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The End of the End: Devotion as an Antidote to Hell

The history of literary descriptions of the hereafter in India extends back to the end of the second millennium BCE, to which period the earliest still extant Sanskrit hymns date. It was not until the emergence of ascetic religious movements, such as Buddhism and Jainism, in the fifth century BCE that hell developed into the place of judgment and of torment. During the first millennium CE, hell would find its place in Hindu literature, as the devotion for the gods Viṣṇu and Śiva gave rise to an impressive literary genre: the Purāṇas. Later, with the help of Sufism, Hindu devotional movements adopted a kind of defiance of the hereafter, as shown by pre-modern literature.

It was not until the first centuries CE that hells – as vast and cruel as those described in Buddhist and Jainist literature – began to appear in Hindu texts. In Hindu literature, hell saw its most important development in the texts known by the generic name of Purāṇas – the "Ancients". I will begin the article's first section with a quote from an example of this golden age of Sanskrit literature on hell.

The rise of the Purāṇas coincides with the growth of religious traditions that propagate the adoration of divinities that eclipse all others. Two dominant movements sometimes opposed each other, sometimes coexisted: the disciples of the god Viṣṇu, and those of the god Śiva. In the Purāṇas, we are confronted with two parallel trends: on the one hand, the increased prominence of elective divinities who promise salvation to their devotees, and, on the other hand, the impressive development of ever more detailed and cruel descriptions of hell. In the article's second section, I will illustrate the paradoxical coexistence of promises of damnation and of doctrines of salvation in order to reveal the logic underlying this rhetoric.[1]

In the course of the second millennium CE, new devotional currents directly challenged the Purāṇas' discourse of hell. Mystics – no longer writing in Sanskrit but in their vernacular languages – promoted an all-powerful god surpassing all other divinities in the pantheon. The emergence of this mystical poetry coincided with the appearance of a new religion on Indian soil: Islam. The Hindu faith developed alongside Muslim mysticism, that is, Sufism, and the two religions often shared poetic images and forms of expression. In my article's third section, I will present some examples of mutual fertilisation of Hinduism and Islam from the works of the great authors of this period.

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1 Concerning salvation, see Dhavamony, *Classical Hinduism*, 466–506; Nelson, "Liberation." About salvation and hells, see Tiefenauer, *Les enfers indiens*, 428–508.

1 The Golden Age of Hell

There are many Purāṇa,[2] in Sanskrit as well as in other Indian languages. Eighteen of them are known as the "great Purāṇas" (called the *Mahāpurāṇa*).[3] The motif of hell is only one of many themes treated in the Purāṇas, whose encyclopaedic scope covers above all cosmological topics. Nevertheless, hells[4] are regularly referred to,[5] and while their number, as well as their names, can vary considerably from one text to another, it is still possible to identify distinct structural families.[6] A representative example is the synthesis provided in the *Purāṇa of the Boar* (*Vārāhapurāṇa*), this animal being one of the forms in which the god Viṣṇu incarnated in our world. The text contains a whole section dedicated to the hereafter, entitled *Moral Anthology* (*Dharmasaṃhitā*),[7] which possibly dates to around the end of the first millennium CE.[8] It is a kind of compilation of representations of hell, similar to descriptions found in other Purāṇas as well as in sources preceding this literary genre. Surprisingly, and without this being explicitly stated in the text, it lists these representations of hell in the order of their historical appearance.

The *Moral Anthology* thus presents itself as the apex of its genre, an overview of the infernal visions of the preceding centuries. The description of the hells is provided by Naciketas, a Brahmin[9] boy who finds himself in the world of the dead after his father has cursed him in a fit of anger.[10]

The child first describes the different kinds of sinners who will end up in hell. The list of sins partly corresponds to those found in another literary genre, the moral treatises (*Dharmaśāstra*). These include sins connected to ritual, to virtue, to food, and to different kinds of theft. The same principles govern the kingdom of the dead as those that rule all Creation, namely the transmigration of the souls (*saṃsāra*) and the retribution of deeds from one life in another (*karman*). In this logic, hell is an existence in its own right – a long and painful existence, which, however, the damned finally leave in order to be reborn again into the world of the living.

Naciketas continues his visit to the hereafter and describes the splendid city of Yama, the king of the hells. In Indo-European mythology, the figure of Yama is

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2 On this subject, see Rocher, *The Purāṇas*.

3 Rocher, *The Purāṇas*, 30–34; Gupta and Bhattacharya, *The Vārāha-Purāṇa*.

4 To be sure, these texts do not refer to a single hell but to numerous hells.

5 In particular in the *Agni-*, *Garuda-*, *Nārada-*, *Padma-*, *Brahma-*, *Brahmavaivarta-*, *Bhāgavata-*, *Mārkaṇḍeya-*, *Vārāha-*, *Vāmana-*, *Vāyu-*, *Viṣṇu-* and *Skanda-Purāṇa*.

6 On this subject, see Kirfel, *Die Kosmographie der Inder*, 147–173.

7 Gupta and Bhattacharya, *The Vārāha-Purāṇa*, 193–212.

8 Hazra, *Studies in the Purāṇic records on Hindu Rites and Customs*, 105–106.

9 I.e. a member of the highest cast, the priests' cast.

10 This is an ancient myth, the first traces of which go back to the so-called Vedic literature. We find it in different forms in the *Śatapatha-* and the *Jaiminīya-brāhmaṇa*, in the *Kaṭhopaniṣad*, in the *Anuśāsanaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*, in the *Dharmasaṃhitā* of the *Vārāhapurāṇa*, and finally in the *Nāciketopākhyāna*.

without any doubt the one with the longest life: we come across him in the most ancient Iranian texts (the *Gāthā* of the *Avesta*) as well as in the first Sanskrit hymns (the *Ṛgveda*), both collections going back to the end of the second millennium BC. In the *Moral Anthology,* Yama, the lord of the dead, welcomes Naciketas into his heavenly enclave of hell. Sometimes terrifying, sometimes reassuring, depending on to whom he is speaking, the king and judge of the deceased allows the child to make a tour of his dominion. Naciketas meets Citragupta, a kind of minister charged with recording all deeds (the *karman*). On his orders, the messengers of Yama (*yamadūta*), who play the role of torturers, burn and tear apart the bodies of the damned. The list of tortures they inflict continues over several chapters. A funny detail in one chapter is that the torturers of hell go on strike and refuse to carry out their hard work any longer. Citragupta tries to bring them back to order by appealing to demons. In the end, Yama himself has to intervene to resolve the disagreement between Citragupta and the *yamadūta*.

The long, vivid description of the hells, to which most of the *Moral Anthology* is devoted, is followed by a shorter account of the pleasures awaiting the righteous. If they fell in battle, met their death while defending the Brahmins, or proved their largesse by giving them lands and cattle, the paradise of Indra (*Amarāvatī*, the home of the immortal) awaits them. There, they will find happiness with charming women whom they can enjoy at their convenience. If these pleasures address themselves to men, the women also enjoy a paradise of their own. Wives who dedicated themselves body and soul to their husbands will find immortality and earn the status of goddesses in heaven without having to endure the judgment of Yama.

The *Moral Anthology* closes with a speech by Yama, who draws up a long list of methods with which to cleanse oneself of one's sins. Kindness towards all creatures, asceticism, and yogi techniques are amongst the recommendations of the king of the dead, but these precepts are mostly addressed to Brahmins. Yama ends by revealing the simplest expiatory practices that are open to all castes, even the lowest ones. Even though offerings of cows or dairy products are mentioned again, the most effective way is to offer worship to the god to whom the text is dedicated: Viṣṇu. According to the master of hell himself, the celebration of Viṣṇu constitutes the most effective expiatory ritual. Its performance even liberates for all eternity even the vilest sinners from all evil deeds they may have committed. And the text does not fail to remind us that, ultimately, a thousand successive existences are needed for the worshippers of the competing god, Śiva, to achieve the advantages that Viṣṇu's worshippers will gain in a single life.

2 The Takeover of the Elective Gods

The *Moral Anthology* constitutes a good example for the coexistence between the rhetoric of hell and the promise of salvation. This text skillfully stages a progression from hell to atonement, and from atonement to paradise. Promises of salvation are not rare in the Purāṇas. Some narratives take the form of moral tales in which Death himself, or his representative Yama, are brought face to face with the redeeming divinity which the text champions.

An example of this can be found in the *Purāṇa of Skanda* (*Skandapurāṇa*),[11] which narrates the story of the good king Śveta ("the white") who is completely devoted to the god Śiva.[12] When the king engages in prayer at a temple consecrated to his divinity, Yama sends his messengers to get him and to carry him to the hereafter. But the men of the master of the dead do not dare attack the king in the middle of his worship. Yama ultimately has to go there himself, but faced with this illustrious worshipper he, too, does not dare intervene. Time (Kāla), who is another incarnation of Death,[13] reminds Yama of his duty, but the latter reveals to him that it is difficult to tackle the devotees of Śiva. Time gets angry and decides to settle the problem himself. When he prepares himself to strike the king with his sword, Time is reduced to ashes by the third eye of Śiva. The sovereign, however, is so virtuous that he pleads with his god for Time: he extols this destroyer of lives' virtues, which Creation cannot do without. Convinced by his devotee's arguments, Śiva brings Time back to life.

The intention of this text is clear: the god Śiva is stronger than death because he is literally able to *kill Time.* According to the *Purāṇa of Skanda,* this all-powerful god is the only one to preside over the destinies of all creatures, and his worshippers therefore have nothing to fear from death.

A similar narrative is located in two other texts, the *Purāṇa of the Tortoise* (*Kūrmapurāṇa*) and the *Purāṇa of the Liṅga* (*Liṅgapurāṇa*).[14] These two sources feature Rudra, an ancient divinity Śiva is associated or even identified with.[15] There we meet Śveta once more, who in the *Purāṇa of the Tortoise*'s version is once more a king, but appears as a simple hermit in the *Purāṇa of the Liṅga*. In the latter,[16] Time (Kāla) comes to get Śveta – his hour has literally come for him. When Time prepares to take the hermit to the realm of Yama, mocking the power of the gods, Rudra

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11 Skanda is one of the sons of the god Śiva.

12 *Skandapurāṇa*, ed. Parata, 1.1.32.

13 It is also often confused with Yama, but this narrative separates the two figures.

14 The tortoise is the form of the second incarnation of Viṣṇu; as for the *liṅga*, it is the ithyphallic symbol of Śiva.

15 Rudra, a minor divinity in the most ancient Sanskrit corpus, the *Ṛgveda,* will later be identified with Śiva in post-Vedic literature, in particular in the Purāṇas.

16 Bhaṭṭācāryya, *Liṅgapurāṇa*, 1.30.

appears and kills Time. The tale ends with the reminder that Rudra defeats death and liberates his worshippers from it.

The *Purāṇa of the Tortoise,* which presents Śveta as a king,[17] also describes Rudra's intervention at the moment when Time ties up his victim. Rudra abuses Death (which is here identified with Time) and kills it with savage kicks. At the end of the eleventh century CE, Somadeva evokes this episode in his famous *Ocean of the Streams of Stories (Kathāsaritsāgara),*[18] clarifying that it is Śiva who has killed Time.

The superiority of Rudra-Śiva in the face of personified Death has given him a number of eulogistic epithets: "Ender of Time", "Conquerer of Yama", "Time-burner",[19] etc. In other parables, however, Viṣṇu is the protagonist who vanquishes Death.

The *Purāṇa of the Fortunate (Bhāgavatapurāṇa),* which is dedicated to Viṣṇu in his most famous incarnation as Kṛṣṇa, includes a delightful parable which shows how to avoid the agonies of hell.[20] Before the story starts, the *Purāṇa* specifies that, to cleanse oneself from one's errors, expiatory rituals are never as effective as devotion to Kṛṣṇa. We then learn about Ajāmila, a Brahmin who had disgraced himself by marrying a slave (*dāsī*), and also engaged in pillaging, gaming, fraud and theft. When he was already old, this man struggled to feed his many children: he had ten sons, the youngest of whom was named after one of the aliases of Kṛṣṇa: Nārāyaṇa. When his hour had come and the dreadful men of Yama closed in to lead him to the world of the dead, the old man called his youngest son. But when the servants of the god Kṛṣṇa heard the old man repeat "Nārāyaṇa" – their master's name – they rushed to save Ajāmila. According to this text, the simple repetition of the name of their god allows the worshippers to atone for the sins committed in the course of ten million existences.

Another parable, which also exists in a Śivaite as well as a Viṣṇuite version, describes the misadventures of a child called Mārkaṇḍeya, who was destined from birth for an early death.[21] The seventh chapter of a lesser Purāṇa, the *Purāṇa of the Lionman (Narasiṃhapurāṇa)*[22] provides a detailed version of this story. At the birth of the child, a wise man predicts that the boy would die at the end of his twelfth year; nevertheless, his father provides him with a religious education with a master. Mārkaṇḍeya grows up in humility and wisdom. One day, he asks his parents about the source of their sadness, and when they reveal the gloomy prediction to him, the boy does not lose confidence in his education, but assures them that he will resist

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17 *Kūrmapurāṇa*, 2.35.

18 Somadeva, *Kathāsaritsāgara*, 12.5.333–338.

19 In Sanskrit, respectively: *Kālāntaka*, *Yamāntaka*, *Kāladahana*.

20 *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, 6.1–3.

21 The Śivaite versions of the myth give him sixteen years, while the *Skandapurāṇa*, 6.21, which attributes the salvation of the child to Brahmā, only promises him six months of life from the time of the prophecy of his death.

22 The Lionman (Narasiṃha or Nṛsiṃha) is one of the *avatāra*s of Viṣṇu.

death thanks to his ascetic practice. On a riverbank, Mārkaṇḍeya spends one year worshipping the statue of his god, until the day of his expected death. When the servants of Yama come to get him, the messengers of Viṣṇu intervene and beat them. The men of Yama retreat; and finally it is Death himself who comes to get the child. When they see him, Viṣṇu's envoys shout that they will "kill Death". Mārkaṇḍeya proceeds to intone a hymn in the honour of Viṣṇu, which Death is unable to withstand, ultimately having to admit defeat. Thus the young devotee vanquishes Death by dedicating himself to Viṣṇu body and soul.

3 The Obsolete Hell

The aforementioned *Moral Anthology* was compiled towards the end of the first millennium CE. It is the period when the Sebuktigīn, and later his son Mahmud of Ghazni, conquered the north of what is now Pakistan, the Panjāb, and the Ganges valley. Two centuries later, Muhammad of Ghor established his capital at Delhi. This Sultanate, which survived until 1526, was succeeded by the Moghul Empire, which lasted until its colonisation by the British. For a millennium, Northern India was controlled by Muslim dynasties. The courts of Indian sultans and emperors attracted Muslim mystic brotherhoods (*ṭarīqa*, pl. *ṭarā'iq*), whose membership increasingly spread across the Indian subcontinent.[23] They profoundly influenced Hindu devotional literature – not without consequence for the perception of the world of the dead, and hell in particular.

In fifteenth-century Northern India, mystic poets started to appear who were born not into elite, but often artisan or lower Hindu castes. Neither ascetics nor monks, they were anti-conformist, rejected castes and idol cults, and shared much common ground with the Sufi. The great poet Kabīr, who lived in the first half of the fifteenth century, worked as a weaver in Benares (the city where he may have been born). His first name of Arabic origin suggests that he may have belonged to a cast of yogis who had converted to Islam. Both humble and fervent, Kabīr expressed nothing but contempt for asceticism and rituals in his songs in the vernacular tongue. He seems to have been illiterate and to have disdained books; nevertheless, Kabīr composed countless poems that were handed down in oral tradition, later to be preserved and imitated by his disciples to such a point that we now cannot distinguish which texts he himself authored, and which his followers and imitators. Still, these poems unequivocally show a defiance of hell.

The songs attributed to Kabīr clearly state that only God (whatever His name) can save us after death. Without the name of Rāma (*avatāra* of Viṣṇu), it is impossi-

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23 See Husain, *L'Inde mystique au moyen âge*; Athar Abbas, *A History of Sufism in India*; Dalmia and Faruqui, *Religious Interactions in Mughal India*.

ble to escape from hell;[24] even dying at Benares, the sacred city, will not save any-one from hell whose heart is evil.[25] Without the name of the only God, hypocrites will thus end up in the city of Yama.[26] If Kabīr is confident in the face of hell be-cause he has found the supreme atonement which will wash him of his sins,[27] he also does not search for paradise – he is as indifferent to the threat of one as he is to the promise of the other.[28] Like a dedicated wife, the mystic is joined to the divine Husband and so can accept the best as well as the worst, provided he is close to his Beloved.[29] His discourse thus directly confronts the theology of fear maintained by the Purāṇas, which, to Kabīr, are nothing but a mirror for the blind,[30] a false doc-trine made up from beginning to end.[31]

While Sūradāsa, another of the great Northern Indian poets, does not display the same scorn for the Purāṇas, he nevertheless also strongly refutes hell. A disciple of Vallabha, the founder of the devotional movement of the Path of Grace (Puṣṭimārga), he is reputed to have lived in the sixteenth century. Like Kabīr's, the œuvre of Sūradāsa outlived the one who began it, and the texts that have come down to us should be considered the fruits of a literary tradition that took several centuries to mature rather than the work of an individual author. A considerable number of devotional texts in Braj (*braja bhāṣā*), a literary language of Northern In-dia that preceded current Hindi, originated with Sūradāsa. The most famous is the *Ocean of Sūra* (*Sūrasāgara*), which consists partly of a rewrite of the most important Viṣṇuite Purāṇa, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*.

In the *Ocean of Sūra*, the poet confesses that he is a sinner and reveals that he has returned to the city of Yama and the pits of hell several times. He even expects to return there forever, carried down by the servants of the god of the dead.[32] He asks his lord Viṣṇu to help him confront his fear of Yama in spite of the number of his sins,[33] because Viṣṇu alone is able to intercede at the moment when the messen-gers of the god of the dead strike.[34] According to Sūradāsa, Viṣṇu is a refuge for his worshippers: he protects us against the soldiers of Yama and, like a ship, allows us to flee sordid hell (and other unpleasant reincarnations) and to reach a peaceful land: the Vaikuṇṭha, the paradise of the adored lord.[35]

24 *Kabīr Granthāvalī*, ed. Vaudeville, *pada* 346.
25 *Kabīr Vāṇī*, ed. Vaudeville, *Rāgu āsā* 37.
26 *Kabīr Granthāvalī*, ed. Vaudeville, *dohā* 12.54, 18.3.
27 *Kabīr Vāṇī*, ed. Vaudeville, *Rāgu āsā* 17.4–5.
28 *Kabīr Vāṇī*, ed. Vaudeville, *Rāgu āsā* 17.4–5, *Kabīr Granthāvalī*, ed. Vaudeville, *dohā* 31.6–7.
29 *Kabīr Granthāvalī*, ed. Vaudeville, *dohā* 11.7
30 *Bījaka*, *ramainī*, 32.
31 *Bījaka*, *ramainī*, 61.
32 *Sūrasāgara*, 391.11–12.
33 *Sūrasāgara*, 392.1–4.
34 *Sūrasāgara*, 418.41–43.
35 *Sūrasāgara*, 433.5–8.

In the sixteenth century, Tulasīdāsa, a Brahmin born near Ayodhyā, chose an itinerant life devoted to the worship of Rāma, an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu. He went to Benares, where he created about a dozen works of devotional inspiration, including his most celebrated work, the *Spirit of the Deeds of Rāma* (*Rāmacaritamānasa*). This great poem, written in the vernacular Avadhī language, revisits the epic of Rāma from a devotional point of view. It was a huge success, to a point where its popularity outdid its illustrious Sanskrit predecessor, the *Journey of Rāma* (*Rāmāyaṇa*), composed one and a half millennia earlier and attributed to the legendary lyric poet Vālmīki.

In the fourth book of the *Journey of Rāma*, Rāma kills Vālin, the monkey king, who had ousted his younger brother. Tārā, Vālin's wife, laments over her husband's corpse and, in a poignant passage, deplores her condition as a widow.[36] Despairing, she even asks Rāma to kill her in order to put an end to her suffering, but the hero-god scorns her.[37] In Tulasīdāsa's reworking, the episode takes a completely different turn: Vālin submits to Rāma in his dying moment, which opens the gates of paradise not only to him,[38] but to his widow, too, who throws herself at the feet of the *avatāra* who has just slain her husband.[39]

Another, even more spectacular conversion of a married couple takes place at the end of Tulasīdāsa's epic: the one of Rāvaṇa and his wife Mandodarī. Rāvaṇa, the demon king, is Rāma's main enemy, and his death closes the epic narrative. In the Sanskrit version of the epic (the *Journey of Rāma*), Mandodarī mourns her husband whom Rāma has killed at the end of a long battle. Like Vālin's wife, she laments her fate as a widow at length.[40] In Tulasīdāsa's *Spirit of the Deeds of Rāma*, Rāvaṇa's death takes a completely different turn. After he has literally been reduced to pieces, the demon still defies his adversary with his last breath, pronouncing the name of Rāma as he dies. The simple fact of having named the hero, even if in ultimate defiance, allows Rāvaṇa's soul to attain the mouth of the triumphant god and thus paradise.[41]

According to the Viṣṇu devotees, the repetition of the divine name has a key place in devotional rituals, and invoking Rāma is a part of the salvation of the worshippers. This is confirmed in the *Very Spiritual Journey of Rāma* (*Adhyātmarāmā-yaṇa*), another (Sanskrit) version of the epic, which was probably composed not long after Tulasīdāsa's work. Regarding Rāvaṇa's death,[42] this text explains that the demon had so obsessively thought about Rāma that he had saved his soul, in the same way as worshippers who concentrate on their chosen god gain salvation. Thus

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36 *Rāmāyaṇa*, 4.23.8–15.

37 *Rāmāyaṇa*, 4.24.36, 43.

38 Tulasīdās, *Rāmacaritamānasa*, 4, *dohā* 9 et *caupāī* 11.1a.

39 Tulasīdās, *Rāmacaritamānasa*, 4, *caupāī* 11.3cd.

40 *Rāmāyaṇa*, 6.111.1–90.

41 Tulasīdās, *Rāmacaritamānasa*, 6, *dohā* 102 et *caupāī* 103.1–2, 5a–b.

42 Śāstrī, *Adhyātmarāmāyaṇa*, 6.82–87.

the name of Rāma is so powerful that it allows the most irretrievable sinner to escape the torments of hell. This is obviously a powerful argument for conversion.

At the end of the sixteenth century, the Moghul emperor Akbar ordered the complete translation of the *Journey of Rāma* into Persian. This translation, which was completed in November 1588, later became the object of numerous revisions.[43] The Freer Gallery of Art in Washington keeps one of the manuscripts of this translation.[44] This illuminated copy provides an illustration showing Rāvaṇa, the demon king, when he confronts Yama, the god of the dead, in single combat.[45] The miniature frames a cartouche with the Persian text summarising this paradoxical battle (Rāvaṇa trying to kill a god who is himself an incarnation of death). The image is interesting in many respects, in particular for the manner in which it represents Yama, who is dressed in Portuguese clothes (high boots, baggy trousers).[46] As we might expect in a Moghul miniature, he is represented in the Persian style in the form of a *dīv*, a demon from Persian mythology. The attributes of the god, which Sanskrit literature describes as a staff (the Staff of Time) and a rope (in order to carry the living into the world of the dead), are here represented in a fanciful, unorthodox manner. But the most significant detail are the wings he is provided with. In fact, the miniaturist has given him angels' wings, borrowing from Iranian and Islamic iconography. The painter thus transposes the Hindu god of the Manes into an angel of death as found in the religions of Semitic origin.

This iconographical transformation of Yama is not only the fruit of the inventiveness of a painter working around 1600. The new status given to the god of the dead is also visible in Indo-Persian literature, especially in the works of a Moghul prince: Dārā Shukoh (1615–1659). At the age of forty-two, when he had already written several treatises on Muslim mysticism and worked on a Persian translation of an important body of ancient Sanskrit texts,[47] he wrote an essay called *The Mingling of Two Oceans* (*Majmaʿ al-Baḥrain*). In this work, he pursues an ambition which is already clear in his translations: to show to what extent Hinduism – or at least his vision of it – is compatible with his Islamic tradition.[48] The essay explains the respective positions of hell and paradise in Hindu cosmology,[49] as well as the mechanism of damnation and salvation.[50] According to Dārā Shukoh, the liberation of the mystic's soul and his disappearance into the Divine Essence "[...] make hell and

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43 On this subject, see Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*, 101–141.

44 Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, shelf no. F1907.271.303.

45 Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, shelf no. F1907.271.303, vol. 2, folio 303, verso.

46 For a full description of this image, see Vālmīki, *Rāmāyaṇa illustré*, ed. De Selliers, 7.59.

47 More precisely the 52nd *upaniṣad,* under the Arabic-Persian title of *Sirr-i akbar*, "The Great Secret."

48 In other words, how the *advaita vedānta* can be interpreted in the light of Sufism.

49 Shukoh and Maḥfūẕ al-Ḥaqq, *Majmaʿ al-Baḥrain*, chap. 17 (*Bayān-i qismat-i zamīn*).

50 Shukoh and Maḥfūẕ al-Ḥaqq, *Majmaʿ al-Baḥrain*, chap. 19 (*Bayān-i qiyāmat*).

paradise obsolete and they would be destroyed at the end of time". The prince also invokes the figure of Yama and assigns a new role to him: the role of an angel.[51]

At the start of the eighteenth century, a Persian-speaking man of letters of Hindu faith, Amānat Rāy, prepared a translation of the *Journey of Rāma* in the form of a *mathnawī,* a long narrative poem.[52] This verse form makes it into a much more elegant and sophisticated piece of literature than the version ordered by Emperor Akbar. This impressive quarto of nearly a thousand pages also includes the episode of the battle of the demon Rāvaṇa against Yama, but this time in a sweeping and elaborate style. The lithographic edition of the *Journey of Rāma in Persian* (*Rāmāyan-i fārsī*), published in Lucknow in 1872, introduces the story of Rāvaṇa's visit to the world of the dead with a cartouche summarising the episode.[53] The author (or editor) translates the Sanskrit term *yamaloka*, "world of Yama", with the Arabic term *mulk al-maut,* "kingdom of death". However, as the Arabic alphabet does not note the vowels, this expression can also be read in a different way: *malak al-maut,* i.e. "angel of death".[54] The latter expression, which is more common than *mulk al-maut,* designates the angel Azrael (in Arabic 'Izrā'īl), who puts an end to the life of all creatures. Comparing Yama to an angel is not the only modification by Amānat Rāy: while in the Sanskrit account, Yama is the "King of the *dharma*" (*dharmarāja*), that is, he is responsible for the respect of the moral order that governs the world, in the Persian translation, he is subject to the order of "God the Pure" (*Yazdān-i pāk*).[55]

4 Conclusion

The Purāṇas present complex and, at first glance, paradoxical images of hell. Complex, in particular, in late sources like the *Moral Anthology*, which gather the different stages of the historical evolution of the hereafter in a synoptic form; paradoxical because the complexity and cruelty of the punitive hereafter stands alongside radically simple methods of escaping the torments of hell, available even to the worst sinners. In the Purāṇas, the hells seem to serve as a necessary opposite to the salvation offered by the elective god – Viṣṇu for some, Śiva for others. This rhetoric suffers no ambiguity: the power of the divinity, the recipient of devotion, is the only simple means allowing the vanquishment of death and the torments it promises to

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51 In Persian: *firishta.*
52 The original model of this form is the *Spiritual Mathnawī (Mathnawī-yi maʿnawī)* by Rūmī, the great thirteenth-century Persian mystic poet.
53 Rāy, *Rāmāyan-i fārsī*, 840.
54 Cf. Qurʾan 32.11.
55 Rāy, *Rāmāyan-i fārsī,* 841, l. 9, col. 3.

sinners. This golden age of Indian hells thus coincides with the rise to power of saviour gods.

When Islam appears in India, amongst the ruling elites as well as amongst the lower classes, it brings, in its mystic form, Sufism, a new discourse that makes the threat of hell as obsolete as the hope of paradise. From the fifteenth century onwards, Hindu devotional movements adopted Sufism's defiance with regard to the hereafter: death is no longer frightening, and if hell remains a recurrent motif in the theology of the worshippers of Viṣṇu and Śiva, its threat is now the object of mockery.

Yama, the god of the dead, survived in the Persian translations of the Purāṇas, which flourished in the Moghul empire, but in the guise of an angel, a form borrowed from Iranian mythology as much as from Islamic tradition. This primordial ancestor, who once was the king and judge of hell, for a time put on the appearance and the function of a psychopomp angel, such as the Azrael of the Semitic religions.

And Yama survives to our day in the modern literature of India, in television series, advertising, graphic novels and video games. He is often a rather simple and paunchy character and no longer provokes fear. He was deposed by much more popular gods who pit their promises of salvation against the challenge of death and hell.

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