

Negative Theology;

A Comparative Study on Ibn Arabi and Eckhart

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Abstract: What do we know about God? Is our knowledge about God accurate and proper, or is it not so? If God is absolute, how we, as human beings with our limited understanding, can define an infinite and absolute being? Can we apply the same terms that we use for our world to describe God? How did Christian and Muslim scholars explain God? This short essay tries to shed light on the discussion about God in both Christian and Islamic traditions. For this reason, we took Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart as examples of the mystical tradition of both religions. However, both use negative theology in their works, but the wayfarer's goal for each is different.

Keywords: God, Godhead, negative theology, Meister Eckhart, Ibn Arab

Introduction

One of the central issues that are discussed among the mystics of Islam and Christianity is defining God or describing what he is and what he is not? Another related discussion to this point is that how God is defined in the content of both religions.

Origen (185-254) among the early interpreters of the Bible mentions that in bible's discussion of God allegorical discourse is dominated to the other methods.¹ Opposite to him, Diodore of Tarsus (d. c. 393 CE)² was of the idea that allegory in the Bible was "unreliable and indeed illegitimate instrument for interpreting Scripture". (Kelly.p 76) Also regarding to many of Church father essence of God was transcendental and far from our imagination and perception.

Quran while describing God uses allegories such as hand and face. On the other hand, "nothing like a likeness of him" (Quran, 42:11). Transcendent God or allegorized or metaphorical description of him, each one attracted a group of the Muslim scholars and theologians. Regarding this issue one could find four main viewpoints toward God. There were at least four major approaches toward God among the Muslims. First approach which defends "Quranic God" suggests that Quranic anthropomorphic statements should be accepted as realities without further enquiry into their modality. Mu'tazilite approach on the other hand, interprets anthropomorphic statements as metaphor and allegorical.³ The third viewpoint is that of Sufis by

¹ For more on Origen's Philosophy of History & Eschatology see Panayiotis Tzamalikos, *Origen: Philosophy of History & Eschatology* (Brill, 24 Apr. 2007, 2007), 147-48. <https://brill.com/view/title/12557>.

² He was a member of the Council of Constantinople in 381. For more on him see Bergjan Silke-Petra, "Diodore of Tarsus," in *Religion Past and Present* (Brill).

³ Dates back to the first half of the 2nd/8th century. For more on the movement and its founders see D Gimaret, "MUTAZILA," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. Th. Bianquis P. Bearman, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, Encyclopaedia of Islam (Brill, 2012).

which God is described as God of Love.⁴ The fourth approach according to Netton belongs to the Neo-Platonian in which the transcendental face of God is based on emanation and hypostases like universal intellect and universal soul.⁵

Intellectual history of Islam and Christianity shows that God in both religions described within the terms of negation and anthropomorphic. In this essay we intent to see how two pioneers of Islamic and Christian mysticism, i.e., Ibn 'Arabi (1165 –1240)⁶ and Meister Eckhart (c. 1260 – c. 1327)⁷ dealt with God and why the language of negation or similarity was Important for them.

Ibn 'Arabi and Meister Eckhart are belonging to a period in which one can call it the golden edge of theorist mystics. This period is also coincided to the crusades.⁸ Both of the mystics have narrated that in their own time have met many mystics which somehow shows the popularity of mystic paths. There are many similarities between Eckhart and Ibn Arabi among which using negative theology is one of them. But there is a slight difference between them regarding the goal of human perfection and transcendence. Eckhart emphasize on Godhead as goal of human journey toward God where is nameless and God is submerged in his essence and there is no sign

⁴ For more on this aspect of God in the Islamic tradition see William C. Chittick, *Divine love : Islamic literature and the path to God* (2015). Ahmad ibn Mansūr Sam'ānī and William C. Chittick, *The repose of the spirits : a Sufi commentary on the divine names* (2020).

⁵ Ian Richard Netton, *Allah Transcendent Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology* (Routledge, 2013), 4-5.

⁶ For Ibn Arabi's life and teaching see William C. Chittick, *The Sufi path of knowledge : Ibn al-'Arabi's metaphysics of imagination* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989).

⁷ For a comprehensive study on Meister Eckhart see Jeremiah Hackett, *A Companion to Meister Eckhart* (Brill, 07 Dec. 2012, 2012). <https://brill.com/view/title/11883>.

⁸ For more on crusades see Taheri Abdullah Naseri and Asatryan Tr. Mushegh, "The Crusades," in *Encyclopaedia Islamica* (Brill). For an analyze of the Muslim world in the age of the crusades see Suleiman A. Mourad, Paul M. Cobb, and Konrad Hirschler, "The Muslim World in the Age of the Crusades: Studies and Texts," (Brill, 18 Dec. 2020). <https://brill.com/view/serial/MWAC>.

of creations, but Ibn Arabi refers to a stage that requires existence of the God and creatures and where God has names and attributions. Eckhart asks man to annihilate in Godhead, but Ibn Arabi invites man to the stage of names and attributions.

Negative Theology in Christian Tradition

Pseudo- Dionysius was one of the preeminent pioneers of negative theology among Christian philosophers. He had an inclination to talk about God apophatically and in terms of incomparability. He regarded positive theology, which uses positive and human attributes about God, as the multitude's theology. According to him, the elite, who want to have better knowledge of God, know him through the negative way (via negative). He holds that God has no limits and definition; hence God is nameless. According to his teachings via negative was "affirming our affirmations, then negating them, and then negating the negations to ensure that we do not make an idol out of a God about whom we know nothing. But it is also much more than this".⁹

Meister Eckhart, a Christian mystic and philosopher, deeply influenced by Pseudo- Dionysius, deliberated extensively on negative theology. "Meister Eckhart, however, cited Dionysius directly as a venerable authority, principally for the utter transcendence of God, beyond life and light and being itself. Eckhart used our author to confirm that God is beyond all concepts, that every description of God is ultimately incorrect, and that only negations and silence are finally appropriate."¹⁰

Eckhart holds that God is inexpressible and unthinkable. He even mentions God's non-

⁹ Kevin and L. Michael Harrington Corrigan, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University, Winter 2019).

<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite>.

¹⁰ Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart : the Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2017), 147-48.

being and says that God is not existent from the viewpoint of man. He emphasizes that:

When I think on God's Kingdom, I am compelled to be silent because of its immensity, because God's Kingdom is none of other than God Himself with all His riches. God's Kingdom is no small thing: we may survey in imagination all the worlds of God's creation, but they are not God's Kingdom. In **whichever** soul God's Kingdom appeareth, and which knoweth God's Kingdom, that soul needeth no human preaching or instruction; it is taught from within and assured of eternal life. Whoever knows and recognizes how near God's Kingdom is to him may say with Jacob, "God is in this place, and I knew it not."¹¹

By these sayings He means that from man's perspective, God has no positive comprehensible and understandable attribute, and because of God's being incomprehensible for man, and due to the fact, that being is one of the comprehensible attributes for us, hence being is negated about God. According to Eckhart man can know things in three ways: by their cause, via their own attributes or through their effects. But none of these ways is helpful in knowing God. Because we do not have any access to God himself nor to his attributes; and God has no cause so as to being known by it; and the last way is not helpful either since according to Eckhart God has no effects and He is in a mysterious tranquility and stillness. By this claim, Eckhart becomes one of forerunners of negative theologians. The Aristotelian theology in which God is presented as the Prime Cause is criticized by Eckhart via denial of the third way of knowing God i.e., knowing through the effects, because according to him God is not the Cause and Mover of the creatures

¹¹ Eckhart and Claud Herbert Allwyne Field, *Meister Eckhart's Sermons. First time translated into English by Claud Field* (1909), 8.

but the origin of their being emanated and, except this, creatures has no other relationship with Him. What we know of Aristotle's Prime Cause and attribute to God is rather, according to Eckhart, our own positive attributes; because via inferring the Cause from the effects, we, while a mere link in the chain of cause and effect, absolutize ourselves and propose it as the Supreme Cause. For Eckhart, the more we do the abstraction of the concept of God, the better we can look at Him; while the more we intend to know God via definitions of Aristotelian Logic, the further away we will be from Him; because in Aristotelian logic we know things by their essence, while according to Eckhart, God is superior to the existence, and, likewise, to the essence. Accordingly, he criticizes and rejects the similarity approach of Thomas Aquinas to theology. For Eckhart, the method of similarity is wrong because it is based on the idea of God's having an essence (which of course should be examined according to Aquinas's thoughts.)

For solving the problem of using language for God's attributes, Aquinas¹² put forward the theory of analogical predication; He maintains that the common attributes which are predicated on both God and man and other creatures are not univocal i.e., when we use 'existence' or 'knowing' for both God and man, the predicates do not have the same meaning in both predications. But he adds that though these predicates are not univocal, they are not equivocal either i.e., it is not such that, say, the existence that is attributed to God, means something totally alien and extrinsic to the existence that is ascribed to man or other creatures; but rather they are similar. For example, when we use the adjective 'hot' for food, a competition, and an exciting piece of news, though here the predications of hot are not synonymous, but they are not

¹² For his place in Christian-Muslim Relations see Burrell David, "Thomas Aquinas," in *Christian-Muslim Relations 600 - 1500*, Christian-Muslim Relations (Brill).

absolutely alien to each other and are somehow similar (and in fact this common core of meaning is the reason of using a common word for all of them.) According to Aquinas, there is a connection between Divine Justice and human justice i.e., there is a similarity between one of God's and man's attributes; it is because of this similarity that the predicate 'just' is not equivocal; of course, such predicates are not univocal either and that's because of the differences that are there, especially regarding being infinite and finite, between Divine and human attributes; but rather, as Aquinas shows, they are used analogically.¹³ Accordingly, it turns out that Aquinas's doctrine does not necessarily rely upon accepting an essence for God because there is not inevitably an essence and a joint origin for all attributes (in such a way that the common attributes denote to that essence and origin.) In fact, here Aquinas finds a middle way between anthropomorphism and agnosticism.

The Meaning of Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism, is what is called in Islamic tradition the pure similarity in which the difference between God and the creatures is a mere quantitative difference, hence when we speak about God no change is required in meaning of the words. Pure similarity has a history in Islamic tradition too. In Christian tradition, the world is assumed to be something blameworthy and evil and that's because of the key role of the notion of the original sin and the consequent descent of man from the heaven to the material world and the self-sacrifice of the Christ for purification of man from that disobedience; accordingly, the attributes of worldly creatures cannot be synonymous with that of God and immaterial beings.

¹³ Michael L. Peterson, "Reason & religious belief : an introduction to the philosophy of religion," ed. Michael L. Peterson (2nd ed., New York :: Oxford University Press, 1998).

On Agnosticism

Agnosticism is the same as pure incomparability in Islamic theological tradition i.e., we know nothing about God and we cannot ascribe any attributes to Him. In fact, God is none of the attributes we ascribe to Him. This doctrine is more compatible with the above-mentioned background of Christianity and the notion of original sin, hence it has more advocates in the Christian tradition and, as we said, Pseudo-Dionysus and Eckhart are among them. In Islamic tradition, the doctrine has a history too and Mutazilites are among its exponents, but the idea didn't last so long in the Islamic world.

Among Shi'ite theologians, the doctrine of "intermediate position" emerged and they tried to adopt a stance between absolute similarity and absolute incomparability.

Among Islamic mystics, Ibn Arabi holds that one of the characteristics of the Last of the Prophets' message, that not all prophets promoted, was equalization between absolute similarity and absolute incomparability. He maintains that though all prophets passed on the message of one God, some of them only declared absolute incomparability; it seems that by putting forward the similarity doctrine, Aquinas intends to propose a middle ground between absolute similarity and absolute incomparability too (or anthropomorphism and agnosticism). But Aquinas' idea is different from that of people like Ibn Arabi in Islamic tradition.

According to Ibn Arabi, the True (i.e., God) who is the origin of manifestation of everything, has two countenances: one is the Veiledness side and the other is the side of the relation of the True with His own Self-Disclosures. Ibn Arabi calls the first side "the Unseen of the Unseen". According to him, at this mode and stage, the True is in absolute incomparability and nothing can be said about Him; at this stage, even for the Blessed Prophet, the True is behind the

absolute Veil; but the True has another mode too and that's his Self-Disclosure in the creatures. Man ascribes the attributes to the True due to this mode. In Islamic Mysticism, the mystics even go beyond this and claim that everything is the Self-Disclosures of True and, nothing, but Him, has a true being, hence everything that people say and every attribute that they use, is in fact told about Him; describing anything necessitates that thing be a Disclosure of the True otherwise nothing would be describable. Ibn Arabi states that "if you insist only on his transcendence (*al-tanzih*) you restrict Him, and if you insist only on His Immanence (*al-tashbih*) you limit Him. If you maintain both aspects (*al-Amrayn*) you are right. (Netton, 274)

Among Christian philosophers too, it is Eckhart who assumes God, at one mode, to be at the stage of absolute incomparability; but when God is assumed to be in a relation with the creatures, He is assumed to have attributes. According to Eckhart, at the first stage, even the attribute of *being* is not ascribed to God; because His Intellect and Knowledge precedes His Existence; Eckhart holds the following verse from the Bible is an evidence for this: "first there was Logos"; he separates Deitas (Divinity) from God says that Deitas (Divinity) is identical with the One who enjoys Parits (Purity; Limpidity), whether purity form existence or purity from other attributes.

Deltas (Divinity) is the unknowable God who is superior to existence and superior to essence and is the origin of the emanation of all things. Deitas (Divinity) is a God superior to God; the only way to know Deitas (Divinity) is negating of any attributes about Him; but God is the [stage of the] divinity who enters in a relationship with the creatures, hence a knowable and describable deity.

At this stage, God does not exist without Man. He is God when the creatures exist; in fact

knowing God is only affirmatively possible, the exact opposite of knowability of Deitas (Divinity) which is only apophatically possible. Many of Christian theologians understood him to be adding a fourth person to the Holy Trinity who is superior to them too. But Eckhart interpreted it for several times as saying that Deitas (Divinity) is identical with Father or the Origin.¹⁴ (Ilkhani 515.)

Regarding each of the aforementioned philosophers and mystics, this issue can be put forward according to another criterion too. This criterion has a history in Shi'ite theological thought and even the Inerrant (the Prophet, his daughter and twelve Imams) has explicitly took a stance on it. The criteria consist in discriminating or not discriminating between God's 'Essence' and His 'Attributes' i.e., duality or non-duality of Essence versus Attributes of God. According to Shi'ite thought, God has no separable Attributes from His Essence and Imam Ali explicitly asserts this. According to this criterion, we can safely assume that Shi'ite theologian's doctrine of intermediate position and Aquinas' doctrine of similarity are reasonable and (at least apparently) true.

But about Eckhart (who believed that God does not even have an Essence and, at the stage of Deitas [Divinity], is not even describable by existence) it should be mentioned that though being existent seems to be a different attribute from other ones, and using it about God does not necessarily mean comparing God with the creatures, he refuses to accept the univocity of existence (being). Like neo-platonic philosophers, he assumes the universe to be hierarchical and regards God as the origin of the emanation of the universe. In Neoplatonism¹⁵, the Unique

¹⁴ İlkhānī, Muḥammad. 2011. *Tārīkh-i Falsafah dar Qurūn-i Vusṭā va Runisāns*. Tehran: Samt.

¹⁵ For more on this movement see Wildberg, Christian, "Neoplatonism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/neoplatonism/>.

(the One, the Alone) who is at the highest level of being, is not the origin of emanation of everything; but rather according to the principle of the one which holds that “nothing issues from the One except one”, from the Unique (the One, the Alone) is only issued the First Intellect, and other levels of being are issued from the First Intellect. Accordingly, there is a gap between the highest level of being and the lowest one (the world of the senses) which gets in the way of their relationship. This appears to hold true for Eckhart’s idea on the subject too. Regarding Trinity, Eckhart believes that from Father originates Son and treat both Father and Son as the joint origin of issuing the Holy Spirit. Once the hierarchy of issuing of the universe develops into the world of the senses, again a gap like the one in neo-platonic cosmology¹⁶ appears; but in Ibn Arabi’s mysticism, though there are Five Divine Presences seemingly similar to levels and classes of the Being in Neoplatonism, the True is hold to be the origin of disclosure of the whole universe; thus there is not any alienation between the True and the world of the senses; accordingly Ibn Arabi uses analogical terms for God’s Attributes; but as we said earlier, he also maintains that the True has the stage of the Unseen of the Unseen which is indescribable. Apparently, this doctrine in Ibn Arabi’s theoretical mysticism, is not so much inspired by Neoplatonism as it is by Islam and some Quranic verses which maintains an incomparable and incomprehensible stage for God; in fact, via this, Ibn Arabi accommodates these verses with some other verses which mentions the Attributes and Names of God.

¹⁶ For an explanation of cosmology in the Islamic intellectual and religious tradition see Seyed Amirhossein Asghari, "Ontology and Cosmology of the 'aql in Šadrā's Commentary on Uṣūl al-Kāfi," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1353/isl.2017.0011>.

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