023, 4). Not at all. Let me explain what has gone wrong here for Tabur. She mistakenly thinks that I am committed to the following conditional:

(1) If *S* practically rejects the knowledge of *tawhīd*, then *S* is a *kāfir* (non-Muslim).

Using (1), Tabur compounds her mistaken understanding of my position by thinking that I must, in virtue of a supposed logical consequence, be further committed to another conditional:

(2) If *S* does not practically reject (i.e. acts on) the knowledge of *tawhīd*, then *S* is not a *kāfir* (i.e. is a Muslim).

Tabur thinks that since many Jews and Christians meet the description contained in the antecedent of (2), it follows that they are Muslims. She submits that this conclusion is problematic for my analysis. Unfortunately, there are several errors here. To begin with, (2) does not validly follow from (1), being a clear case of the fallacy of denying the antecedent. In any case, as I have already explained, I am not committed to (1). Furthermore, Tabur badly misrepresents my analysis of *tawhīd* by discarding the *theological* meaning of the term I use and instead substituting it with one that refers to *generic monotheism*. The classical theological understanding of *tawhīd*, at least in Sunni orthodoxy, sees it as comprised of three inextricable elements: (1) *tawhīd al-rubūbiyah* (the oneness of God); (2) *tawhīd al-ulūhiyyah* (nothing other than God has any right to be worshipped); and, (3) *tawhīd al-asmā' wa-ṣ-ṣifāt* (God's names and qualities are unique to Him). Instead of discussing this understanding of *tawhīd*, which I make explicit in BPE (233–244), she takes *tawhīd* to mean belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect Creator. When *tawhīd* is properly understood in its classical theological sense, however, one cannot, from the perspective of traditional Islamic theism, maintain that Jews and Christians act appropriately on it. The Qur'ān is clear on this point. Here are a few examples:

They have certainly disbelieved who say that Allah is Christ, the son of Mary. (5:17)

They have certainly disbelieved who say, 'Allah is the third of three.' And there is no god except one God. And if they do not desist from what they are saying, there will surely afflict the disbelievers among them a painful punishment. (5:73)

The Jews say, 'Ezra is the son of Allah'; and the Christians say, 'The Messiah is the son of Allah.' That is their statement from their mouths; they imitate the saying of those who disbelieved [before them]. May Allah destroy them; how are they deluded? They have taken their scholars and monks as lords besides Allah, and [also] the Messiah, the son of Mary. And they were not commanded except to worship one God; there is no deity except Him. Exalted is He above whatever they associate with Him. (9:30–31)

The fundamental Qur'ānic complaint against Jews and Christians is that they commit the unpardonable offence of *shirk* (associating other things with God in worship):

Indeed, Allah does not forgive association with Him, but He forgives what is less than that for whom He wills. And he who associates others with Allah has certainly fabricated a tremendous sin. (4:48)

Consequently, Tabur's third objection to my argument is off the mark because of her compounded misstatements and errors in describing my account of *tawhīd*.

Tabur misstates another aspect of my argument in BPE to advance a fourth objection. She alleges I incorporate, as a premise for my argument, the view that belief in *tawhīd* is non-inferential, according to Islam. I do not, Tabur objects, support this view by referencing Islamic sources (Tabur 2023, 5). But nowhere in my discussion do I commit myself to a specific Islamic view of the causal process giving rise to belief in the truth of *tawhīd*.⁵ I merely note that all human beings have evidence for its truth, according to the Qur'ān. Deciding whether the Qur'ān regards the truth of *tawhīd* as basically (i.e. non-inferentially) or inferentially evident is not necessary for my argument, as it is tangential to the point I want to emphasize. In the Qur'ān, the universality of belief in the truth of *tawhīd* is connected to the universality of God's signs in the world (BPE, 241). Still, I will engage with Tabur's response to the position she misattributes to me, as doing so will reveal additional insights useful for the present discussion.

Tabur maintains that the mainstream Islamic view – informed by the Qur'ān and its interpreters in the Ash'arī and Māturīdī schools – regards belief in the truth of *tawhīd* to be inferentially evident. More specifically, it is derived from the evidence provided by creation. But this derivation, she further maintains, may not be possible or incumbent for some individuals. She thinks this position is warranted in light of Al-Ash'arī's and Al-Māturīdī's views about religious knowledge (Tabur 2023, 5). 'Despite accepting its metaphysical possibility', writes Tabur, 'the Ash'arī view rejects [the] necessity [of reasoning to the truth of *tawhīd*] and therefore the culpability of any person without her access to the divine message sent through prophets' (Tabur 2023, 5). Describing it this way, however, doesn't make clear that what is being rejected is the *moral necessity* (i.e. *moral obligation*) of reasoning to the truth of *tawhīd*. What is not being rejected is *epistemic necessity*, which Boris Kment provides a helpful conception of (in relation to empirical evidence):

[A] proposition *P* is *epistemically necessary for an agent A* just in case the empirical evidence *A* possesses and ideal reasoning (i.e. reasoning unrestricted by cognitive limitations) are sufficient to rule out $\sim P$. (Kment 2021)

Understood in this way, a proposition *P* can be epistemically necessary for an agent *A* without *A* having any moral obligation to believe that *P*. Aisha's belief that *shadows are caused by a body coming between light and a surface*, for example, may be epistemically necessary for her without Aisha having any moral obligation to acquire this belief. This distinction between epistemic necessity and moral necessity (or moral obligation) is made clear by Al-Shahrastānī, whom Tabur references in describing Al-Ash'arī's position, in the following remarks:

Ash'arī [says] that whatever is of obligation is so because of revelation. Reason does not impose any obligation, nor does it declare anything good or bad. *Knowledge of God is, indeed, acquired by reason*, but it is through revelation that it becomes of obligation to know him. (Al-Shahrastānī 2014, 86; emphasis mine)

Perusing Al-Ash'arī's writings, we can see that he is committed to the epistemic necessity of belief in the truth of *tawhīd* based on the empirical evidence provided by creation. Here is how Abdullah Saeed describes the argument for the existence and nature of God that we find in the opening chapter of Al-Ash'arī's *Kitāb al-Luma'*:

[W]hen human beings reflect on the way they were conceived, how they grew from one state to another until they reached perfection, and realized that they could not

have instigated or performed this, *they will be in no doubt of a creator who is all-powerful, all-knowing, willing, wise and all-merciful*. The human being who has a sound intellect, according to al-Ash'ari, would find it inconceivable that these acts were brought about by chance or autonomously, since their manifestly deliberate choice and perfection would deny that claim, pointing instead to their creator. (Saeed 2006, 67; emphasis mine)⁶

For Al-Ash'arī, knowledge of *tawhīd* is secured by reflecting on oneself and the world. There is no suggestion whatsoever in his writings that one may reasonably remain ignorant of God's existence and nature after such reflection or that contrary viewpoints on these matters can be rationally accepted (even as a serious possibility) after doing so. His position on *tawhīd*, therefore, presents no obstacle to and aligns with my account of the Qur'ān's description of the world as providentially unambiguous.

Granted that Al-Ash'arī holds *tawhīd* to be epistemically necessary for human beings, there remains the question of whether he also thinks the acquisition of knowledge about it is morally necessary (obligatory) for us without revelation. Tabur believes he does not. While I grant that this is a plausible interpretation of Al-Ash'arī's position, it is misleading to refer to it, as Tabur does, simply as 'the Al-Ash'arī view'. Several thinkers from the Ash'arī school affirm that human beings have a fundamental moral obligation to reflect on the signs of God that lead to knowledge about Him. Al-Bāqillānī is one example (see, e.g. Abrahamov 1998, 60–62; Mihirig 2022, 435). As Richard Frank shows, although there is general agreement among the Ash'arītes that knowing God is obligatory, there is no consensus among them regarding the character of this knowledge or its prior conditions and requirements (Frank 1989, 47, 45, 45 n. 21).

As for Al-Māturīdī, Tabur acknowledges that he maintains human beings are both able to derive and responsible for deriving knowledge of God from the evidence of creation (Tabur 2023, 5). She thinks this is incongruent with my argument, as Al-Māturīdī's position 'does 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' (Tabur 2023, 5). As previously noted, however, my discussion is not cemented to this particular interpretation of Islamic religious epistemology.

The main reason for Tabur's insistence that knowledge of *tawhīd* is inferential according to mainstream Islam is to show that there is conceptual space within Islamic theology to allow inculpable non-compliance with its truth; a person may be unable to reason about God or have no moral obligation to do so (Tabur 2023, 5). The only evidence she provides to support this view is an appeal to the Ash'arīte school of theology. As I have pointed out, however, not all Ash'arīte thinkers hold the same view regarding one's obligation to reflect on creation. Al-Māturīdī does not assist Tabur either since his position is consistent with my portrayal of the Qur'ānic worldview. In fact, as Abdurrahman Ali Mihirig observes, the obligation to reason about God appears to be the *norm* among all the major schools of Islamic theology (*kalām*):

Since believing without proof was nearly universally condemned by the theological schools of Islam, it was a moral obligation on every capable person to reflect rationally and provide a proof for the existence of God . . . According to all of the major schools of Islamic theology (Ash'arī, Māturīdī, Mu'tazilī, etc.), human beings are obligated to inquire into the doctrines of revelation and to believe them with proof. One of those beliefs, of course, is the belief that God exists. *This means that everyone who meets the criteria for moral obligation (any sane adult capable of reasoning) must reflect on all of their beliefs and come to have knowledge of them, that is, to know why they are true.* (Mihirig 2022, 431, 433; emphasis mine)

Mihirig's observation here is true more broadly speaking in classical Sunni thought. In Abū Ja'far Aḥmad Al-Ṭaḥāwī's acclaimed and widely accepted Sunni creed, for instance, one finds the following:

[T]he majority of Muslims argued that knowing Allah is obligatory. They differed, however, over the means to acquiring this knowledge . . . The vast majority of theologians opined that the only way to know Allah Most High is by means of contemplation and deduction, as knowledge of His Most High's existence is not self-evident and therefore requires evidence . . . It is . . . necessary to adduce rational proofs . . . The way to prove His Most High's existence is either by [deducing from] the possibility of the existence of the universe, or its origination, or both; each of which relates to substances or accidents. (Al-Ṭaḥāwī 2020, 10; emphasis mine)

To refute my argument in BPE, Tabur must show a basis in traditional Islamic theism for a person being reasonable in not acquiring knowledge of *tawḥīd* or having no moral obligation to do so. This would also provide her with a basis to reject my claim that traditional Islamic theism adopts salvific exclusivism: only Muslims (who practically adhere to the knowledge of *tawḥīd*) will end up in heaven, while non-Muslims (who do not practically adhere to the knowledge of *tawḥīd*) will be eternally consigned to hell (BPE, 241–242). As I point out in my brief discussion of salvation in Islam, the Qurʾān contains some passages that suggest an inclusivist attitude on this topic, but the dominant Islamic view is that these verses have been abrogated by Qurʾān 3:85 (BPE, 242). This verse states:

And whoever desires other than Islam as religion – never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers. (Qurʾān 3:85)

So far, as I have shown, nothing in Tabur's objections indicates that traditional Islamic theism allows a person to fail in acquiring knowledge of *tawḥīd* reasonably or inculpably. There is, I grant, some recognition in mainstream Islam that a person may be excused for failing to acquire this knowledge due to insanity or being a child, despite neither of these conditions being mentioned in the Qurʾān.⁷ This does not, however, have any significant impact on my argument. All its key points remain unaffected if we adjust the category of people to whom it is relevant by focusing only on mentally competent adults.

In what I will classify as her fifth objection to my argument in BPE, Tabur presents a discussion centred on Jews and Christians (whom the Qurʾān refers to as *Ahl al-kitāb* or 'People of the Book') as a potential counterexample to my framing of the Qurʾānic picture. Her main points in this discussion are the following: (1) the Qurʾān separates the People of the Book into two categories: those who have faith and those who are *kuffār*; (2) only the *kuffār* among the People of the Book will be eternally punished in hell; (3) verse 3:85 in the Qurʾān must be understood contextually as addressing only the *kuffār* among a specific faction of the People of the Book in the historical past and not all of humanity; (4) the reference to 'Islam' in Qurʾān 3:85 is not a reference to the historical religion brought by the Prophet Muhammad but instead to a broader, transhistorical term that refers to the religion of all the prophets; and, (5) Al-Ghazālī defends a model of salvific inclusivism in which some people who do not accept the Qurʾānic message can be saved from eternal punishment in hell (Tabur 2023, 7–9).

Central to points (1) and (2) is Tabur's claim that the Qurʾān depicts some individuals among the People of the Book as people of faith. As I concede in my discussion, there are a few Qurʾānic verses, such as 5:69, which suggest salvation is open to people from other religions because of their faith in God. Tabur cites 5:69 as well:

Indeed, those who have believed [in Prophet Muhammad] and those [before Him] who were Jews or Sabians or Christians – those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness – no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve. (Qurʾān 5:69)

The consensus among classical Qurʾānic exegetes is that this verse refers to faith understood as the appropriate response to the unadulterated monotheism at the heart of humanity's primordial religion – Islam. Saiyad Fareed Ahmad and Saiyad Salahuddin Ahmad elaborate on this understanding of 'Islam' as follows:

[T]o follow religion is to . . . submit to and know our Creator, the One and Only God . . . [F]or God there has only been and will only be one eternal, primordial, and revealed religion – that of *Islam*, or peaceful submission to the Will of God. Whether it is Adam, Noah, Solomon, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Moses, David, Joseph, Jesus or Muhammad, they are all part of one great family – that of Muslims, or those who practice Islam. (Ahmad and Ahmad 2004, 130–131)

Taken this way, 'Islam' is not identical to the historical and reified Islam preached by the Prophet Muhammad. Rather, as the Ahmads explain, it is God's only true religion, which predates, but also includes, Muhammad's advocacy of it in seventh-century Arabia. Those who follow this primordial religion, which consists of peaceful submission to the Will of God, are called 'Muslims', as are followers of Muhammad's religion. Several Qurʾānic verses attest to this as a legitimate interpretation of 'Islam'. Here are just two:

He has ordained for you of religion what He enjoined upon Noah and that which We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], and what We enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus – to establish the religion and not be divided therein. (Qurʾān 42:13)

Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian, but he was one inclining towards truth, a Muslim [submitting to Allah]. And he was not of the polytheists. (Qurʾān 3:67)

To keep things clear, I will use 'Islam^P' to refer to Islam understood as humanity's primordial religion, and 'Islam^H' to refer to the reified, historical version of Islam^P preached by the Prophet Muhammad. If Qurʾān 5:69 is seen within the framework of Islam^P, then it does not provide evidence that Jews and Christians *conventionally understood* have faith in God. The Jews and Christians mentioned in this verse are among the faithful followers of humanity's primordial religion. They are really 'Muslims', not in the sense that they follow Islam^H, but because they respond appropriately to the knowledge of *tawhīd* that is foundational to Islam^P. Tabur may think otherwise, holding that the positive reference is to conventional Judaism and Christianity. In that case, she then has to explain why the Qurʾān explicitly condemns Jewish and Christian practices (e.g. saying that God has a son, taking scholars and monks as lords besides God, etc.) and states that they constitute disbelief (see my earlier discussion of Tabur's attempt to argue that Jews and Christians practically conform to *tawhīd*). Muslim literature penned by advocates of traditional Islamic theism is replete with explanations of how Christians and Jews are culpable for their non-compliance with *tawhīd*. Christians are frequently criticized for their profession of the doctrine of the Trinity, whereas Jews are rebuked for contaminating the commitment to *tawhīd* by deifying their religious leaders. Such points are often nested in the more general Muslim polemic against the People of the Book, alleging that they follow corrupted forms of God's primordial religion (see, e.g. Ahmad and Ahmad 2004, 141–149). Given all of this, Tabur has not shown that the Qurʾān approves of the faith of conventional Jews and Christians.

Another difficulty facing those who think that the Qurʾān positively endorses non-Islamic faiths, such as Judaism or Christianity, is the problem of accounting for verse 3:85:

And whoever desires other than Islam as religion – never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers. (Qurʾān 3:85)

In BPE, I explain that according to a long-established tradition in Islamic thought, this Qurʾānic verse is believed to have abrogated other verses suggesting salvific inclusivism (BPE, 242). Tabur appears unaware of this well-known point among Muslim thinkers when she claims my reference to this tradition is ‘so-called’ (Tabur 2023, 7). In her discussion of Qurʾān 3:85, Asma Asfaruddin points out that exegetes who favour exclusivism interpret the reference to ‘Islam’ in the verse narrowly (in accordance with what I have called Islam^H). On the other hand, those who favour inclusivism interpret it more broadly as referring to submission to God, characteristic of all faithful monotheists (in accordance with what I have called Islam^P) (Asfaruddin 2015, 193). Asfaruddin explains that the exclusivists’ interpretation was favoured by most pre-modern exegetes (Asfaruddin 2015, 193). Unfortunately for Tabur, whichever of these two interpretations we go with, there is no avoiding the conclusion that the Qurʾān regards Jews and Christians, conventionally understood, as culpable for not complying with *tawhīd*, the indispensable core of Islam^H and Islam^P. Because they engage in religious practices that compromise commitment to *tawhīd*, such individuals cannot be Muslims even concerning Islam^P. As Ismaʿīl Rājī al-Fārūqī explains,

There can be no doubt that the . . . essence of Islam is *al tawhīd*, the act of affirming Allah (SWT) to be the One, the absolute, transcendent Creator, the Lord and Master of all that is . . . [T]o violate *al tawhīd* is to doubt that Allah (SWT) is the One and only God. But to do so means to assume that other beings may share in His divinity . . . Without *al tawhīd* . . . there can be no Islam. (Al-Fārūqī 1992, 17–19)⁸

Thus, even some of the seemingly ‘inclusivist’ passages in the Qurʾān based on Islam^P do not lend themselves to endorsing the practices of Jews and Christians as far as *tawhīd* is concerned. Nor do they suggest that these practices may lead to salvation for them. The centrality of *tawhīd* to Islam^P also negates points (3), (4), and (5) in Tabur’s fifth objection. Suppose in making point (3) she is correct that Qurʾān 3:85 specifically addresses the *kuffār* among a specific historical faction of the People of the Book. This does not mean that the requirement to comply with *tawhīd* only applies to this faction, obviously, and especially so if *tawhīd* is part of Islam^P. As for point (4), Tabur questions the salvific exclusivism implied by Qurʾān 3:85 by endorsing Ibn Taymiyyah’s and Ibn Abī al-ʿIzz’s interpretations of it, both of which take ‘Islam’ in a broad sense to refer to Islam^P. But since *tawhīd* is an essential component of Islam^P, this broader interpretation does not have the ecumenical import Tabur thinks it does, one that would allow for the salvation of faiths that do not adhere to *tawhīd*.

Point (5) in Tabur’s discussion of the People of the Book is that some among them may inculpably fail to accept the Qurʾānic message, as Al-Ghazālī allows for in his discussion of salvific inclusivism. Here, I will concentrate only on the underlying problem in Tabur’s use of Al-Ghazālī and shall leave aside its other difficulties, such as the complication of how to interpret him on this topic and how compatible his views on it are with the Ashʿarite and Sunni orthodoxy that he is typically seen to represent. The issue at hand is whether at least some Jews and Christians may, from the perspective of traditional Islamic theism, reasonably and inculpably fail to comply with *tawhīd*. The aspects of Al-Ghazālī’s discussion of salvific inclusivism Tabur cites are not primarily related to

this issue but rather to concerns about the fate of those who do not accept *the Prophet Muhammad and his Qur'ānic message* (Tabur 2023, 9). In other words, Tabur looks at what Al-Ghazālī says about the fate of those who do not accept Islam^H. As we have seen, though, the Qur'ān upholds the requirement to comply with *tawhīd* even before the advent of the Prophet Muhammad since it is an integral part of Islam^P. That being so, failing to hear about the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur'ān does not mean that a person can reasonably and inculpably be ignorant about God and, as a result, fail to respond appropriately to *tawhīd*. As mentioned previously, the obligation to reason about God is widely endorsed among the major schools of Islamic theology. In mainstream Sunni thought, as exemplified by Al-Ash'arī and Al-Māturīdī, knowledge of God's existence and nature is believed to be acquired by rational reflection on the world. Through reason, we know not just that God exists but also that God is unlike His creatures, one, incorporeal, etc. (see, e.g. Al-Ash'arī 1953, 6–19; Al-Māturīdī 2019, 30–36, 74–84). The relationship between Al-Ghazālī's views and the broader Ash'arite tradition to which he belongs is complex. Nevertheless, in his discussion of salvific inclusivism that Tabur incorporates into her own, Al-Ghazālī acknowledges that one may, on Qur'ānic grounds, plausibly deem as an unbeliever a person who does not acknowledge the existence or oneness of God (Al-Ghazālī 2002, 130).

Because of the problems I've identified with points (1)–(5), Tabur's fifth objection to my argument also fails. The Qur'ānic discourse concerning Jews and Christians does not provide scriptural evidence for holding that they can reasonably and inculpably fail to acquire knowledge of *tawhīd*, that they have no moral obligation to do so, or that their practices may lead to salvation. With this, my defence of the core argument I present in BPE comes to an end.

Contra Tabur on the problem of hell in traditional Islamic theism

In BPE, my discussion of salvific exclusivism in Islam does not involve an evaluation of the Problem of Hell. There, I simply note that God's existence seems incompatible with the eternal suffering of some people in hell (BPE, 246). Even so, I grant in that discussion, purely for the sake of argument, that the eternal suffering in hell of people who culpably refuse to act appropriately on knowledge of *tawhīd* is compatible with God's existence. For, even if true, one cannot use *this* view as a premise to argue that non-Muslims who do not believe that *tawhīd* is true, whether they are Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, atheists, etc., are destined for hell (BPE, 246–247). My argument in BPE focuses primarily on the plausibility of traditional Islamic theism's views about the doxastic and epistemic aspects of Islamic monotheism, not so much on the general reasonableness of its soteriological and eschatological views, which include the doctrine of hell.

Bertrand Russell, in his essay *Why I am not a Christian*, takes issue with some of Christ's teachings, citing, as 'one very serious defect', Christ's belief in hell. He confesses he '[does] not . . . feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment' (Russell 2004, 13). Russell's remarks about the inhumanity of eternal punishment, although they are directed at Christian theology, seem to apply, *a fortiori*, to Islamic theology, given how much more frequently hell is mentioned, discussed, and emphasized in the Qur'ān and *aḥādīth*. It is unsurprising then that, in addition to responding to my core argument in BPE, Tabur extends her apologetic to attempt the challenging task of solving the Problem of Hell. In the remainder of this article, I will argue that she fails to do so and that the weaknesses exposed by her unsuccessful solution highlight further significant problems for traditional Islamic theism. Before turning to its gist, I will identify three preliminary problems with Tabur's defence.

First, leaning on Al-Ghazālī's discussion of salvific inclusivism and without citing any primary references from the Islamic sacred texts, she maintains that eternal punishment in hell is 'limited to a small group of people' (Tabur 2023, 10). Putting aside the controversial matter of whether Al-Ghazālī's views justify the conclusion that only a small minority will be punished forever in hell, it is difficult to reconcile Tabur's claim with the Qur'ān and *aḥādīth*.⁹ For example, the Qur'ān states that, although some will be saved from hell through His mercy, God will 'surely fill Hell with jinn and men all together' (Qur'ān 11:119). Even then, hell can accommodate more (Qur'ān 50:30). In the *aḥādīth*, we read that ninety-nine out of every group of a hundred people, the offspring of Adam, will enter hell (Sahih al-Bukhari n.d.2). Hell is so deep that it takes seventy years for a stone thrown into it to reach the bottom (Riyad as-Salihin n.d.). On the day of judgment, hell will be brought forth with 70,000 bridles, with 70,000 angels dragging each bridle (Sahih Muslim n.d.). These references (and one can easily provide more) call into question the claim that only a small number of people will eternally inhabit hell.

Second, Tabur entirely omits from her defence any description of the *nature* of eternal punishment in hell. On what he calls the 'Mainstream View' of hell in Sunni Islam, according to which hell is a place of real existence (not something figurative or imaginary), Safaruk Chowdhury explains that this punishment 'involves a demonstrable affliction of suffering and agony through subjecting the body to a comprehensive set of tortures' (Chowdhury 2021, 119). Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad list many of these tortures in their summary of the Qur'ānic account of punishment in hell:

The Qur'ān offers a number of rather specific indications of the tortures of the Fire: its flames crackle and roar (S 25:14); it has fierce, boiling waters (S 55:44), scorching wind, and black smoke (S 56:42–43); it roars and boils as if it would burst with rage (S 67:7–8). The people of the Fire are sighing and wailing, wretched (S 11:106), their scorched skins are constantly exchanged for new ones so that they can taste the torment anew (S 4:45), they drink festering water and though death appears on all sides they cannot die (S 14:16–17), people are linked together in chains of 70 cubits (S 69:30–32) wearing pitch for clothing and fire on their faces (S 14:50), boiling water will be poured over their heads, melting their insides as well as their skins, and hooks of iron will drag them back should they try to escape (S 22:19–21). To these terrifying details the *ḥadīths* could add only more elaboration and more specifics. (Smith and Haddad 2002, 85–86)

For many not religiously affiliated with Islam and unfamiliar with the Qur'ānic description of hell, this summary alone no doubt comes across as shocking and obscene. Among Muslims, there are those for whom the traditional understanding of Islamic hell as a place of corporeal tortures makes for uncomfortable and perhaps even embarrassing discussions with people who question it, appealing to the revulsion it causes given our fundamental moral sensibilities. To succeed in her defence of *traditional Islamic theism's view of hell*, Tabur needs to show that God's existence is compatible with Him tormenting people eternally in a grotesquely exaggerated cosmic version of a medieval torture chamber. In evaluating the force of the Problem of Hell, as with the standard Problem of Evil of which it is a variant, matters concerning the scope and nature of suffering are relevant considerations.

Third, the internal coherence of Tabur's defence is doubtful through its reliance on free will. Despite making it the core of her solution to the Problem of Hell, Tabur does not explain what she means by 'free will'. Most attempts to resolve the Problem of Evil and the Problem of Hell hinge on a libertarian conception of free will, according to which people sometimes act freely and responsibly without being causally determined to do so

(Palmer 2014, 4). Such a view of free will is generally rejected in Sunni theology, however, as seen in the works of several classical Muslim thinkers. Al-Ghazālī, for instance, in his exposition of Islamic doctrine, explains that God not only *creates* our actions, but He also *will*s them such that

He is the cause (*minhu*) of good and evil, benefit and harm, Islam and infidelity, acknowledgement and denial [of God], success and failure, rectitude and error, obedience and rebellion, association of other gods with Him and belief [in Him alone]. (Al-Ghazālī 1965, 109–111)

This view raises serious doubts about whether libertarian free will exists and implies the unpalatable conclusion that God compels people to do things for which He also eternally punishes them in hell. Because of this unattractive implication, it is understandable why Tabur may choose to steer clear of a traditional Sunni interpretation of free will of the sort described by Al-Ghazālī. But her opting for a libertarian alternative, if that is indeed what she interprets free will to mean, is at odds with what many traditional Sunni thinkers maintain.¹⁰

With these preliminary problems noted, let me explain the gist of Tabur's proposed solution to the Problem of Hell before I evaluate it. She holds that hell will be eternally populated, but only by the *kuffār*. Using the Qur'ān's description of Satan's proclivities and misdeeds as a paradigmatic example, Tabur articulates her defence by stating that it is the attitude of the *kāfir* that justifies his or her eternal punishment in hell:

The paradigmatic example of the *kāfir* is Iblis (Satan), the first rational free agent to reject God's summon as narrated in the Quran . . . 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 *kufir* 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 . . . [T]his attitude, which is also a general attitude of the *kāfir*, 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. (Tabur 2023, 6)

Also relevant, says Tabur, are the *kāfir*'s character and actions. She does not explain what she means by 'character' and how it is different from attitude (or intention), so I will interpret it to include a combination of attitude (or intention) and (freely chosen) actions. This seems to be what Tabur has in mind when she writes that '[t]he *kāfir* forms a character by his free actions throughout his lifetime that makes him deserve an eternal punishment after his death' (Tabur 2023, 11). More specifically, the *kāfir* is motivated by evil to freely perform actions that result in an irrevocable character, formed by an insistent fight against the truth, which he or she would never voluntarily stop (Tabur 2023, 11). The fundamental feature of this irrevocable character that justifies eternal punishment in hell, according to Tabur, is the *kāfir*'s inability to repent genuinely of his or her sin (Tabur 2023, 11). Given this irremediable defiance, God cannot fulfil the requirements for retributive justice through finite punishment and must, therefore, punish the *kāfir* by eternal damnation in hell (Tabur 2023, 11–15).

There is much that I find problematic and unpersuasive in Tabur's discussion of her proposed solution. In proceeding to argue that her solution is unsuccessful, I will limit my criticisms of it only to its most apparent failings. I will begin with an appraisal of

her depiction of the *kāfir*, who remains resolute in sinfully defying God. After this, I will assess her views about God's treatment of such a person.

In Tabur's account of the traits of the *kāfir*, the connection between these traits and the inability to repent genuinely is unclear. Is this inability *inherently* part of what it means to be a *kāfir*? If it is not, might not external circumstances arise where the *kāfir* sincerely repents of his or her sin? Consider, as an example, the conversion to Islam by 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, a figure revered in Sunni Islam as a faithful Muslim, dedicated companion of the Prophet Muhammad, and second ruler of the Rashidun Caliphate. Before his conversion, 'Umar was one of Islam's fiercest opponents, a violent man, devoted to the gods of pagan Arabia (a *mushrik*, one who culpably refuses to act on *tawhīd*), and who even set out to murder Muhammad. On his journey to do so, and after physically assaulting his brother-in-law and sister, who were early followers of the Prophet, he became remorseful. Shortly afterwards, he read, for the first time, a script containing some Qur'ānic verses. This resulted in a change of heart, leading 'Umar to seek the Prophet to profess his faith in Islam (Lings 2006, 85–86). Reflecting on this Islamic example (among several others available), we can make the more general point that, perhaps given the correct set of external circumstances, a *kāfir* can be genuinely remorseful.

In response, Tabur may say that even if some among the *kuffār* genuinely repent for their sins given a particular configuration of external circumstances, others may remain defiant in their sinfulness no matter what. Alternatively, she might claim that the inability to repent genuinely is inherently part of being a *kāfir* (perhaps also entertaining the *ad hoc* suggestion that 'Umar was never *truly* a *kāfir*). Both replies converge on the point that external circumstances, however they may line up, cannot affect the *kāfir*'s irrevocable sinful defiance. If this is so, a puzzle begins to emerge. In the present dialectical context, we can rule out on both theological and philosophical grounds the possibility that irrevocable sinful defiance is woven into the very essence of human beings and *jinn*, the two main beings recognized in Islamic thought as capable of being *kuffār*. Theologically speaking, as seen in the Qur'ān, not all human beings are *kuffār*; similarly, not all *jinn* are *kuffār* (see, e.g. Qur'ān 72:1–2). Moreover, there is no doctrine of original sin in Islamic theology. In a well-known *ḥadīth*, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said that every child is born in a state of *fiṭrah*, a human being's natural disposition to worship God alone (Sahih al-Bukhari n.d.1; see also Qur'ān 30:30). Philosophically speaking, to hold that irrevocable sinful defiance is intrinsically part of the God-given nature of human beings and *jinn* would contravene Tabur's commitment to libertarian free will, which maintains people sometimes act without being causally determined to do so. Consequently, we are left with the puzzle of accounting for the *kāfir*'s resolute sinful defiance without appealing to human/*jinn* nature or external circumstances.

Tabur may now argue that there is no puzzle since the *kāfir*'s sinful defiance can be fully accounted for by his or her possession of libertarian free will. As already noted, the heart of her proposed solution to the Problem of Hell, which she gleans from the Qur'ānic narrative about Satan, is 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' (Tabur 2023, 6; emphasis mine). While this may be a theologically acceptable interpretation of the *kāfir* in traditional Islamic theism, it is philosophically problematic if utilized to defend the idea of persistent sinful defiance. As Thomas Talbott persuasively argues, a necessary condition of free choice is a minimal degree of rationality to distinguish it from utterly random events or chance occurrences (Talbott 1999, 185). God, as he explains, fundamentally wants for us what we want for ourselves – supreme happiness (Talbott 1999, 185). If this is correct, why then would a person freely disobey and oppose God? To answer this question, Talbott introduces a distinction between a *fully informed* and *less than fully*

informed decision to reject God. The latter involves impediments like ignorance, misinformation, deception, etc., which are absent from the former (Talbot 1999, 186). The idea that a person can make a fully informed decision to reject God freely, Talbot argues, is incoherent because such rejection exhibits irrationality incompatible with free choice.¹¹ To reject God is to go against one's interests (Talbot 1999, 186). Elements in this line of reasoning have antecedents in ancient Greek thought. In the *Meno* (Plato 1967), among other Platonic dialogues, Socrates defends the view that no one knowingly does evil since this means choosing misery for oneself. Those who may give the impression of knowingly desiring and acting on evil are, in fact, motivated by a mistaken conception of the good (77c–78b). As Aristotle (1934) observes in the first book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, although most people agree that the greatest good for us is *happiness*, what happiness consists of – whether wealth, pleasure, honour, etc. – is a matter of dispute among people (1095a).

These points collectively suggest that the very idea of a *kāfir* – understood as a person who freely (rationally) makes a fully informed decision to reject God – is incoherent. The coherent alternative to this – the view that a person may make a less than fully informed decision to reject God – implies hindrances distorting one's perception of what is being rejected. Indeed, even with Satan, who is regarded in Islam as the prototypical *kāfir*, a reasonable case can be made that such hindrances exist. Consider the Qur'ānic account of Satan's fall, which is described in verses such as the following:

[So mention] when your Lord said to the angels, 'Indeed, I am going to create a human being from clay. So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My [created] soul, then fall down to him in prostration.' So the angels prostrated – all of them entirely. Except Iblees (Satan); he was arrogant and became among the disbelievers. [Allah] said, 'O Iblees, what prevented you from prostrating to that which I created with My hands? Were you arrogant [then], or were you [already] among the haughty?' He said, 'I am better than him. You created me from fire and created him from clay.' (38:71–76)

In his work, *Al-Qiṣṭās al-Mustaqīm* (The Correct Balance), Al-Ghazālī discusses several ways in which Satan is animated by erroneous thinking. Commenting specifically about Satan's fall described in the Qur'ānic verses above, he writes:

[Satan] justified the prevention of bowing by his being better, and then confirmed the 'betterness' by the fact that he was created from fire. And when one explicates all the parts of his argument, one finds that his balance is correct in structure, but false in matter. Its full form is that he says: 'I am better than he; but the better does not bow; therefore I do not bow.' (Al-Ghazālī 1980, 312)

Although Satan's refusal to prostrate to Adam is predicated on a valid argument (i.e. one where the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion), the argument is ultimately unsound, Al-Ghazālī observes, because both premises are dubious. The second premise, for instance, can be reasonably rejected because obligation and merit are by command, not by 'betterness' (Al-Ghazālī 1980, 312–313). If Al-Ghazālī's analysis is correct, then, plausibly, Satan's response to God's command was based on delusional thinking and, therefore, constituted a less than fully informed decision to disobey God. With this analysis of the concept of a *kāfir* in hand, I will now address Tabur's views about God's treatment of those who remain resolute in their sinful defiance of Him.

God, as Tabur explicitly accepts in her formulation of the Problem of Hell, is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent (Tabur 2023, 10). In her proposed solution to the

problem, however, there is hardly any discussion of these omni-attributes of God or what they imply. In gauging the success of defences and theodicies purporting to resolve the more general Problem of Evil, these attributes are critically relevant and cannot be ignored. In his classic presentation of the problem, J. L. Mackie explains that, in its simplest form, the Problem of Evil arises out of three constituent propositions: ‘God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists’ (Mackie 1955, 200). In surveying possible responses to it, Mackie identifies the general form in what he calls ‘fallacious solutions’ to the problem:

[I]n order to solve the problem one (or perhaps more) of its constituent propositions is given up, but in such a way that it appears to have been retained, and can therefore be asserted without qualification in other contexts. Sometimes there is a further complication: the supposed solution moves to and fro between, say, two of the constituent propositions, at one point asserting the first of these but covertly abandoning the second, at another point asserting the second but covertly abandoning the first. (Mackie 1955, 202–203)

It is precisely this sort of problem – the failure to consistently uphold God’s omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence (perfect goodness) in accounting for the eternal suffering of some people in hell – that renders Tabur’s proposed solution to the Problem of Hell fallacious, as I will now show.

Let’s take omnipotence first. If God is all-powerful, couldn’t He actualize a possible world in which no one eternally suffers in hell? For an omnipotent God, there are, surely, several possible worlds that can be actualized in which this can occur. These worlds may include those in which hell, or a more humane version of it, exists. In such worlds, some people are punished in hell for various sins, but no one resides there for eternity. Since rejection of God is always less than fully informed, in these possible worlds, God could, using His omnipotence, rectify people’s misunderstandings about Him, whether in this life or the afterlife. One might object that for God to take such corrective action would violate people’s libertarian free will. It is generally agreed among philosophers of religion that God’s omnipotence is not diminished by His power being ‘limited’ to bringing about states of affairs that are logically possible. Philosophers of religion also generally agree that, on a libertarian conception of free will, God cannot directly make someone do something freely, as that is logically impossible. While I accept these two points, I do not think they threaten, in the least, my point about God taking steps to correct misunderstandings about Him. With His omnipotence, God can, without exercising *direct* causal control over an agent (i.e. without puppeteering him or her), providentially arrange external conditions so that an individual will freely accept Him over some finite period, during which all hindrances to the knowledge of God are removed. But suppose this is wrong, and there are some possible worlds in which even God’s omnipotence cannot guarantee that all individuals will eventually freely accept Him. What seems uncontroversial is that it is within the purview of God’s omnipotence to *refrain* from actualizing such possible worlds. Should an omnipotent God wish to create a world, He has an abundant variety of possible worlds for His choosing to actualize. Among these possible worlds are those where there are no creatures of the sort that can exercise creaturely freedom to sustain irrevocable disbelief. In such worlds, perhaps no persons exist, or perhaps, instead of humans and *jinn*, there are other sorts of creatures who do not fall into irrevocable disbelief. The Qur’ān intimates that God can easily create such worlds: ‘If He wills, He can do away with you and bring forth a new creation. And that is for Allah not difficult’ (Qur’ān 35:16–17).

Next, let’s consider omniscience. Tabur forgoes any consideration of God’s omniscience in her proposed solution to the Problem of Hell despite including it in her formulation of

the problem. I will offer a few critical remarks on God being all-knowing. If God is omniscient, He knows how to providentially engineer His creation using His omnipotence so that all creatures possessing libertarian free will accept Him. The understanding of God's omniscience in traditional Islamic theism includes *foreknowledge*. In Sunni orthodoxy, belief in *al-qaḍā' wa l-qadar* ('divine will and decree') is one of the six articles of faith (*arkān al-ʿīmān*). This is understood to imply that, from eternity, God foreordained and knew everything that would happen, including human choices (Murad 2006, 81–83). Although this doctrine does not seem compatible with libertarian free will, let me shelve this concern for now and continue to operate on Tabur's assumption that we have free will in this sense. Regardless of whether individuals have this sort of freedom, it is notable that the doctrine of divine will and decree implies God knew from eternity how they would behave. Thus, even if some creatures possessing libertarian free will never accept God, thwarting His omnipotent efforts to ensure they do, God knew this would happen before they were created.

Finally, we come to omnibenevolence. Let's assume Tabur is correct and that the notion of a free and fully informed rejection of God, accompanied by persistent sinful defiance, is coherent and instantiated in God's creation. Why would, indeed how *could*, an omnibenevolent God consign individuals who maintain this attitude to a place where they must endure – for eternity – horrific forms of torment, such as having their skins roasted, boiling water poured over their heads, etc.? One might justifiably ask whether this amounts to 'overkill', but that would not be quite the right way to phrase the question since the inhabitants of hell cannot die (Qurʾān 14:17). Tabur thinks God's retributive justice provides the answer here, but justice is only *one* facet of divine omnibenevolence. God, as the Qurʾān states, is Just (4:40), but He is also *Ar-Raḥmān* (the Beneficent) and *Ar-Raḥīm* (the Most Merciful), as repeated in virtually every *Sūrah* (Chapter) of the Islamic Scripture. The Qurʾān contains numerous descriptions of several other divine attributes that are relevant to a consideration of God's omnibenevolence, also referring to Him, for example, as *Al-Ghaḥūr* (the All-Forgiving) (e.g. Qurʾān 41:32). Ignoring such divine attributes results in a myopic analysis of God's omnibenevolence. As a connected point, it is unreasonable to believe that God's omnibenevolence is exhausted or even based on *lex talionis*, especially when, according to the Qurʾān, God Himself urges us non-omnibenevolent, ordinary, and weak mortals to aspire to higher moral standards: 'Repel [evil] by that [deed] which is better; and thereupon the one whom between you and him is enmity [will become] as though he was a devoted friend' (Qurʾān 41:34).

Even if we confine ourselves to God's justice and further assume that it is best construed as retributive, as opposed to redemptive and restorative, Tabur's answer is unconvincing. One of the core principles of retributive justice is that the punishment given to an individual must be proportionate to the wrongdoing done by him or her. Such proportionality seems wildly distorted in God's eternally and horrifically torturing individuals who are irrevocable in their disbelief and never genuinely repent. God, after all, cannot be harmed by this attitude. Is He then so affronted by the stubbornness of such small and frail creatures that He thinks the fitting response is to subject them to vicious molestation in hell forever? Couldn't God resort to other, less horrific forms of punishment? Indeed, one can make a reasonable case that there would not be much for God to do when dealing with those who reject Him in this manner. Suppose, *per impossible*, there exist individuals who, although *fully* informed about God, freely reject Him irrevocably; *Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor* ('I see the better way and approve it, but I follow the worse way') each of them says, like Ovid's Medea (*Metamorphoses* 7.20; Ovid 1922). For God to *sustain* this state for them throughout eternity without inflicting additional corporeal torment seems like sufficient punishment. God may, out of His compassion and respect for their autonomy, refrain from overriding their freedom and decide to let them be – perhaps

quarantining them in some place away from heaven and the blessedness of those who inhabit it.¹² In this scenario, about which Socrates would be wrong, some choose to be 'miserable and ill-starred' (cf. *Meno*, 78a). They decide, that is, to remain miserable in perpetuity, knowing that their misery stems from clinging to counterfeit forms of happiness while rejecting genuine happiness that is found only in conforming to God's will. This would be self-inflicted mental torment, akin to Ibn Sīnā's heterodox Islamic understanding of punishment in the afterlife as psychological, not somatic (Heath 1992, 68–69).

Let's proceed further, conceding to Tabur that God is justified in tormenting (psychologically and/or somatically) for all eternity those individuals who persist in their disbelief. A world in which this happens is still not a good world, all things considered. Here are just a few of its unsavoury features. It is a world forever plagued by the terrible suffering of some of God's creatures. It is also a place where God's ultimate purpose in creating human beings and *jinn*, to worship Him (Qur'ān 51:56), is never fully realized. And, perhaps most disturbingly, the existence of such a world means that, ultimately, Satan had some measure of victory against God when he said that he would lead everyone astray except God's chosen servants (Qur'ān 15:39–40; 36:62 says that Satan led a great multitude of people astray). If God is omniscient, He would have known about these features of this world before creating it. Since He is omnipotent, God had the power to refrain from bringing it into existence. If God is also omnibenevolent, He would not have wanted to create this world, being aware that actualizing it would entail the eternal endurance of several bad states of affairs, including those that go against His will. Even Ibn Taymiyyah, one of the great champions of Sunni orthodoxy, is swayed by aspects of this reasoning, incorporating them into his defence of an interpretation of hell that contradicts Muslim consensus (*Ijmā'*). God's mercy and wisdom, he says, preclude the creation of a world in which God's chastisement does *not* serve the higher purpose of cleansing sins and purifying souls (Hoover 2009, 189). Compared to Tabur's position, this seems a much more plausible conclusion to infer from an analysis of God's omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence.

Tabur's proposed solution to the Problem of Hell is a complete failure because it fundamentally neglects to take God's omni-attributes seriously. One could only begin to entertain the plausibility of her proposal if working with impoverished notions of divine power, knowledge, and especially goodness. Heavily discounted notions of these attributes might be suitable for thinking about an anaemic deity, but, as Muslims frequently say, *'Allāhu 'akbar* (God is the Greatest).

Conclusion

According to traditional Islamic theism, as I explain in BPE and here, our world is a Manichean theatre in which drama unfolds according to how human beings (and *jinn*) respond to God's primordial religion, Islam, the sum and substance of which is *tawhīd*. Knowledge of *tawhīd* is evident to all. Muslims respond appropriately to this knowledge through their religious practices, whereas non-Muslims culpably fail to do so. Non-Muslim followers of other religions are not adherents of self-contained belief systems, as many think today, but are deviants who practice corrupted forms of Islam. The corruption in these forms may be gauged by the degree to which they stray from commitment to *tawhīd*. As the Ahmads write, '[Islam] . . . contends that *all other religions*, in their current forms, have deviated from or are entirely removed from Divine Revelation as a source and have severely compromised the Unity of God' (Ahmad and Ahmad 2004, 135; emphasis mine). Those who are eternally punished in hell have compromised God's Unity. As Smith and Haddad note in their discussion of Islamic views regarding human responsibility to God, there is a consensus among classical Muslim thinkers that 'the

one unpardonable sin, that for which the pain of the Fire is assured, is refusal to testify to the *tawhīd* of God' (Smith and Haddad 2002, 22). All the inhabitants of hell who abide there forever, non-Muslims, have in some way compromised their commitment to *tawhīd*.

Is this understanding of our global religious landscape plausible when viewed independently from commitment to religious dogma? In BPE, I argue that it is not, making my case principally using the incompatibility between this view of the world and what are eminently plausible facts of religious diversity. Not everyone believes that *tawhīd* is true. Among those who do not believe it to be true, there are many reasonable people for whom its truth is not evident. Moreover, it is unreasonable to think that the average non-Muslim culpably refuses to act in accordance with knowledge of *tawhīd* and is bound for hell (to appreciate the force of this point, I invite Muslims to consider it not in the *universal* abstract but in light of *particular* non-Muslim individuals they are intimately acquainted with – perhaps an agnostic parent, a Buddhist sibling, a Christian spouse, a dear Hindu friend, etc.).

I have argued that Tabur's apologetic on behalf of traditional Islamic theism fails to refute my core argument in BPE. Her extension of this apologetic to solve the Problem of Hell within an Islamic context also fails. I will end this article with what I hope are two constructive comments directed at Muslims who may feel disquieted by my discussion. First, my criticisms of traditional Islamic theism's understanding of the world's religious diversity do not rest on any claims about how Muslims in general (particularly those who are not philosophers or theologians) perceive non-Islamic religions and their non-Muslim followers. Thus, the fact that there are, for instance, many Muslims who have close Hindu friends and do not see them as perversely rejecting God and bound for hell is perfectly consistent with my criticisms. Second, as I have previously explained, my criticisms of traditional Islamic theism are directed at a particular *interpretation* of Islam. They are by no means intended to be a 'refutation of Islam' or anything of the sort. Surveying and evaluating the plausibility of alternative Islamic interpretations of the world's religious diversity is, however, a task I will leave for some other time.

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Notes

1. See Helm (2000, 11) for a relevant discussion of how 'believing in' God is distinct from 'believing that' God exists.
2. As the Islamic philosopher Shabbir Akhtar explains, the main feature of *kufr* is negligence in *practice*: '*Kufr* is not metaphysical disbelief in the reality of a divine power; it is practical neglect of divine imperatives informing daily life and its priorities' (Akhtar 2008, 248). A full discussion of the nature and scope of this practical neglect as maintained by the *kāfir* is beyond the scope of this article.
3. This quotation and subsequent quotations from the Qur'ān are from the Sahih International English translation.
4. See the full discussion in Izutsu (2002, 187–188) for additional Qur'ānic evidence in support of the *mu'min-kāfir* dichotomy.
5. In commenting on the view that belief in the truth of *tawhīd* can be caused non-inferentially, Tabur says it is 'not even among the main Islamic views in the Islamic tradition' (Tabur 2023, 5). She is simply wrong about this. See, for example, Jamie Turner (2019) and (2022) for a discussion of how Ibn Taymiyyah develops the idea of *fiṭrah* (our innate nature or disposition), an important tenet of Islamic theology, as yielding non-inferential knowledge of God. As Turner shows, this idea is fully compatible with Alvin Plantinga's Reformed epistemology, which has become prominent in contemporary discussions of religious epistemology. The essence of Plantinga's Reformed epistemology is perhaps best characterized as the view that one can have knowledge of God's existence (and other religious truths) without relying on arguments.

6. For Al-Ash‘arī’s full discussion of the arguments for God’s existence and nature, many of which are motivated by explicit references to the Qur’ān, see Al-Ash‘arī (1953, 6–19).
7. Often, Islamic scholars who mention these conditions in discussions of religious epistemology cite this *ḥādīth*: ‘It was narrated from ‘Aishah that the Prophet said: “The pen has been lifted from three: From the sleeper until he wakes up, from the minor until he grows up, and from the insane until he comes back to his senses or recovers”’ (Sunan an-Nasa’i n.d.). Although this *ḥādīth* suggests that children are not accountable, there are other reports in the collection of *aḥādīth* suggesting otherwise. In particular, the fate of non-Muslim children who die young is controversial in Sunni Islam (see, e.g. Al-Munajjid 2009).
8. See Al-Fārūqī (1992, 21–23) for a discussion of how, according to him, Judaism and Christianity violate *tawḥīd*.
9. In his great theological work *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn* (Revival of the Religious Sciences), Al-Ghazālī warns even believers to be fearful of hell: ‘Your coming unto it [hell] is certain, while your salvation therefrom is no more than conjecture.’ He advises them to ‘fill up [their hearts], therefore, with the dread of that destination’ (as quoted in Lange 2016, 9).
10. See, for example, the account of destiny and God’s Will in Ahmad ibn Naqib al-Misri’s *‘Umdat as-Salik* (Reliance of the Traveller), a classic and authoritative handbook of Sunni jurisprudence (Al-Misri 1997, 813–814, 819–820). In this account, notwithstanding the mention of people ‘choosing’ their actions, the heavy emphasis on Divine Sovereignty seems to preclude any notion of libertarian free will.
11. In giving his own defence of this point, David Bentley Hart is as forceful as he is eloquent:

What, then, of the claim that hell could be the ultimate free choice of a rational spiritual nature? It is meaningless. To the very degree that a rational creature might reject the one transcendent reality that can alone satisfy its deepest needs and desires, that creature is in bondage. An injured, damaged, and deluded person might behave in such a manner, but never a free person. Freely, sanely, deliberately to elect misery forever rather than bliss would be a form of madness. To call that madness freedom, in order to soothe our consciences and to continue to reconcile ourselves to a picture of reality that is morally absurd, is to talk gibberish. (Hart 2022)

12. For the record, I think this is also an inadequate solution to the Problem of Hell. Still, I find it better than solutions that attempt to defend the traditional Islamic understanding of hell with all its somatic tortures for the damned.

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