

SUFI PATHS OF NEGATIVE SPEECH: APOPHASIS IN THIRTEENTH
CENTURY ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

By

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to Asli:

We have grown a flower that
does not fit into the pot.

Technical Note on Transliterations

This study adopts the IJMES transliteration system for Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, and modern Turkish (<http://ijmes.chass.ncsu.edu/docs/TransChart.pdf>).

CONSONANTS

A = Arabic, P = Persian, OT = Ottoman Turkish, MT = Modern Turkish

	A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT		A	P	OT	MT
ء	◌	◌	◌	—	ز	z	z	z	z	ك	k	k or g	k or ñ	k or n
ب	b	b	b	b or p	ژ	—	zh	j	j				or y	or y
پ	—	p	p	p	س	s	s	s	s				or ğ	or ğ
ت	t	t	t	t	ش	sh	sh	ş	ş	گ	—	g	g	g
ث	th	ṣ	ṣ	s	ص	ṣ	ṣ	ş	s	ل	l	l	l	l
ج	j	j	c	c	ض	ḍ	ẓ	ẓ	z	م	m	m	m	m
چ	—	ch	ç	ç	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	t	ن	n	n	n	n
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	h	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	z	ه	h	h	h ¹	h ¹
خ	kh	kh	h	h	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	و	w	v or u	v	v
د	d	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	g or ğ	g or ğ	ي	y	y	y	y
ذ	dh	z	z	z	ف	f	f	f	f	ة	a ²			
ر	r	r	r	r	ق	q	q	q	k	ال				

¹ When h is not final. ² In construct state: at. ³ For the article, al- and -l-.

VOWELS

	ARABIC AND PERSIAN	OTTOMAN AND MODERN TURKISH
<i>Long</i>	ا or آ ā و ū ي ī	ā ū ī
		} words of Arabic and Persian origin only
<i>Doubled</i>	ـيـ iyy (final form ī) ـوـ uww (final form ū)	iy (final form ī) uvv
<i>Diphthongs</i>	او au or aw اي ai or ay	ev ey
<i>Short</i>	ا a و u ي i	a or e u or ü / o or ö ı or i

For Ottoman Turkish, authors may either transliterate or use the modern Turkish orthography.

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This dissertation examines the formations, historical developments, and contextual regulations of negative speech (apophasis) in pre-modern Sufism, and its contemporary representations in Islamic Studies. The dissertation (i) problematizes the current approaches to apophasis and negative theologies in the study of religion, particularly in relation to Islam (Ch.1-3); (ii) constructs a genealogy of the terms “apophasis” and “negative theology” in the last two centuries (Ch.1-2); (iii) presents in-depth case studies that provide contextual analyses of Sufi performances of apophasis in the fields of theology (Ch.4-7), and mystical union (Ch.8).

In the first two chapters, I bring a fresh perspective to the field by approaching “apophasis,” and “negative theology” as second-order, scholarly categories that are not *sui generis* religious, philosophical, mystical, or critical. This shift in perspective makes clear that contemporary studies on apophasis and negative theologies, as well as their reflections on Islamic Studies and Sufism, are in large part responses to the challenges and demands of modernity. Chapter 3 argues that “negative theology” is a blanket term that cannot distinguish between the varieties of theological questions that medieval scholars asked. I differentiate “negative theologies of the divine essence” from “negative theologies of divine attributes.” Chapters 4-to-7 introduce the formations and historical developments of four prominent negative theological positions on the divine essence that circulated among medieval Sufis. Chapter 8 examines Sufi approaches to the *unio mystica* in the thirteenth century, in order to display the ways in which negative speech is governed by context-specific norms and institutions.

This dissertation not only constitutes the first book-length study of negative theologies in medieval Islam, but it also makes wider theoretical contributions to the contemporary study of religion particularly in two respects. First, the genealogies in the first two chapters demonstrate that the study of negative theologies and apophaticism is a highly politicized field that needs to be informed by the self-reflexivity and historical consciousness provided by a second-order analysis of its terms. Second, Chapters 3-8 show that negative speech, like every speech-act, is a historically embedded performance that should be carefully contextualized within the multi-layered discursive spaces that it affirms in order to operate.

**PART 1. "APOPHASIS TRIUMPHANT:" A GENEALOGY OF NEGATIVE SPEECH IN
THE STUDY OF RELIGION**

“Apophasis” is an uncanny term that has been increasingly employed in the Humanities in recent decades. Appearing largely within the context of another uncanny field, “negative theology,” apophasis has generally been translated as “unsaying” or “negative speech.” Especially since the 1970s, the appeal to the term in the study of religion, arts, philosophy, contemporary theology, gender and sexuality, and literature has soared.¹ But what do we mean exactly by “apophasis”? While scholars associate the term with the performative negation of discourse, closer analysis displays a variety of definitions. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as a rhetorical term, which means “to speak off,” or simply “to deny.” For scholars of religion, it is much more than that. For H. Wolfson (d.1974), for example, “apophasis” names the *via negativa* of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim theological traditions that cannot be separated from their shared Neoplatonic heritage. From this perspective, “apophasis” is an inherently theological term with a sustained history and specific intellectual context. Yet for other prominent scholars of comparative religion since the time of H. Corbin (d.1978), “apophasis” is primarily a mystical gesture that is self-consciously pessimistic about discursive constructs. Briefly, the heart of apophasis is seen as mysticism. Yet another approach has been developed by post-modernist scholars especially after Derrida (d.2004) and Jean-Luc Marion (b.1946). Accordingly, “apophasis” cannot actually be defined. It is the infinitely self-critical, hence unnamable, turn present in the critique of each discursive construct. As the possibility of limitless criticism, “apophasis” is a term that resists all definitions.

The diversity of definitions of “apophasis” recalls J. Z. Smith’s recognition of more than fifty definitions of the term “religion.” Indeed, some of the prominent definitions of religion, similar to the case of “apophasis,” have depicted “religion” as an inherently religious or mystical concept that is difficult to define. What would happen if we used J. Z. Smith’s advice on the term “religion” as a springboard for the analysis of “apophasis”? What if we do not remove the quotation marks from “apophasis” in the study of religion? In the following two chapters, I am adopting such an approach, which shifts my focus from the *sui generis essence* of the term “apophasis” to its much needed but yet to be written *genealogy*—the critical history of how scholars employed the term, especially in the last century.²

¹ See Laird 2001, pp.1-12.

² Schmidt (2003) followed a similar strategy in his analysis of the concept “mysticism.” I agree with Hollywood on the difficulty in separating the history of how “mysticism” is used in the

In order to shed light on the understudied presence of “apophasis” in the study of religion, I juxtapose two different but interconnected literatures in the following two chapters. In the first chapter, I skip the ancient Greek and Latin history of “apophasis,” and fast-forward to the history of the term in the last two centuries in Europe. This part traces the transformation of the concept in the second half of the 1970s that will dominate the subsequent literature in the study of religion. The second chapter traces the parallel history of the academic study of Islam in order to display how the transformation of the term “apophasis,” indeed, perpetuates the earlier modern assumptions on agency, morality, and universalism within a pluralistic discourse. In the mid-1970s apophasis emerged in Western philosophy as “infinite critique” through a culmination of the long-standing assumptions about modernity as a moral, critical and pluralistic enterprise. The description of Sufism as inimical to apophasis, and the god of Sufism as the immanent as opposed to the incomparably and ineffably transcendent swiftly changed into their *direct opposites* after this period. After the 1970s, studies on apophasis turn towards Sufism, while the assumptions on modernity as well as the motivated associations of agency, morality and pluralism in relation to Islam remain unthought. Since the 1970s, the transcendent god of “Islamic theology” generally continues to carry the unfavorable connotations of lacking in human agency, morality, and pluralism from a philosophical perspective, while the now-transcendent god of Sufis and mystics is celebrated for being apophatic, and for opening space for critical thinking, universalism and morality. “Apophasis” triumphs in the study of religion from the 1970s with reference to the ineffable, utterly transcendent god of Sufis, as opposed to the outdated, oppressive, “Semitic” transcendence of god in Islam.

academic study of religion from that of its religious use. (Hollywood 2012, p.7, n13.) Obviously, the very presence of multiple scholarly approaches and definitions indicates the intertwining of the scholarly scrutiny on the term and the religious history of that term. Yet, exactly due to this infiltration between “mysticism” as a scholarly and a religious term, I find it immensely helpful to make that initial distinction of J. Z. Smith and Schmidt in order to identify how the term evolved or varied under particular assumptions, and attained (or lost) meanings or significance in specific contexts. In conclusion of such analysis, I will not claim that “apophasis” is a scholarly, and not a religious, term—a statement that makes peculiar authoritarian and normative claims. Instead, I will argue that any employment of the term should be guided by the genealogical analysis in order to avoid perpetuating assumptions that remain otherwise invisible. Religious employments of “apophasis” will benefit from the perspective that analyzes it as a term that scholars have employed within particular contexts, with motivated selections, interpretations, and principles of rarification. (See Foucault 2002, p.134.)

From a methodological perspective, then, I argue in this part that it is insufficient to see “apophasis” as a *sui generis* mystical, theological, philosophical, critical etc. term. Approaching “apophasis” as a second-order scholarly category, “our category,” sheds light on our own assumptions in the study of religion and philosophy. Any constructive theological, philosophical or comparative endeavor that appeals to “apophasis” as its own, endemic concept needs to be informed by the self-reflexivity and historical consciousness provided by second-order analysis of the term. I am appealing to this insight in the next part in the analysis of the negative theological current that circulated in the medieval Islamic world.

CHAPTER 1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF APOPHASIS IN THE LAST TWO CENTURIES

While there is an increasing number of scholarly works that explain how apophatic various people and ideas have been throughout history, a genealogy of how “apophasis” [“negative speech”] has been fashioned and redefined in these works is yet to be written. This chapter presents the first step towards a genealogy of the term “apophasis.” It approaches “apophasis” as a second-order category employed by scholars, instead of an inherently critical, theological, philosophical, mystical, or universal term. Yet, the complex, intertwined intellectual developments of the last two centuries make it difficult to trace the history of the Greek term “apophasis” and its relationship to the study of religion. Hence the study begins with the earliest, safest home of apophasis, i.e., rhetoric, and moves to the comparative study of religion where the term emerged, with considerable controversy, only towards the end of the 1940s.

A. “Apophasis” as a Rhetorical Figure of Speech: Parasitism

Dictionaries should be the least interesting place to search for the history of such a solemn term—yet they have consistently provided the most dependable terrains for “apophasis” to date. “Apophasis” has been firmly situated within the field of rhetoric in the last four centuries even though the field underwent major changes. The term has long been considered in the field of rhetoric as a Latin concept that entered into English without losing its original linguistic significance in Greek. At the same time, this significance is limited to that of a figure of speech, devoid of any philosophical and theological content, or critical import.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, especially after John Locke (d.1704)’s lectures at Oxford in 1663 that launched an attack on Aristotelian/Ciceronian rhetoric, a new scientific study of rhetoric was established.³ English philologist and lexicographer Nathan Bailey (d.1742)’s *Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, which became the most popular dictionary of the century, was among the earliest dictionaries to follow the new Lockean paradigm and to define “apophasis.” Accordingly, “apophasis” was “a figure of rhetorick, whereby an Oratour seems to wave what he [*sic*] would plainly insinuate.”⁴ On the other hand, John Holmes’ (d.1759) work (pbl.1739) on rhetoric and oratory, which embodied an effort to revive the classical rhetoric of Cicero, defined “apophasis” quite similarly as “omission,” sometimes called as

³ Lynn 2010, pp.224-225.

⁴ Bailey 1770, no page number.

“*paraleipsis*, a passing over,” and sometimes “*parasiopesis*, a concealing.”⁵ To put it in rhymes: “apophasis, t’enforce, *slights* or says less.”⁶ The compendium (pbl.1806), which brought together John Stirling (d.1777)’s *a System of Rhetoric* and John Holmes’ *the Art of Rhetoric Made Easy*, repeated verbatim the definition of apophasis as a figure of speech, with a curious change in the emphasis from “slight” to “saying less:”

what is apophasis? Apophasis, t’enforce, *slights* or says less. ...
Omission, or passing over.⁷

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the definition took a standard form. House (d.1901) employed the term as one of the “powerful expedients of rhetoric” in his novel (pbl.1881) on Japan.⁸ Along with the American professor of rhetoric D. Jayne Hill (d.1932),⁹ the famous British grammarian Quackenbos (d.1881) categorized “apophasis” under “figures of rhetoric,” giving the definition that “*apophasis, paralipsis, or omission, is the pretended suppression of what one is all the time actually mentioning; as ‘I say nothing of the notorious profligacy of his character’.*”¹⁰ He would repeat the same definition in his book *an English Grammar* in 1887.¹¹ At the end of the century, W. D. Cox’s, *Principles of Rhetoric* repeated verbatim not only Quackenbos’ definition of apophasis as a concept interchangeable with paralipsis and omission, but also the example that he had given.¹²

The standard approach to “apophasis” in rhetoric did not change in the twentieth century. In the 1950s, apophasis was mainly a focus of speech theoreticians, all of whom were publishing in the journal *Speech Monographs*. Otto Alvin Loeb Dieter (d.1968), a Professor of Speech at the University of Illinois, defined “apophasis” as the negative form of a grammatical unity and an abstract speech strategy. The apophasis of a verb was “the negative of the verb”—not only parasitic to the positive definition of a verb, but also devoid of theological,

⁵ Holmes 1755, pp.46-47.

⁶ Holmes 1755, pp.44; original emphasis, not mine.

⁷ Stirling and Holmes 1806, p.39; original emphasis, not mine.

⁸ House 1881, p.73.

⁹ Hill 1884, p.254.

¹⁰ Quackenbos 1874, p.252.

¹¹ Quackenbos 1887, p.277.

¹² “*Apophasis, or Omission, is the pretended suppression of what one is all the time actually mentioning. This is an oratory device in common use. Example: ‘I say nothing of the notorious profligacy of his character’.*” (Cox 1897, p.52.)

or self-critical connotations.¹³ “Apophasis” was seen as a literary strategy of negating a statement in the rhetorical repertoire. As an article published in 1962 defined it in line with Quackenbos, apophasis was a “device wherein the rhetor brings up a topic while disclaiming his intention to mention it (‘I will say nothing of his many crimes’).”¹⁴ Thus it could be employed as a “*technique of abuse while denying abusive intent*.”¹⁵ Abusive or not, apophasis necessarily begged for a positive (or affirmative) statement at first as it was just one of many literary ways of negating a statement. There could be no negation without something that lends itself to negation—“apophasis” was not able to stand on its own. Nadeau explains the *ipso facto* parasitic nature of “apophasis” through the legal case of the Greek rhetorician Hermogenes (fl. 2nd CE). In the case of an accusation, first there had to be “an initial charge (*kataphasis*) [while] the answer to it (*apophasis*) came after that.”¹⁶ “Apophasis” could be employed not only for negating a statement, but also for responding to a given statement negatively. Indeed, it was perpetually seen to be related to the field of accusation and defense.¹⁷ Apophasis as a figure of speech employed for the defendant’s response to, and denial of, the charge kept its prominence after the 1980s.¹⁸ It was seen as but one of many ways of expressing negation as a literary tool in the sustained tradition of the Renaissance rhetoricians. “Renaissance rhetoricians use three predominant figures to denote negation. These are *aequipollentia* or *isodunamia*, *negando* or *antiphrasis*, and *negatio*, otherwise known as *apophasis* or *depulsio*.”¹⁹ “Apophasis,” among these tools, meant to “employ a self-conscious and casuistic irony that results in purposeful self-contradiction.”²⁰ This effect could be accomplished with other tools of rhetoric as well. While negation

¹³ Dieter 1950, p.348; Preus and Anton 1992, p.18 (n16), 129 (n8), 337; Egli 1987, pp.122-130.

¹⁴ Cook 1962, p.272.

¹⁵ Cook 1962, p.272; my emphasis.

¹⁶ Nadeau 1964, p.374.

¹⁷ “Something is said: the Greeks call this *phasis*. It is separated into two parts, of which one is called *kataphasis* and the other *apophasis*. For *kataphasis* (surely, to translate the term with ‘affirmation,’ *aiencia*, is inadequate), we may say ‘the verbal statement of the charge’ (*intentio verho facta*), for instance: ‘You struck the blow; you betrayed; you killed.’ However, what they designate as the *apophasis* we may call ‘the denial of the offense which the accuser has charged’ (*abnuentia criminis eius quod accusator intenderit*), for instance: ‘I did not strike the blow; I did not kill; I did not betray.’” (Dieter and Kurth 1968, p.101.)

Also see Klein 1971, p.43.

¹⁸ Carter, 1988, p.99. Apollonius 1981, p.211, 270-274.

¹⁹ Fischlin 1989, p.158.

²⁰ Fischlin 1989, p.159.

was possible in various ways, apophasis provided but one interchangeable means for expressing a specific rhetorical intent.

In brief, rhetorical analysis has depicted “apophasis” consistently as a figure of speech that necessarily needs other figures in order to be employed: an accusation to deny, an abusive intent to hide, or a positive statement to negate. While this trend of study has been steady, its significance has been dwarfed by the explosion of a massive literature on apophasis in the last decades in philosophy, theology, and the study of religion. Still, the fact that the most “up-to-date” entry on “apophasis” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (pbl.2013) dates to 1753 and appears under the category of “rhetoric” illustrates the persistence of this approach.²¹ Within this framework of rhetoric “apophasis” has been analyzed linguistically, while the themes of negative theology, deconstruction, mysticism, or Neoplatonism are completely absent in abstract linguistic analysis.²² In this sustained dwelling, “apophasis” has long been a rhetorical figure of speech interchangeable with other figures depending on the context. Most importantly, “apophasis” is neither able to stand on its own without a given affirmative statement, nor is it incommensurable with another figure of speech.

B. “Apophasis” as a Theological Concept: the *Via Negativa* of Mysticism

Translations of and studies on the pre-Socratic, Attic, Hellenistic and Imperial philosophical writings found new momentum in the nineteenth century thanks to the formation of a Greek consciousness and its glorification as the Hellenic origins of the “West.” However, it was only with Harry Wolfson (d.1974) that “apophasis” comes to the fore as a prominent comparative theological concept of Greek origin. H. Wolfson saw the three monotheistic religions inextricably intertwined with, and influenced by, the Greek intellectual heritage, Neoplatonism in particular. His analysis of monotheistic philosophical and theological ideas easily transformed into tracing the history of the original Greek terms translated into Syriac, Arabic, Latin or Hebrew. His early study in 1952 showed that the Middle Platonist Albinus (fl.2nd CE) and Plotinus (d.270) both were employing “the term *aphairesis* in the technical sense of Aristotle’s *apophasis*.”²³ A few years later he expanded his analysis to the employment of “apophasis” by the Church Fathers Basilides (2nd CE), Gregory of Nyssa (d.395),

²¹ “apophasis, n.” OED Online 2013.

²² See e.g. Morton 2003, p.270; Ungar 2004, p.169.

²³ H. Wolfson 1952, p.121.

Pseudo-Dionysius (fl.5th CE) and John of Damascus (d.748).²⁴ Soon the analysis further expanded to include early Islamic theologies. Studying the accounts of the later doxographies on Islamic theological currents of the eighth and ninth centuries, Wolfson came to the conclusion that “in Arabic, there are two words for ‘negatio:’ *salb*, which is used as a translation of the Greek *apophasis*, and *nafy*, which reflects the Greek *aphairesis*.”²⁵ Wolfson’s articles would later be collected into one of the most authoritative sources for the study of Islamic theology for decades to come.²⁶

A long and controversial history within Christianity antedates the rise of “apophasis” as a Neoplatonic concept shared among Abrahamic religions. Some pagan philosophers, and early Christian theologians employed the term. Yet it is difficult to say that “apophasis” was a theologically legitimate term either in its early context, or in the eyes of the scholars of religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead, *Apophasis Megale*, attributed to the legendary early heretic Simon Magus indicates that “apophasis” as a rhetorical tool was prone to becoming a theologically derogatory term. Magus was widely seen as “an opponent of Christian doctrine and of the Apostles” both by the Catholic and Protestant theologians, who saw *Apophasis Megale* respectively as an expression of “a heathen Gnosticism”²⁷ or as the “esoteric theology”²⁸ of an early heretic. The Swiss-German Protestant theologian Herzog (d.1882)’s entry “Simon Magus” was rendered to English in 1891. “*Apophasis Megale*” could be better translated into English as “the Great Declaration,” which would fit into the exposition of teachings in the book, and preserve the original positive theological sense of the term. *A Patristic-Greek Lexicon* (pbl.1961) demonstrates that “apophasis” not only meant to deny or negate, but also to decree or declare plainly.²⁹ Martin Luther (d.1546) employed the term “apophasis” in this latter sense of “declaration.”³⁰ Nevertheless, “*Apophasis Megale*” was rendered into

²⁴ See H. Wolfson 1957.

²⁵ H. Wolfson 1959, p.80. Later studies on Islamic theology will show the limitations of this approach to the transmission of its meaning from Greek to Arabic.

²⁶ See H. Wolfson 1976.

²⁷ Kirsch 1912, p.798.

²⁸ Herzog 1884, p.255.

²⁹ See Noble in T. Jones 2011, p.165.

T. Jones argues that Marion employs the term in this paradoxical sense that resists to reducing its meaning to pure negation. See T. Jones 2011, pp.8-9.

³⁰

English at the end of the nineteenth century as “the Great Denial,” indicating the negation and denial of the Christian doctrine and the deeply disgraceful connotation of the term “apophasis.”³¹ The figure of speech for “denial” was neither theologically neutral nor was it limited to a defense before an initial charge. “Apophasis” negated not an initial charge, but theological discourse, hence it had an intensely unfavorable meaning within this context.

Not only “apophasis,” but its natural companions or even synonyms, “*via negativa*” and “negative theology” have ignoble meanings until recently. These unfavorable meanings would begin to be questioned only a few decades later. R. A. Vaughan (d.1857)’s *Hours with the Mystics* (pbl.1856) employs the terms “*via negativa*” and “*via apophatica*” interchangeably.³² This path of negation—“the highway of mysticism”—is self-contradictory,³³ hateful towards “the very name of speculation,”³⁴ and “associated with the unhealthy morality always attendant on pantheism.”³⁵ Darkness of ignorance falls on reason, imagination and memory in *via negativa*: “we are sunk below humanity.”³⁶ Explicit employment of the term “apophasis” like Vaughan’s was quite rare. Max Muller’s influential work (pbl.1895) on comparative mysticism depicts Pseudo-Dionysius, Johannes Scotus Eriugena (d.877), and Meister Eckhart, as the key names of Neoplatonist *theosophy* instead of Christian negative theology. “Apophasis” or “*via negativa*”

Why do I go on? Why do we not end the case with this Introduction, and pronounce sentence on you from your own words, according to that saying of Christ: “By your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt.12:37)? For you say that Scripture is not crystal clear on this point, and then you suspend judgment and discuss both sides of the question, asking what can be said for it and what against; and *you do nothing else in the whole of this book, which for that reason you have chosen to call a Diatribe rather than an Apophasis or anything else*, because you write with the intention of collating everything and affirming nothing. (Luther in Luther and Erasmus 1969, p.167; my emphasis.)

Also see Carter in Shirbinī 1981, p.277n3.

The deprivation of “apophasis” from this positive and affirmative dimension in its reduction to denial is eye-catching.

³¹ Herzog 1891, p.2184. Also see Baur and Zeller 1884, p.64.

³² Vaughan 1893, Vol.2, p.115.

³³ Vaughan 1893, Vol.2, p.116.

³⁴ Vaughan 1893, Vol.1, pp.36-17.

³⁵ Vaughan 1893, Vol.1, p.91.

³⁶ Vaughan 1893, Vol.1, p.86.

does not appear in the book, but significantly, Muller has an unfavorable view of anything negative. "Negation" has no intrinsic value, but a lowly status for him: for example, *religious ideas grow from the negative to the positive stage*.³⁷ William Inge (d.1954), prolific Anglican priest and professor at Cambridge also impugned the *via negativa*, which was a Neoplatonic plague on Christian mystics. Many of these mystics fell "victim to the unfortunate negative method,"³⁸ he wrote. Thorold (d.1936)'s *Catholic Mysticism* (pbl.1900), similarly, has no room for "negation" except unfavorable contexts.³⁹ This association of negativity with mysticism in Christianity was the most widespread approach, and ended up criticizing at least some forms of mysticism on rational and moral grounds. E. Gregory's *Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (pbl.1901) also attacked mysticism and its negative path. She charges mysticism with the "two greatest errors:" first, "pantheism," and second, "nothingness." The latter focuses on "the divine dark" and "*docta ignorantia*," which undermine rational theology and lead to pessimism. Accordingly, this negativist doctrine is "closely connected with all Oriental Mysticism, and the Buddhist Nirvana."⁴⁰ The difference between good and evil fades away in such a pantheistic mysticism, and undermines all discursive constructs, including religious morality.

An important yet elusive dimension of these critiques of the mystical *via negativa* is their surprising emphasis on the socially and politically active capacity of mysticism.⁴¹ The moral problem in the *via negativa* is not only its annulment of the distinction between good and evil, or its doctrinal denial, but also its privatized, passivist individualism. "*Via negativa*" for Culp (pbl.1914) names not only theological negation, but a larger unethical negativist worldview that contains the practical form of self-abnegation as well. With its self-abasement and contempt, the negative path suggests resignation and absolute denial of the self—a "mental inactivity" that is "Buddhistic in character."⁴² Another American scholar to sharply criticize the *via negativa* was the Quaker Rufus Jones (d.1948), one of the most prolific American writers on mysticism. Jones' critique of negativity was fortified by discussions on, and references to, a rich variety of

³⁷ Muller 1895, p.vii. The philosopher Mellone employed the term "via negativa" in the same manner, as a reference to an unserviceable manner of thinking. See Mellone 1905, p.529.

³⁸ Inge 1899, p.87.

³⁹ See e.g. Thorold 1900, p.50.

⁴⁰ E. Gregory 1901, p.34.

⁴¹ See Schmidt 2003, pp.292-293.

⁴² Culp 1914, pp.21-22.

Christian scholars, all of whom were mystics in his mind. Accordingly, the *via negativa* not only renders the affirmative truths of Christianity relativistic and irrelevant,⁴³ but it also removes the distinction between good and evil—the necessary ground for morality,⁴⁴ “ending in a blind alley of quietism.”⁴⁵ Normative and healthy mysticism is a transformative social force, as exemplified in Jones’ insistence on the practical social implications of a revived mysticism and his dedication to the Fellowship of Reconciliation.⁴⁶ It is rather negative mysticism that is individualistic and morally problematic for R. Jones. G. Coe, who reviewed the book, perceptively points to Jones’ persistent critique of the “classical *via negativa*” as a repeated theme in the book. He also presents major disagreements with R. Jones on various topics, yet as a critical reviewer Coe joins the author in the critique, and moral deficiency, of the negative path.⁴⁷ Similarly, in his *Mysticism and Modern Life* (pbl.1915) Methodist John Wright Buckham (d.1945) also criticizes negative and individualistic mysticisms. Buckham defends what he calls “social mysticism” or “active mysticism,” and underlines that mysticism cannot be separated from service to others and political activism.⁴⁸ Insofar as activism sets its normative, moral standards, mystical theology cannot be reduced to pure negation: “the doctrine of mysticism is not reducible merely to a negative affirmation of an ineffable and empty reality.”⁴⁹ J. Royce (d.1916), the American idealist philosopher at Harvard, depicts *via negativa* as “the way of contrast” which not only falls short of answering final metaphysical questions but also denies the immediacy of experience and its noetic quality. With the individualistic turn inward, mystics dispense with their (moral) capacity to act. Famous Anglo-Catholic writer Evelyn Underhill (d.1941)’s *The Mystic Way* (pbl.1914), parallels Royce’s approach:

The idea of God as the utterly transcendent and unknowable Absolute, only attainable by the *via negativa* of a total rejection of the sensual world ... led to that harsh separation of the active from the contemplative life and of the temporal from the eternal

⁴³ R. Jones 1909, pp.108-109.

⁴⁴ R. Jones 1909, pp.111. “As evil is as negation, an unreality, it has no place or being in the final consummation.” (R. Jones 1909, pp.127.)

⁴⁵ R. Jones 1909, pp.298.

⁴⁶ On R. Jones’ approach to mysticism, see Schmidt 2003, pp.290-293.

⁴⁷ Coe 1910, p.668.

⁴⁸ Buckham 1915, pp.154-155. Also see Schmidt 2003, p.293.

⁴⁹ Buckham 1915, p.22.

world which is definitely un-Christian—a destruction of the synthesis achieved by Jesus.⁵⁰

Until the 1920s, *via negativa* was not the sturdy ship upon which one would board ones friends. Instead of saving the entire boat from the rocks of unfavorable associations, some scholars followed the way of selectively saving individual mystics by getting them off the boat—underlining the essential positivity of their theological ideas. In his *Aspects of Christian Mysticism* (pbl.1907), W. M. Scott acknowledges and participates in the critical depiction of negative theology. But he also aims to demonstrate that Christian mystics like Pseudo-Dionysius, and especially Meister Eckhart, were not falling into that error, as they actually affirmed the positive Being of God beyond the negations and affirmations.⁵¹ In the same vein, *the Cambridge Medieval History* (pbl.1911) declares that St. Augustine (d.430), like the Cappadocian Fathers, kept his feet “from the hopeless *via negativa* by an intense personal conviction of the abiding presence of God.”⁵² This *selective ethicalization*, and *positivization* of mysticism as opposed to negative mystical or theological paths was a remarkable *modernizing* process that was underway in the scholarship on religion in nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe and United States.

In brief, the classical dwelling of “apophasis”—negative theology and its negative path—is widely condemned for being morally and theologically unfit for Christianity at the beginning of the twentieth century. The unfavorable depiction of *via negativa* begins to be questioned only towards the 1920s, but holds its general sway until the late 1970s. Prominent theologian and the Director of the Slavonic Studies at the Institute for Oriental Europe in Italy, A. Palmieri (d.1926) accepts that the negative path of Christian mystics is an imperfect one. This imperfection, however, is not inherent to the divine truth—it is only the outcome of human limitedness before it.⁵³ Still, the mystical *via negativa* has clear disadvantages compared to the knowledge of the Christian dogma attained through analogical cognition. A more direct and influential defense of the *via negativa* comes from what we may call “the elite converts”—the prominent scholars of religion who had pioneered the very attacks on the negative path. In *Philosophy of Plotinus* (pbl.1918), Inge continues to associate the negations of

⁵⁰ Underhill 1914, p.286.

⁵¹ Scott 1907, pp.42-55.

⁵² Stewart 1911, p.579.

⁵³ Palmieri 1917, pp.602-603.

Indian religions with nihilism, but he completely changes his interpretation of the *via negativa* in Christian mysticism as well as Neoplatonism. Criticizing J. Royce, Inge argues now that the *via negativa* is not just a senseless effort of “peeling the onion,” but an expression of excessive emotions that cannot be formulated otherwise.⁵⁴ Similarly, R. Jones, who had harshly criticized mysticism and *via negativa* for a decade, writes now in 1922 that the negative path is a spiritual response to the divine, mystical darkness.⁵⁵ R. Jones’ quotation from William James (d.1910) in this context clarifies one of the reasons for this turn. At the beginning of the century, W. James had adopted a minority opinion on the *via negativa* by claiming that the “negation of negation” in Christian mysticism in fact affirms the positive presence of God.⁵⁶ The *via negativa* is a component of a dialectical path, in which negation is “a mode of passage towards a higher kind of affirmation.”⁵⁷ Hence, instead of being a pure denial of the deity, of self, or of good and evil, the *via negativa* participates in a subtle form of ethics which combines intellectual mystery with moral mystery.⁵⁸ The *via negativa*, at least in Christianity, is not necessarily an immoral or nihilistic pre-modern mode of negation, but it might fit into modern morality exactly because it is *essentially* affirmative.

By the end of the 1920s, the term “*via negativa*” could be read in either of two mutually exclusive ways in the West: a marginal form of Christian theology with legitimate mystical credentials as its negations eventually affirm God and the Christian dogma; or an immoral, self-renouncing, unruly mysticism epitomized in the “Orient.” Influential scholars like W. James and R. Otto (d.1937) underlined the decisive role of negativity in Christian theology and mystical experiences, yet many theologians and philosophers kept defining *via negativa* as “nebulous, ill-defined, vague.”⁵⁹ Its purported weakness in affirming the Christian dogma, or in

⁵⁴ Inge 1918, pp.146-159.

⁵⁵ Jones 1922, p.152.

⁵⁶ “Qualifications are denied... not because the truth falls short of them, but because it so infinitely excels them. It is above them. It is super-lucent, super-splendent, super-essential, super-sublime, super everything that can be named.” (James 1902, p.408.)

⁵⁷ James 1902, p.409.

⁵⁸ James 1902, p.409.

⁵⁹ See e.g. Fred Smith 1922, pp.268-273. Fred Smith also writes that pre-modern mysticism discredited itself by its negative path. “It scorned the things of sense. It made much of the *via negativa*.” (F. Smith 1922, p.269.)

distinguishing what is good and evil continued to be criticized.⁶⁰ The debate is still unresolved in the 1950s when “apophasis” emerges in the field as a comparative theological term interchangeable term with *via negativa*. The emergence of the Greek term helps in situating negative theology and the *via negativa* within Neoplatonism, and its multi-religious heritage. Especially with H. Wolfson’s influential writings since the 1950s, “apophasis” gradually came to represent the inalienable Greek legacy of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Wolfson’s search for the origins of all philosophical and theological ideas inescapably pointed towards either Athens or Jerusalem, and generally to both. Later studies on H. Wolfson’s theses on the link between “apophasis” and the Church fathers simply used the term “negative theology” to refer to *via negativa*, which, in turn, was employed interchangeably with “apophasis.”⁶¹

The strongest early defense of “apophasis” came from Eastern Orthodox intellectuals beginning in the 1920s.⁶² The post-1905 Revolution Russia witnessed an intense interest in religious philosophical questions. Russian philosophers and theologians Nicolay Berdyaev (d.1948), Sergey Bulgakov (d.1944), and Semyon Frank (d.1950) joined several others to plead for a renewal of Orthodox religious traditions.⁶³ Berdyaev (d.1948) was likely the most confident intellectual forcefully appealing to “apophasis,” and celebrating the negative path of Christian mysticism. Berdyaev saw any positive discourse on God as “socio-morphic,” inescapably intermingled with social structures and

⁶⁰ E.g. Stafford 1920, pp.70-71; Jones 1921, p.255; Streeter and Appamy 1922, p.67.

⁶¹ See e.g. Whittaker 1969.

⁶²

During the twentieth century, appeal to apophatic theology became characteristic of much Eastern Orthodox theology, both among the Russians, expelled from their homeland by the Communist Revolution and encountering in the West a rather-too-confident and overdefined Roman Catholic theology, and among other Orthodox, seeking to escape the just-as-overdefined Orthodox theology that had emerged as Orthodoxy sought to understand itself during the seventeenth century in distinction from Western Catholicism and Protestantism. (Louth 2012, p.144.)

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This was the start of a revival of ideas originally promoted in the nineteenth century by authors such as Khomyakov, Dostoevsky, and Solovyov concerning the spiritual and political path Russia should follow within (or outside) European culture. The period of publications and heated debates that followed is known as the “religious renaissance” or the “silver age.” (Simons 2000, p.356.)

categories. "The path of apophatic God-cognition" was the mystical cleansing of this socio-morphism.⁶⁴ Hence "apophasis" embodied a form of mystical knowledge, an "unknowing," that is attained through negations of notions and determinations. The apophatic god resides beyond all binaries including that of good and evil,⁶⁵ light and darkness, optimism and pessimism,⁶⁶ etc. but he grounds them with a decisive negation. Apophasis indicates the unsayable transcendence of God beyond all binaries through negative speech formations. "In accord with the method of apophatic-negative theology, it must needs be said, that God is the supra-good, is beyond-goodness, and that the concept of the good likewise is inapplicable to God, just as all concepts are."⁶⁷

The younger Eastern Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky (d.1958)'s approach to apophasis was no less important than that of Berdyaev. Lossky's influential and still debated book *À l'Image et à la Ressemblance de Dieu [In the Image and Likeness of God]* (pbl.1967) was rendered into English in 1974. The first chapter of Lossky's book, titled "Apophasis and Trinitarian Theology," analyzed the writings of Clement of Alexandria (d.215) and Pseudo-Dionysius. "Apophasis" was for Lossky also an inherently religious term, interchangeable with "negative theology," which was an expression of "an intellectual experience of the mind's failure."⁶⁸ Admitting the Neoplatonic origins of the tradition, Lossky apologetically underlined the affirmative, dogmatic aspects of this form of

⁶⁴ "But this spiritual path is nowise a denial of revelation nor of God having become man also, i.e. of the possible proximity of God and man, of the humanness of God and the God-likeness of man, this is a path of cleansing and liberation from servile sociomorphism." (Berdyaev 1932, #379.)

⁶⁵ "God is not good and is not subordinate to the good, but God also is not evil, God is beyond and higher than all goodness, He is transcendent beyond goodness, He is beyond both good and evil in the sense of apophatic theology." (Berdyaev 1929, #346)

⁶⁶

[P]rofoundly deeper than what we say, concerning God and concerning His relationship to the world and to man kataphatically, positively and recouring to the rationalism of concepts, lies rather the inexpressible mystery of God, concerning which it is possible to speak only negatively, apophatically. Therein already obtains no sort of dualism, no sort of opposition of light and darkness, therein is the pure Divine light, which is darkly obscured for reason, and therein is impossible already Hell nor is there possible any sort of pessimism that can be spoken of. This is at the borderline of thinking, the sphere of mystical contemplation and unity. (Berdyaev 1935, #401)

⁶⁷ Berdyaev 1927, #321.

⁶⁸ Lossky 1974, p.13.

theology, per William James, W. M. Scott and others, in stark opposition to Berdyaev. Apophasis, accordingly, was a legitimate tool for Christian theologians, because it was not a return to the fully negative, “impersonal monad” of Plotinus. Instead, it did affirm the super-essentiality of god when negating the sayable, dialectical attributes. Not an absence, but the super-essential, more-than-divine triad beyond affirmation and negation was indicated by the apophatic move. Even though Lossky endeavored to show the essential theological positivity in apophasis, it was not seen to be sufficiently affirmative by Brian Davies (b.1951-) who reviewed the book in 1976. Davies, a priest, friar and Professor of Philosophy, found the apophatic god neither intelligible nor consistent.⁶⁹ The apologetic emphasis on an inherent positivity in apophasis was not good enough to make it theologically and ethically acceptable for Davies. But more interestingly, Lossky’s overemphasis on the dogmatic affirmative aspect of apophasis received even harsher criticism from Berdyaev, who did not hide his disgust with the former’s misuse of “apophasis:”

We, evidently, belong to totally different spiritual worlds from V. Lossky than, I fear, even to different religions. ... V. Lossky says, that theologising ought to be apophatic. But his own theologising namely is nowise apophatic, it is kataphatic in a very bad sense of this word. V. Lossky as it were does not understand, that the transferring to God and of the relationship of God to man and the world of categories, taken from the social relationships of people, from the relationships of governance and the rule of power, is as such a denial of apophatic God-knowing, a denial of the mystery of Divine life, which cannot have semblance to the lowlymost human social activity. ... I am very grateful to V. Lossky for his indulging me, as a person not clergyman, to express whatever the heretical opinions. But I do not presuppose to avail this indulgence.⁷⁰

The defense of apophasis by Eastern Orthodox intellectuals, most notably Lossky, the Romanian Orthodox Dumitru Stăniloae (d.1993) and the Greek Christos Yannaras (b.1935) gained wider attention with the 1960s.⁷¹ More significantly, it

⁶⁹ “If we do not know the essence, how can we affirm it? It is Locke and Berkeley (d.1753) over again. And how can one admit division into god in the light of the Christian claim that god is unity?” (Davies 1976, p.128.)

⁷⁰ Berdyaev 1936, #409; my emphasis.

⁷¹ For an overview, see Louth 2012, pp.144-146.

has been suggested that the negative methodology that R. Otto and later Mircea Eliade (d.1986) employed in their influential works *Das Heilige* (pbl.1917) and *The Sacred and the Profane* (pbl.1957) had strong parallels, or were familiar, with “the apophatic ways of Orthodoxy.”⁷² In any case, “apophasis” was still not at home in the Western scholarship on Christianity as late as the beginning of the 1970s. The 1960s and early 1970s mark a chaotic period in situating “apophasis” within the study of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The two prominent types of approaches of the period depict “apophasis” as eventually affirmative theology, or as logically inconsistent heretical mysticism that hijacks morality through self-denial, hatred towards speculation and thinking,⁷³ or individualism. These competing perspectives dramatically changed towards the end of the 1970s when writing on Christian mysticism began to incorporate post-modern philosophy.

C. Dialectics and Symbiosis: “Apophasis” as a Comparative Philosophical Concept

The scholarly interest in East Asia intensified immediately in the post-war period, when Western religionists discovered the philosophical significance of negativity in Indian, Chinese, Korean and Japanese intellectual traditions. It was not long before the concept “apophasis” was associated with the negativity of various strands of Asian thought. Famous Chinese philosopher Feng Yu-lan (d.1990)’s *A History of Chinese Philosophy* (pbl.1934) appeared in several different translations in European languages after 1948. In order to indicate the potential contributions of Chinese philosophy to Western philosophy, Yu-lan undertook a comparative study that included no less than Dewey (his teacher at Columbia University), Kant, Hume, A. Smith, Mill, Newton, Hegel, Marx, Engels, B. Russell, Schopenhauer and Darwin.⁷⁴ The Chinese philosophical ideas presented in the book were soon to be connected to negative theology and negative theological terms such as the *docta ignorantia* and *apophasis*. In 1949, the reviewer of the first English translation of the book, P. Demieville of the Collège de France, already made these connections, complaining of Yu-lan’s insufficient grasp of Western apophatic thought, particularly its mysticism, necessary for a genuine comparison:

⁷² See Webster 1986, pp.634-637. For a recent analysis of the claim specifically with reference to Eliade, see Rennie 2010, p.200-206.

⁷³ “Cyril was an apophatic theologian who repeatedly repudiated speculation.” (McCauley and Stephenson in Cyril 1969, p.11.)

⁷⁴ See Yu-lan 1948.

The “negative method” of mysticism is familiar to us as the Greek apophasis, and his [Yu-lan’s] reference to Kant is unexpected and inadequate. The theory of “knowledge that is not knowledge,” in which he sees one of the most typical aspects of Chinese thought and through which he thinks that China “can contribute something to future world philosophy,” is no other than the docta ignorantia of Nicholas of Cusa. On the whole, it is doubtful whether in the history of Western thought, considered in its entirety, and apart from its modern departures, the “positive method” has dominated the “negative method” to the extent that he suggests.⁷⁵

Its presence as “the negative method” rendered “apophasis” an available tool suitable for comparative studies in philosophy. However, the reviewer’s positioning of “negative theology” and “apophasis” complicates the scope of comparison, as he situates both terms in “Western mysticism” instead of philosophy or theology. Except for this unfriendly debut in Demieville’s book review in 1949, “apophasis” does not appear in the study of Asian thought in the following two decades. In the same vein, “apophasis” begins to be employed with reference to the mystical current in Islam, Sufism, in mid-1970s specifically with the contribution of prominent Islamicists like Henry Corbin and Annemarie Schimmel, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Except this insignificant appearance in a book review, comparative philosophical works do not employ the term “apophasis” until the mid-1970s. But this comparative scholarship prepares a peculiar ground by doing something significant. Referring to Buddha as a dialectical thinker, or even “the founder of dialectics,”⁷⁶ they equate the idea of negation with critical thinking by adding a positive, complementary dimension to it. Accordingly, the way of negation in Buddhism was a critique of reason that avoided dogmatism. Genuine criticism was self-criticism, which was possible within the anti-dogmatic dialectical way of the Buddha. “Apophasis” would enter the vocabulary of the comparative study of Buddhist and Western thought later in the late 1970s, when negation was already associated with being self-critical and anti-dogmatic.

⁷⁵ Demieville 1949, p.146; my emphasis. Notably, Demieville employs “apophasis” and “*via negativa*” interchangeably.

⁷⁶ E.g. Murti 1955; R. Robinson 1972, pp.325-331.

The association of negation with critical thinking and self-reflexivity in the 1950s and 1960s was fundamental. For, a wide array of earlier works on Buddhism depicted negativity in Buddhism as a symptom of theological weakness, such as world-denunciation and nihilism.⁷⁷ At the beginning of the century, a scholar of comparative theology defined Buddhism as “*the negative religion of Buddha*.”⁷⁸ Similarly, the term “*via negativa*” was employed with reference to the purported nihilism, passivism or quietism in Hinduism. For example, even when W. R. Inge began adopting a more favorable position on “*via negativa*,” his appreciation did not extend beyond Neoplatonism and Christian mysticism. Instead, he was careful to situate the Neoplatonic *via negativa* in opposition to what he saw as Hindu nihilism.⁷⁹ For E. Underhill (d.1941), the *via negativa* “in its most characteristic form” was found in Hindu mysticism, and ended up with quietism thanks to its innately crippled attempts “to perfect contemplation by the refusal of action.”⁸⁰ Streeter and Appamy’s monograph (pbl.1922) on the Christian missionary to India, Sadhu Sundar Singh (d.1929), underlined that for Sadhu, “the mystic way is not the *via negativa* of self-conscious renunciation but just a simple quiet life of prayer and self-sacrificing service.”⁸¹ As the famous polymath Albert Schweitzer (d.1965) defined it in his *Indian Thought and Its Development* (pbl.1957), Hinduism was a religion that emphasizes “world and life negation”

⁷⁷ E.g. Clarke 1887, p.22, 168; Trever 1897, p.168; Macculloch 1902, p.78, 97, 153, 211, 313; E. C. Gregory 1901, pp.34-37; Culp 1914, pp.14-15; Spengler 1926, Vol.1, p.138, 358; Stcherbatsky 1927; F. Harold Smith 1937, pp.178-180, 183; R. Robinson 1957. For an overview, see R. Robinson 1957 pp.290-294, 305-308; Garfield 1995, p.300.

In an interesting comparison, R. Nicholson and Charles Cutler Torrey (d.1956) argue that the apparent agreement of Sufism with Buddhism was only partial: the annihilation [*fanā'*] of Sufis entails subsistence [*baqā'*], while Buddhist “nirvana is merely negative.” (Torrey 1921, p.167.) Some later scholars of Sufis adopt that approach, explicitly quoting Nicholson, and argue that “the Buddhist conception of Nirvana (extinction) which has a purely negative content,” while Sufi annihilation, “though negative in meaning, has a positive implication.” (‘Abdu-r-Rabb 1967, p.61.) Also see Abdel-Kader 1962, p.82.

⁷⁸ Macculloch 1902, p.78; my emphasis. He adds that in Buddhism “doctrines of God and of a future life are so negative and so abstract that wherever it has spread it has had to supplement them with objects of adoration from the popular faith.” (Macculloch 1902, p.211.)

⁷⁹ Inge 1918, p.117.

⁸⁰ Underhill 1914, p.17. Also see pp.286-289.

⁸¹ Streeter and Appamy 1922, p.67.

instead of “world and life affirmation,” which was the predominant principle of European thought to his mind.⁸²

With the adoption of more philosophy-oriented perspectives in the late 1950s, negation in Buddhism and Indian philosophies began to be represented as a sophisticated, self-critical gesture that operates in a dialectical way. Later, with the mid-1970s, “apophasis” was incorporated in this comparative philosophical literature simply by replacing “negation.” Accordingly, “apophasis,” was the self-critical, negative way of speech that emerges from the learned distrust of all linguistic constructions. As “apophasis” represented the distrust of discourse, it was to be accompanied by the affirmative discourse [*kataphasis*] as its counterpart in dialectical Buddhist philosophy. As Gimello (pbl.1976) put it, “apophasis” was a “caution that uncritical use of the constructive language of philosophical views is a species of intellectual bondage.”⁸³ It was “the way of denial and negation, the unremitting distrust of positive language,” which had to be supplemented with “the salvific value of *kataphasis*, the spiritual utility of positive and affirmative language.”⁸⁴

Current employment of the term “apophasis” with reference to Buddhism and Hinduism follows broadly this scholarly emphasis on dialectics that developed in the 1970s. Accordingly, “apophasis” is employed in a dialectical tension with its counterpart, *kataphasis*, but never alone. The interplay between *apophasis* and *kataphasis* as the complementary aspects of dialectical philosophy grounds the vast subsequent comparative literature since the 1980s. Buswell’s article (pbl.1982) on Korean Son (Ch’an) tradition,⁸⁵ Peter N. Gregory’s labors (pbl.1982, 1983, 1985, 1986) on Chinese Buddhism,⁸⁶ Donald S. Lopez’s article (pbl.1987) on

⁸² “Thus both in Indian and European thought [,] world and life affirmation and world and life negation are found side by side: but in Indian thought the latter is the predominant principle and in European thought the former.” (Schweitzer in Salmond 2004, p.4.)

⁸³ Gimello 1976, p.119.

⁸⁴ Gimello 1976, p.119.

Even if Bhattacharya’s works do not employ the terms “apophasis” and “kataphasis,” his depiction of Nagarjuna as a master of dialectics resonates with Gimello’s approach. See e.g. Bhattacharya 1971, p.217.

⁸⁵ See Buswell 1982.

⁸⁶ See P. N. Gregory 1982, 1983, 1985, 1986. In his study of the role of constructive imagination in Kim Manjung (d.1692)’s *Dream of the Nine Clouds*, Bantly’s approach to “apophasis” follows Gimello and P. N. Gregory. See e.g. Bantly 1996, p.127-128.

Buddhist Hermeneutics⁸⁷ and his later writings, more recent comparative works on Soto Zen Buddhism,⁸⁸ and Garfield's commentary (pbl.1995) on Nāgārjuna's *Mulamadhyamakakarika*⁸⁹ consistently conceptualize "apophasis" as the "way of negation" that operates dialectically with the way of affirmation.⁹⁰ Hence the comparative philosophical and theological literature on Buddhism has a distinct parallel with the rhetorical approach to "apophasis:" both fields assume that the term is unable to stand on its own without a positive ground or statement. Their difference lies in the details: rhetoric has treated "apophasis" as a parasitic gesture on positive statements, while the comparative literature on Buddhism pointed to the symbiotic relationship between apophasis and kataphasis, and began attributing to the term a critical (hence moral) capacity at least since the late 1950s. This capacity to distrust discursive constructs should be employed within a careful dialectic. Mere apophasis ends up with silence, denial of discourse, or even worse, "nihilistic destruction of some entity or as a literal void to which one might cling *dogmatically*."⁹¹ The negative way is in need of positive constructions, with which it is in a symbiotic, dialectical relationship. As a recent study on Buddhist-Christian dialogue states, every act of apophasis presupposes something named or described, hence, *kataphasis*.⁹²

Briefly, "apophasis" is neither theological, nor Neoplatonic, nor rhetorical, nor literary, nor mystical in the comparative study of Asian philosophical traditions. Instead, it is the name of the negative philosophical discourse that is so critical that it will be damagingly self-negating and nihilistic if left on its own. Hence it should be situated within a dialectical relationship with its complementary counterpart, *kataphasis*. When "apophasis" began to be employed in this way in comparative philosophy in the 1970s, it was already associated with critical thinking. In other words, from the rhetorical *parasitism* on *kataphasis*,

⁸⁷ See Lopez 1987.

⁸⁸ See e.g. J. P. Williams 1997.

⁸⁹ Garfield 1995, pp.300-302.

⁹⁰ "Buddhist Mahayanist thought contains both a *via negationis*, in which reality is represented negatively and approached apophatically, and a *via eminentiae*, in which it is represented positively and approached cataphatically." (Lopez 1987, p.76.)

⁹¹ Lopez 1987, p.76; emphasis mine.

⁹² "*Apophasis* or un-saying is commonly paired with *kataphasis*, which literally means 'speaking with.' Each and every act of unsaying presupposes something named or described (*kataphasis*)." (Thometz 2006, p.136.)

“apophasis” had already evolved into *symbiosis* when it emerged in comparative philosophy.

Yet a new, radical emphasis on negativity in Buddhism emerged only in late 1980s, under the influence of post-modernism. Exemplifying this more recent trend, J. W. Huntington attributes a radical, post-modern, and moral negativity to the Madhyamika School of Buddhism. He differentiates two different forms of negation, and defends that the Madhyamika School actually adopted the one that has no affirmative content or dimension. Huntington claims that the first form of negation, which indirectly affirms the existence of something else [*paryudasa*], leads to nihilism and absolutism according to the early Indian Buddhists. In contrast, the second form of negation which leaves nothing in its place [*prasajya*] was used by the Madhyamika “to express the *radical, deconstructive negation* effected through application of the concept of emptiness.”⁹³ Such negation, as Huntington puts it, is “non-implicative,” or “non-presuppositional,” hence independent from any kataphatic statement. Not only parasitism on kataphasis, but even symbiosis with it is over for apophasis in Huntington’s approach. With the emergence of references to deconstruction and J. Derrida, Huntington shifts the depiction of the early Indian Madhyamikan approach to language from the dialectic of apophasis and kataphasis into a radical negation. The standard word Huntington chooses to express the philosophy of Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti (d.ca.650), and other philosophers in the Madhyamika School is “deconstruction.” He wants to put Nāgārjuna into the same boat as the great, radically negativist, and subversive masters of post-modernity:

If “sawing off the branch on which one is sitting” seems foolhardy to men of common sense, it is not so for Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and Derrida; for they suspect that if they fall there is no “ground” to hit and that the most clear-sighted act may be a certain reckless sawing, *a calculated dismemberment or deconstruction* of the great cathedral-like trees in which Man has taken shelter for millennia.

*We may now confidently add Nāgārjuna’s name to the list of those who are not afraid of hitting ground.*⁹⁴

⁹³ Huntington 1989, p.58.

⁹⁴ Huntington 1989, p.140; my emphasis.

Such conceptions of apophysis as the self-sufficient, endlessly critical negation emerge in the study of Buddhism and Hinduism only in the 1980s, following the decisive change of how “apophysis” was represented in continental philosophy.

D. Postmodern Times: “Apophysis” as Infinite Critique

Before "apophysis" arrived on the continental philosophy scene in the 1970s, the association of “negation” and “negative theology” with a key moral standard of modernity, i.e., critique, had long been underway. Negativity was conceptualized as a term of critique already by Nietzsche (d.1900), E. Husserl (d.1938), Heidegger (d.1976), and the Frankfurt School, but pure negation was not generally seen as a healthy prospect for thinking in continental philosophy. The philosophical and theological negativity espoused by Karl Jaspers (d.1969), for example, was a productive one. The movement of this “qualified negativity” provides according to him the basis for “transcending-thinking” as a dialectic, instead of a pure negation.⁹⁵ Walter Benjamin (d.1940) was another critical thinker to incorporate negative theology into his work. For Benjamin, negative theology presents an emancipating denial of social functions and categorizations, but he also adds immediately that the denial of specific social functions itself will inescapably create its own limitations.⁹⁶ Negative theology saves us from dependence, *but not infinitely*, as it eventually creates another dependence.

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Thus qualified negativity is an essential aspect of Jaspers’ modality of *Existenzerhellung* and is a productive and not a destructive negativity. Its movement provides the basis for “transcending-thinking” as a dialectic which elucidates horizons of transcending that are more and more encompassing and less and less constrictive, but it does not, as negativity, make its claim in the absolute sense as Hegel’s *Aufhebung*. (Olson 1979, p.20.)

Also see Peach 2008, pp.175-180.

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With the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, photography, simultaneously with the rise of socialism, art sensed the approaching crisis which has become evident a century later. At the time, art reacted with the doctrine of *l’art pour l’art*, that is, with a theology of art. This gave rise to what might be called a negative theology in the form of the idea of “pure” art, which not only denied any social function of art but also any categorizing by subject matter. (In poetry, Mallarmé was the first to take this position.) An analysis of art in the age of mechanical reproduction must do justice to these relationships, for they lead us to an all-important insight: for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility.

T. Adorno (d.1969) declared that he was “not afraid of the reproach of unfruitful negativity” as early as 1931 when he called for a dialectical negation of idealism and the bourgeois philosophies of history.⁹⁷ Adorno’s negation of negation very much responds to Hegel’s determinate negation, which yields positive residue through a process Hegel calls “sublation” [*Aufhebung*].⁹⁸ Adorno in some places equates his negative dialectics with determinate negation, yet he also seems to criticize the Hegelian thesis that the negation of the negation yields a positive content. Adorno’s negative dialectics, and the concepts he uses, such as “non-identity,” “the ineffable,” and “the non-conceptual,” “the non-identical” induced the objections of Jürgen Habermas, Albrecht Wellmer, and Herbert Schnädelbach alike. Habermas compares the role that the notion of non-identity or the non-identical plays in Adorno’s late work with the theme of “a hidden, world-transcendent God” in mysticism.⁹⁹ While there are diverse interpretations in the secondary literature, I think it is safe to claim that Adorno had virtually no interest in negative theology.¹⁰⁰ Non-conceptual and ineffable or not, “negation” already entails an affirmative gesture towards future, hope, and promise. Any negation has to be grounded by a firm and radical affirmation, “the hope of utopia,” that makes sense of the negation.¹⁰¹ Again, “negation” has to be situated within dialectics in order to become *complete* and *constructive*.

From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic’ print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics. (Benjamin 1968, p.224.)

⁹⁷ Buck-Morrs 1977, p.36.

⁹⁸ See Finlayson 2012, pp.18-21.

⁹⁹ Finlayson 2012, p.2.

¹⁰⁰

Adorno appears to refer to apophatic theology only in two places: in his essay on Kafka and in his essay “Sacred Fragment: On Schönberg’s Moses and Aaron.” Even in this last essay, the only place where Adorno actually uses the term “negative theology,” he uses it to refer the Old Testament prohibitions against making graven images and on pronouncing or writing the name of God. (Finlayson 2012, pp.7-8.)

Also see Steunebink 2000.

¹⁰¹ See Buck-Morrs 1977, p.90.

Herbert Marcuse (d.1979)'s writings follow a similar dialectical approach to negation with Adorno. "*Negation* needs to be read affirmatively, to draw out connections to today, to other present struggles, and to the current crisis. Affirmatively, which is to say also, and at the same time, through a strategy of *negation*."¹⁰² The productive dynamics of the affirmative, future-oriented, radical, imaginative hope and the critical negation of history is what Marcuse calls the "materialist dialectic." "Critical theory" is its socially active form of thinking, which is perpetually self-negating. "Critical theory is ... critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its own basis."¹⁰³ However this double-negation, again, is conditioned by the affirmative hope of utopia.

The dialectical emphasis of the Frankfurt School leaves its place to radical negativism in France in the late 1960s, with the *la nouvelle théologie*, as well as with such intellectuals as Henry Corbin (d.1978),¹⁰⁴ and Jacques Derrida (d.2004). Immediately after he presented a paper on *différance* in 1968, Derrida encountered Brice Parain (d.1971)'s challenge that his concept "*différance*" was identical with "the God of negative theology."¹⁰⁵ Derrida dismissed this claim without hesitation, arguing that negative theology was still a "theology" working within the limits of what Heidegger had called "onto-theology." The charge, however, never left the scene, and finally, with writers such as John Caputo (b.1940) and Jean-Luc Marion (b.1946), the gap between deconstruction and negative theology was reduced, and for some, disappeared.¹⁰⁶ Derrida's *Sauf le Nom* is his most often cited text within this discussion. "*Sauf le Nom*" is best translated as "Save the Name," where "save" has both senses of "rescuing" and "except." Here Derrida ends up coming back to his point in 1968 with slight compromises—an approach that honors negative theology, but also keeps its distinction from deconstruction firm.¹⁰⁷ Briefly, Derrida accepts here that negative theology negates the discourse on god, *including the name of god*. The erasure of the name is fundamentally important, because naming relies on repetition, via which discourse, and implicitly power and politics, emerge. Deconstruction, as "infinite critique," erases all the names as well, which means that it operates against all discursive spaces. The crux of Derrida's argument is

¹⁰² Shapiro in Marcuse 2009, p.xvi; emphasis original.

¹⁰³ Marcuse 2009, pp.115-116.

¹⁰⁴ Corbin's approach to "apophasis" is discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁵ See Derrida and Parain in Wood and Bernasconi 1988, p.84.

¹⁰⁶ Caputo 1997, pp.1-6; Nault 1999; Almond 2004, pp.29-34. See T. Jones 2011, pp.8-9.

¹⁰⁷ See Derrida 1995, pp.35-88.

that the deferral of god's name in negative theology is actually saving the name. Though unnamable, the apophatic god remains as the hyper-real principle in negative theology. On the one hand, Derrida sees an absolute critical power of negative theology, and he does not dismiss it as "naming," or "discourse" as such. On the other hand, it is still a discourse, though an inherently critical one. Towards the end of *Save the Name*, he brings this point forth, asking "what would negative theology look like today?" His answer is certainly not "deconstruction." Instead, Derrida claims, it would be a kind of peaceful activism in the post-colonial world, working for just peace treaties criticizing oppressive, unequal, unjust, international law.¹⁰⁸ It is absolutely shocking for a philosophy student to see a conversation on international law in the middle of a discussion of negative theology—a shock specifically intended by Derrida in order to point out that the distinction between deconstruction and negative theology is clear. It was rather the Frankfurt School that focused on the critique of the international, capitalist mode of production and the commodification of life. Derrida distinguishes his own method of infinite critique from negative theology by associating the latter with the Frankfurt School's conception of negation, which successfully criticizes global capitalism and its institutions, but exists only within a dialectical relationship with affirmation.

Derrida's former student Jean-Luc Marion (b.1946-), who shares his radicalization of negation, is more direct in the critique of dialectics in favor of negativity:

Why, indeed, does the dialectical movement suffer no exception, whereas applied to the confession of faith, it comes to terms with another logic ...? It is because the dialectical movement is put to work by the 'seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative.' Now the negative rules the totality of being as universally as Spirit, to which, in a sense, it exclusively returns.¹⁰⁹

Marion later comes to a discussion of Derrida's approach to negative theology and deconstruction with "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of It."¹¹⁰ Responding to Derrida's distinction between *différance* and negative theology, Marion uses "eventmentality," a concept that he carefully develops throughout

¹⁰⁸ Derrida 1995, p.81.

¹⁰⁹ Marion 1991, pp.191-192.

¹¹⁰ Originally written and given in the context of a conference at Villanova in 1997, the essay was published at the very end of Marion's *Studies in Excess*. See T. Jones 2011, p.32.

the book as well as Marion's earlier writings. Accordingly, phenomena give themselves in eventmentality in time, which is itself eventmental. The phenomenological primacy of the event implies that the self is "donated" (*adonee*), not that there is an agency behind the givenness.¹¹¹ This is a major, and indeed, very creative deviation from classical Western phenomenology. In a process-philosophical manner, Marion undertakes a long critique of Cartesian dualism to show that (1) the self is not the "donator," but the "donated," (2) there is no donator. Marion links the primacy of the eventmentality and the absence of the donator in order to defend the position that negative theology does not affirm a hyper-reality. Apophasis negates all hyper-realities beyond the name, by negating the name of god.¹¹²

Setting aside other implications and variant readings of these thinkers, the association of negative theology and negative speech with critique or even "infinite critique" is somewhat clear in Derrida, Marion and the philosophical debates on the role of critique in theology. Negativity was conceptualized as a term of critique already in various strands of philosophy as far back as Kant, Hegel and Marx. However, with Derrida and Marion, critique becomes the defining aspect of not only Western philosophy, but also that of negative theology—an association that will render it philosophically self-conscious and ethically superior to others. Apophasis could stand on its own, independent of any positive ground, and negate discourse in any form with its infinite power of critique. This recently developed approach became quite influential in the study of religion in the last decades. *The Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, to give a recent example, puts "negative theology" under the rubric of "apophasis," neither of which can be defined because of their infinite negativity.

[L]ike divinity, *negation is infinite*. ... Thus, negative theology points to certain limits of all disciplinary discourses, their inability to circumscribe their domains and give an adequate account of themselves. ... Theology, as the discourse of the unlimited, or as discourse without limits, turns out to be radically negative. ... Negative theology invades discourse throughout its whole extent. There is always a factor of negation in discourse, since it is not what it says. *And there are no limits to the capability of recursive self-negation of discourse: it reaches to infinity. This makes negative theology impossible to define*. In fact, it does not exist, as

¹¹¹ Marion 2002, pp.30-49. See T. Jones 2011, pp.95-96; 114-116.

¹¹² Marion 2002, pp.128-162.

Jacques Derrida lucidly maintained. *There is no negative theology as such; there can only be a negative theology of negative theology: a discourse that cancels itself out by its very nature and necessity and that exists only in and as this act of self-annihilation or self-erasure.*¹¹³

E. Summary

Only in the 1970s with French intellectuals like Derrida, Marion and Corbin, did “apophasis” and “negative theology” begin to indicate a widely accepted, self-reflective philosophical theology, which avoids the traps of idolatry and parochialism with its infinite capacity for criticism.¹¹⁴ Such self-reflective capacity in apophatic positions embodies the agency of individuals and their morality as non-dogmatic, pluralistic believers who are ready to admit their god has no being, is equally distant with other gods, or dead, purely negative, unknowable or empty.

A *modernizing* and *ethicalizing* approach that associates “apophasis” with anti-idolatry and critique already circulated among Eastern Orthodox intellectuals like Berdyaev and Lossky, but its heyday began in France in the 1960s. Such modernizing capacity attributed to “apophasis” among French intellectuals is directly influenced by the theological debates of the time within Catholicism. The movement of *la nouvelle théologie* in France appealed to the patristic theologians and to their apophaticism in order to ward off the anti-modernism of neo-Scholasticism. Some of the central figures of the *la nouvelle théologie*, such as Louis Bouyer (d.2004), Jean Daniélou (d.1974), Henri de Lubac (d.1991), and Hans Urs von Balthasar (d.1988), who aimed to revive [*ressourcement*] the interest in the significance of the church fathers, were also the teachers of Marion.¹¹⁵ Hence the modernizing dimension in reclaiming the apophaticism of patristic theologians was strongly influenced by the theological tension in mid-nineteenth century Catholicism. T. Jones succinctly sketches this immediate context in France wherein apophasis became an ethicalizing and modernizing gesture:

¹¹³ Franke and Woods 2013, pp.1444-1445; my emphasis.

¹¹⁴ For example, characterizing Marion’s “thought as ‘apophatic’ is a shorthand way of signifying his fundamentally critical stance toward the subjectivist hold on modern philosophy and his attempt to escape conceptual idolatries in both theology and phenomenology. Idolatry refuses to recognize excess or plenitude, but an appropriately apophatic stance begins in response to this excess.” (T. Jones 2011, p.9.)

¹¹⁵ T. Jones 2011, pp.5-6.

Many of Marion's teachers were propagators of "*la nouvelle théologie*," so to understand Marion's earliest work their influence needs to be recognized. One of the primary characteristics of this movement was a renewed interest in intensive study of patristic theologians as sources with which one might combat the dominance of Neo-Scholasticism in Catholicism. Despite Neo-Scholasticism's fight against the central tenets of *modernity* and the Enlightenment, the very character of its reaction resulted in the unconscious acquisition of those very same tenets. Thus, a critique of Neo-Scholasticism by "*la nouvelle théologie*" was bolstered by a return to premodern sources, specifically the retrieval of the church fathers as resources against the curiously "modern" anti-modernism of Neo-Scholasticism.¹¹⁶

"Apophysis" as (1) an inessential rhetorical tool, (2) a comparative philosophical or critical theoretical concept that cannot live outside the dialectical dynamics without an affirmation, (3) a native Neoplatonic term with hardly acceptable theological credentials, underwent a decisive shift in the 1970s. These diverse conceptions of apophysis were eclipsed by a conception of an infinitely critical negation in philosophy. A new, self-reflexive, pluralistic, moral conception of apophaticism was born in the comparative study of religion with reference to specific groups or traditions.

This interpretive, selectively ethicalizing shift in the significance of "apophysis" can be best analyzed, and its unthought assumptions best observed, by a closer look at the scholarly literature on Islam about the transcendence of god.

¹¹⁶ T. Jones 2011, p.16.

CHAPTER 2. NOT-RELIGION: A SHORT SURVEY ON THE APOPHATIC GOD OF ISLAM

This chapter investigates the appeal to negativity and “apophasis” in the study of Islamic theology over the last two centuries. In light of the previous chapter, I argue that the interpretive and selective ways in which “apophasis” has been employed in the last two centuries are in large part responses to the challenges and demands of modernity. To borrow from the title of Masuzawa’s celebrated book, the invention of “apophasis” in the study of religion is a history of “how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism.” With a focus on the study of Islam, and “Sufism” in particular, the chapter traces the history of how apophasis has been fashioned and refashioned in ways that uncritically followed specific assumptions of the early modern period in the last two centuries in the study of religion.

A. Beginnings

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the influential¹¹⁷ American missionary S. Marinus Zwemer (d.1952) emphasized what the famous philosopher David Hume (d.1776), the Jesuit scholar W. Glifford Palgrave (d.1888), earlier missionaries such as T. Patrick Hughes (d.1911) and many others had already pointed out. Accordingly, if asked, Muslims invariably point to the profession of faith “*lā ilāha illā Allāh*” [“there is no god but god”] as the core of their faith.¹¹⁸ However, the profession of the absolute divine oneness says virtually nothing about the ipseity of the god to whom they “submit” [*islām*] themselves. What “god” means is not stated, but simply assumed to be self-evident. There is this “god” whatever it is, and there is no other. It is a “*simple and uncommunicable Oneness*” as Zwemer puts it.¹¹⁹ At the core of the profession of oneness lies the unity of a primal negation, “there is no god”, and a subsequent affirmation, “but god,” which still says nothing on *what god really is*.

¹¹⁷ See J. I. Smith 1998, p.361.

¹¹⁸ Zwemer 1905, p.15-17.

“There is no God but God. ... In this one sentence, is summed up a system which ... the Pantheism of force, or Act, thus exclusively assigned to God. ... All is abridged in the autocratical will of the One great Agent.” This statement of Palgrave was later cited by many intellectuals writing on Islam. (E.g. Zwemer 1905, p.65; Hughes 1885, p.147.)

¹¹⁹ Zwemer 1905, p.66; emphasis mine.

The tension in the profession of faith only reflects or summarizes the broader theological tension manifested in the Qur'ān and the prophetic reports. The emphasis on god's being absolutely dissimilar, unique and transcendent is as strong as it could be; but we also find that god is ubiquitous and nearer to us than our jugular vein.¹²⁰ It will hardly slip even from the attention of an unacquainted reader of the Qur'ān that the absolute, transcendent god is also immanent, manifested sometimes in corporeal and gendered terms: a god merciful [*rahmān*] and compassionate [*rahīm*] as the womb [*rahm*] of a mother who nourishes, protects, and brings life; or an admonishing and just father whose wrath should not be aroused.¹²¹

The coexistence of abstract transcendence and anthropomorphism, understood to be inconsistent, debases Islam twice for David Hume (d.1776):

Were there a religion (and we may suspect Mahometanism of this inconsistency) which sometimes degraded him so far to a level with human creatures as to represent him wrestling with a man, walking in the cool of the evening, showing his back parts, and descending from Heaven to inform himself of what passes on earth; while at the same time it ascribed to him suitable infirmities, passions, and partialities, of the moral kind.¹²²

In this lively passage full of corporeal images of god, Hume is in fact simply extrapolating from his information on the Hebrew Bible in order to describe Islamic theology.¹²³ Based on his representations of the exotic and irrational

¹²⁰ Q.50:16. See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 1957, Vol.1, p.89. For an English translation, see al-Ghazālī in Watt 1994, p.74. (Watt's translation has a typo as it cites Q.5:16 instead of Q.50:16.)

¹²¹ Some of the most intensively debated verses among Muslim theologians in terms of anthropomorphism were Q.7:54, Q.10:4, Q.13:2, Q.20:5, Q.25:59, Q.32:4, Q.57:4.

¹²² Hume in Bailey and O'Brien 2014, p.172.

Interestingly, the passage was later modified in a way that narrows the wide critique specifically to Islam by removing the Biblical references to god's wrestling and showing his back parts. (Cf. Hume 1757, p.49.)

¹²³ While we can find a couple of Islamic accounts on "wrestling with god" both in early doxographical and later mystical writings, there is no similar account on god "showing his back parts" to my knowledge. Rūzbihān Baqlī (d.1209) quotes Abū al-Ḥasan al-Kharaqānī (d.1034)'s ecstatic outburst [*shath*] on his wrestle with God which al-Kharaqānī eventually lost. (See Ernst 1985, p.38.) However, Baqlī's recently edited commentary on ecstatic sayings was clearly not available to Hume. It is most probable that Hume was indeed thinking of Jacob's famous Biblical wrestle, which became the reason of his renaming as "Israel" (cf. Genesis 32:22-30). By the time of Hume, the wrestling Jacob had already found illustrious artistic expression in the paintings of Breenbergh (d.1657) and Rembrandt (d.1669).

Islam, Hume sees it as an inconsistent hodgepodge of a distant, transcendent god and rude anthropomorphism.¹²⁴ While anthropomorphism is universalistic and even relatively pluralistic and tolerant, it is this unspeakable god of Islam who is so transcendent that he ends up producing abject believers:

“*who can express the perfections of the Almighty?*” say the Mahometans. Even the noblest of his works, if compared to him, are but dust and rubbish. How much more must human conception fall short of his infinite perfections?¹²⁵

This inexpressible transcendence of god, for Hume, is actually the expression of a divine tyranny, “over and above” the believers who turn into pitiful slaves without agency at the hands of their religion—in the hands of a god that indeed mirrors them.¹²⁶

Also for “god’s showing his back parts,” Hume is relying on the vast Jewish, and more probably Christian, literatures on the vision of Moses on the Mount Sinai. “I will take away my hand, and *you shall see my back*; but my face shall not be seen (Exodus 33:23; emphasis mine).” This passage in the Hebrew Bible became a key source of not only Jewish, but also Christian mystical traditions. Indeed, Denys Turner argues that this passage constitutes one of the two “main linguistic building blocks of the Western Christian tradition,” along with the “Allegory of the Cave” in Plato’s *Republic*. (Turner 1995, p.11.)

Moreover, God’s showing His pack parts was a major metaphor for scripture-oriented theological reflection in Martin Luther (d.1546) himself. Accordingly, while “the theologian of glory” tries to look on God face to face, “the theologian of the cross” looks only on what Luther calls God’s “backward parts” [*posteriora*]. (See Janz 1998, p.7.)

¹²⁴ D. B. MacDonald (d.1943)’s critique of the inconsistent juxtaposition of immanence and transcendence very much echoes that of Hume. MacDonald argues that

[Muḥammad had a] bundle of contradictory ideas... His Allāh, on one hand, was an awful unity, throned apart from all creation, creating, ruling, destroying all. But on another hand, he is depicted in the most frankly anthropomorphic terms both of body and of mind; and on yet another, phrases are used of him which, fairly interpreted, can mean nothing else than immanence. (MacDonald 1910, p.24.)

In any case, what appears as “Islamic theology” was an “awful unity,” and “so essential a contradiction.” “Muḥammad was no systematizer; certainly he had no coherent system of theology.” (MacDonald 1910, p. 36.) The same justification for the Muslim theological inconsistencies appears again and again, including in surprisingly recent works. The British scholar A. S. Tritton (d.1973)’s influential *Islam: Belief and Practices* (pbl.1951), for example, repeats MacDonald’s argument: “Muḥammad was a preacher not a theologian, so it was left to his followers to reduce his ideas to a system.” (Tritton 2013, p.36.)

¹²⁵ Hume 1757, p.52; my emphasis.

¹²⁶

As Hume's extrapolation from the Biblical sources also indicates, the sense of absolute transcendence speaks to "Semites" in general, meta-historically covering all Muslims, Jews, Phoenicians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and other groups. Not only iconophobia,¹²⁷ but also an anti-pluralist fanaticism and religious intolerance are strictly connected to their ultra-transcendent god.¹²⁸ Many "base" and "nonsensical" ascetic practices of Jews and Muslims, such as circumcision, owe themselves to the arbitrary pleasure of this tyrant god.¹²⁹ However, the most significant result is the immorality of the Semitic religiosity for Hume. The pompous ascetic practices, most notoriously "the most vicious and depraved" Muslim practice of fasting devoted to the glorification of a god (whose glories cannot be expressed) not only create abasement but also ethical corruption.¹³⁰ Every practice that Hume identifies as "ascetic" also draws his

Where the deity is represented as infinitely superior to mankind, this belief, though altogether just, is apt, when joined with superstitious terror, to sink the human mind into the lowest submission and abasement, and to represent the monkish virtues of mortification, penance, humility, and passive suffering, as the only qualities which are acceptable to him. (Hume 1757, p.65.)

¹²⁷ Extremely afraid of any form of idolatry,

some theists, particularly the Jews and Mahometans, have been sensible; as appears by their banishing all the arts of statuary and painting, and not allowing the representations, even of human figures, to be taken by marble or colors; lest the common infirmity of mankind should thence produce idolatry. (Hume 1757, p.56.)

¹²⁸

The intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of god, is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists. The implacable narrow spirit of the Jews is well known. Mahometanism set out with still more bloody principles; and even to this day, deals out damnation, though not fire and faggot, to all other sects. (Hume 1757, p.61.)

¹²⁹ The "smile and favor" of the tyrant god "renders men forever happy; and to obtain it for your children, the best method is to cut off from them, while infants, a little bit of skin, about half the breadth of a farthing." (Hume 1757, p.52.)

¹³⁰

The practice of morality is more difficult than that of superstition; and is therefore rejected. For ... it is certain, that the Ramadan of the Turks [i.e., Muslims], during which the poor wretches, for many days, often in the hottest months of the year, and in some of the hottest climates of the world, remain without eating or drinking from the rising to the setting sun; this [Ramadan], I say, must be more severe than the practice of any moral duty, even to the most vicious and depraved of mankind. (Hume 1757, pp.105-106.)

critique as embodying pompous piety devoid of ethical content. Fasting an entire day has “distinguished marks of devotion,” but Hume rather defends the ethics of the daily, individual-oriented, world-affirming, simple, and thus, early capitalistic economic life. Activities such as “restoring a loan” and “paying a debt” have an ethical dignity and a pious dimension that does not exist in the pseudo-ethics of servanthood to an ultra-transcendent god.¹³¹

The standards of the current ethics of daily economics, which Max Weber (d.1920) famously traces back to sixteenth century Europe, were not in harmony with what Hume observes as Jewish or Islamic theology.¹³² A rich variety of moralists, theologians and intellectuals of the time championed what would be called “early modern ethics of economic life,” i.e., an individualist ethics that focused on self-interest and individual agency instead of social, political, ethical institutions and mechanisms for the well-functioning of the capitalistic market, and the society.¹³³ This ethical paradigm, to be monumentalized in the work of the moralist Adam Smith (d.1790), later to be known as the father of the now-disembedded, abstract discipline of “economics,” defined a new normative yardstick against which they widely measured other moral systems. Within this context the apparently unknowable, ultra-transcendent god, which entails a lack of individual agency and morality, would become a common bogeyman for many theologians and philosophers soon after the emergence of the first chairs of Islamic [“Arabic”] Studies in Europe in the late seventeenth century.

The critique of the Semitic divine transcendence in Leibniz (d.1716), Herder (d.1803), Kant (d.1804), and Schlegel (d.1829) among others has such an infallible ethical dimension. It underlines individual agency and religious pluralism as opposed to institutionalism, fatalism and parochial fanaticism. Leibniz finds a primordial spirituality in Islam and Judaism, while he argues that Islamic theology is an inferior form of natural theology.¹³⁴ For Kant (d.1804),

¹³¹ Hume 1757, p.108.

¹³² Weber quotes Benjamin Franklin (d.1790), a good friend of Hume, as a document of “the spirit of capitalism” in its “classical purity”: “[N]ever keep borrowed money an hour beyond the time you promised, lest a disappointment shut up your friend’s purse for ever. ... It shows, besides, that you are mindful of what you owe; it makes you appear a careful as well as an honest man, and that still increases your credit.” (Franklin in Weber 2001, p.15.)

For Franklin’s letters to Hume and a brief introduction to the connection between the two figures, see Franklin 1760.

¹³³ Dewald 2001, p.172.

¹³⁴ Almond 2010, p.22.

Judaism and Islam exercise the Semitic prohibition of images to express the ineffability, thus, the supposed superiority of their god. "The Jews," writes Kant cynically, "like the Mohammedans, despised the maxims of other religions, since it was they who were uniquely in possession of a deity."¹³⁵ The parochial anti-pluralism of Semitic religions is inextricable from the ineffability of their god, in Kant's perspective. Very much like Hume, Kant sees the Muslim ascetic practices as primitive customary "formalities," not only morally empty but also unspiritual, harsh and dogmatic. Thus "Kant gradually divorces Islam from any ethical content (in contrast to Christianity, whose practices relate directly to practical concepts and the 'moral good')." ¹³⁶

The theology of an ultra-transcendent god and the poor morality it produces is inconsistent with modern ethics and rationality; thus it belongs to the religiosity of the past. For Herder (d.1803), Schlegel (d.1829) and Hegel (d.1831), *Islam* is the name of an already eclipsed form of religiosity¹³⁷ that by definition serves as an all-explanatory category for *Muslim phenomena*.¹³⁸ Islam, "cleansed of any nationalism," is an "improved" version of Judaism, while their shared, "oriental" concept of the unknowable, irrepresentable god leaves no space for individual agency or morality.¹³⁹ Hegel's critique of Islam rests explicitly on the norms of this new ethics of economic life. Under the inaccessible divine oneness of Islam, says Hegel,

all bonds disappear. In this oneness all individuality of the Orient falls away, all caste differences, all birthrights. No positive right, no political limitations of the individual is available. Property and

¹³⁵ Kant in Almond 2010, p.34.

Indeed the argument was present even around a millennium before Kant in the apologetic and polemical writings of Christian theologians under early Muslim rule. See e.g. Abū Qurrah in Bertaina 2007, pp.395-430.

¹³⁶ Almond 2010, p.37; emphasis mine.

¹³⁷ Hegel puts it succinctly: "Islam has forever vanished from the stage of history at large." (Hegel in Almond 2010, p.111.) Also see *ibid.* pp.64-65; 100.

The same approach delineates the nineteenth and early twentieth century Christian missionary writings on Islam as well. See J. I. Smith 1998, pp.362-366.

¹³⁸ Since the 1970s until his death, Edward Said (d.2003)'s studies displayed that this application of "religion" as an all-explanatory category for *pre-modern* peoples is not only alive, but also still very prominent. (See Said 1979, pp.299; 332-333.) The most famous contemporary example zealously continuing the same essentialist paradigm of eclipse is Bernard Lewis' politically engaged writings. See e.g. B. Lewis 2002.

¹³⁹ "The One of the Orient is much more the One of Judaism." (Hegel in Almond 2010, p.126.)

*ownership, all individual purposes are null and void ... and this invalidity, in manifesting itself, becomes destructive and devastating.*¹⁴⁰

The pure negation in favor of an absolute god abolishes all human constructs, hierarchies and discourses, whereupon reason, freedom, ethics and economic systems are built. "It is easy to see what is left [over], namely, what is *completely abstract, or totally empty*, and determined only as what is '*beyond*'; the *negative of representation.*"¹⁴¹ Three qualities of "emptiness," "abstraction" and "negativity," which indicate agency, critique and morality in post-modern study of apophaticism, are the pejorative indicators of their *complete deprivation* according to Hegel as well as Kant.

Many scholars of religion of the following century kept the connection of the excessive divine transcendence in Islamic theology to the theme of Islam as the religion of the past, which already appeared in German idealism. The suggested absence of regenerative power in Islam to respond to modernity was actually the result of this ultra-transcendent god, who was distant, non-incarnate, and as Sell's *Faith of Islam* (pbl.1907) put it, "sterile."¹⁴² In his *Ten Great Religions* (pbl.1889), C. F. Clarke (d.1888), one of the early American theologians to scrutinize eastern religions, and a member of the Transcendental Club, perfectly summarizes all of these problems that originate from the divine transcendence:

Immeasurably and eternally exalted above, and dissimilar from, all creatures, which lie levelled before him on one common plane of instrumentality and inertness, God is one in the totality of omnipotent and omnipresent action, which acknowledges no rule, standard, or limit save his own sole and absolute will. He communicates nothing to his creatures, for their seeming power and act ever remain his alone, and in return he receives nothing from them; for whatever they may be, that they are in him, by him, and from him only. And secondly, no superiority, no distinction, no pre-eminence, can be lawfully claimed by one creature over its fellow, in the utter equalization of their unexceptional servitude and abasement. ... [Muslim God is] tremendous autocrat, this uncontrolled and unsympathizing

¹⁴⁰ Hegel in Almond 2010, p.122; emphases mine.

¹⁴¹ Hegel in Almond 2010, p.117; emphases mine.

¹⁴² "In Islam there is no regenerative power. Its golden age was in the past. ... Islam is sterile, it gives no new birth to the spirit of a man." (Sell 1907, p.48.)

*power... He himself, sterile in his inaccessible height, neither loving nor enjoying aught save his own and self-measured decree, without son, companion, or counsellor, is no less barren for himself than for his creatures, and his own barrenness and lone egoism in himself is the cause and rule of his indifferent and unregarding despotism around.*¹⁴³

The strong connection of Islamic divine negativity with theses like oriental despotism, religious violence, immorality, and inability to respond to modernity was carried to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when comparative studies in religion attained institutional and subtler forms.

B. Birth of the Science of Religion

The ubiquitous references to “Semites” in discourses on Islam and Judaism display the fundamental role philology played in eighteenth and early nineteenth century Europe.¹⁴⁴ Masuzawa explains how the linguistic theory of “polygenesis” provided an evolutionary theory of language-families with irreducible origins—a tree with more than one root.¹⁴⁵ Polygenesis suggested that languages coming from the same root, however temporally or geographically distant they are, have a kinship that is absent among other languages that do not share the same root, even though they are contemporaneous, historically connected and geographically intermixed. This scientific discourse of late nineteenth century provided a kind of pluralism, which nevertheless produced racial and religious taxonomies (and thus, hierarchies).

This deep division of the “races” implied ... commensurability and commutability of peoples, languages, “geniuses,” and “spirits”

¹⁴³ Clarke 1887, p.487; emphases mine.

G. A. Barton’s (d.1942) *Religions of the World* (pbl.1917) depicts the “sterile” and “barren” lands as the cradle of the Semitic religion, from where it outpoured into other lands. See Barton 1917, pp.97-98.

¹⁴⁴ As early as *the Comparative Study of Religions* (pbl.1923) written by a PA. G. Widgery (d.1968) recognized the key role of philology during the inauguration of “a scientific *Comparative Study of Religions*.” Widgery pays tribute to Max Muller in this new epoch in the study of religion, but also indicates that the role philology plays in the study of religion has already fundamentally diminished by 1920s: “As for the beginnings of a definite Science it may be said that although probably no scholar of repute would now follow the philological bias of Max Muller, few would refuse to recognise him as one of the greatest pioneers in the systematic study of religions.” (Widgery 1923, p.13.)

¹⁴⁵ The claim of Max Muller (d.1900) that all languages spread from one origin was dismissed as theologically laden and unscientific in favor of a pluralistic theory. (See Masuzawa 2005, pp.209-264.)

belonging to the same “family,” even if they were separated by a great distance in space or in time. Thus the nineteenth-century Englishman could presume that there was an essential tie between him and an Athenian of the fourth century BCE, whereas a medieval Mohammedan from North Africa, for all his knowledge of Aristotle, presumably could not claim the same kinship.¹⁴⁶

The pluralistic vocabulary provided by linguistics not only helped in constructing a universalist Western identity with Hellenic origins, but also its re-presentation of Islam as a Semitic religion undermined the latter’s claim for universalism and pluralism despite its ethnic diversity. With the rise of the study of religion as a linguistic endeavor, ethnically more accurate earlier ethnographic representations of Islam as a local (Indian, Turkic, Persian etc.) colorful phenomenon were eclipsed by a monolithic Semitic religion at the end of the nineteenth century. Its universalism and pluralism were also undermined by the representations based on the long-lasting wars with Europe: Islam was the religion of sword. Its rapid expansion and wide presence around the world was the sad result of this deep intolerance against other religious truth-claims, forced conversions and inhumane violence. This extreme and indiscriminate violence, very much like the concept of “oriental despotism,” in turn, directly nourished from the ineffable transcendence of god in Islam, who is, as E. Sell (d.1932)’s *Faith of Islam* (pbl.1907) put it, “far beyond the reach of the human understanding.”¹⁴⁷ *The Religions of the World* (pbl.1917),¹⁴⁸ *an Outline Introduction to the History of Religions* (pbl.1926),¹⁴⁹ and *the Elements of Comparative Theology* (pbl.1937) argued in the same lines. The latter also employed distinct terms for negation, such as *mysterium tremendum* popularized by R. Otto. Accordingly, violence, immorality, and oriental despotism followed this unrestrained transcendence of the Muslim god:

Like the oriental monarch or leader He [the Muslim god] is “indulgent.” ... The “*ethical monotheism*” of the Hebrew prophets was on quite a different level from this *militant “omnipotent monotheism*” of Muhammed. The latter succeeded indeed in

¹⁴⁶ Masuzawa 2005, p.168.

¹⁴⁷ Sell 1907, p.47, 189.

¹⁴⁸ “He was thought to be all-wise and all-powerful, and to be the absolute despot of the world. It was useless for man to hope to understand him, but God would be merciful if man submitted to him.” (Barton 1917, p.99.)

¹⁴⁹ See T. Robinson 1926, p.183.

raising the morality of a demoralized Arabia, but it was mainly an appeal through fear, not an appeal to the essentially ethical character of God. Allāh is the sheer personification of the numinous, omnipotent, terrible, supremely great, capricious, arbitrary, the *mysterium tremendum*, urgent in appeal, fostering in the creature a sense of his utter creatureliness and nothingness. ... As the “Wholly-Other” He is transcendent, at the expense of being immanent. ... The divine sovereignty is so absolute that there is hardly any room left for human freedom.¹⁵⁰

While this now-mundane representation of Islam as an intolerant, anti-pluralistic religion of the sword had a sustained polemical career,¹⁵¹ its renewed Semitization with the academic study of religion produced much more significant immediate consequences when combined with the polygenetical linguistics. Semitic languages, unlike Indo-European languages, were poor in terms of inflection, thus, inherently uncreative and rigid. Von Humboldt (d.1835)’s argument that language determined thought and culture had an immense influence on later continental philosophy. In M. Heidegger (d.1976)’s famous words, “language is the house of Being.”¹⁵² Under this assumption, inflexible languages meant essentially unchanging thinking capacities and cultural behavioral patterns.¹⁵³ “Semites” comprising a trans-historical group of Arabs (or Muslims), Jews, and other groups were thus (1) homogeneously the same wherever they lived; (2) incapable of producing high level knowledge, arts, artifacts; (3) themselves being ethnically unchanging peoples, living in unchanging territories.¹⁵⁴

“Semitic religiosity,” having been superseded by a Hellenized Christianity, was for European theologians of the last two centuries essentially an extrapolation and generalization from the dominant representations of Judaism and Islam as law-oriented, thus, rigid and violent forms of religiosity incompatible with the values of modernity. Accordingly Judaism and Islam were nomocentric, focusing

¹⁵⁰ F. H. Smith 1937, p.93; my emphasis.

¹⁵¹ At least in late ninth century the Byzantine Christian writings began to become “more overtly polemical and antagonistic” that employed these themes of violence. (See Goddard 2000, pp.56-57.) For even earlier arguments from ‘Irāqī Christians, see e.g. Abū Qurrah in Bertaina 2007, p.403 (English trans.), p.445 (Arabic original). Also see J. I. Smith 1996, pp.54-55.

¹⁵² Heidegger 1982, pp.5-22.

¹⁵³ For an early critical approach, see Said 1979, p.96.

¹⁵⁴ E.g. see W. R. Smith 1894, pp.1-6; T. Robinson 1926, p.172, 188.

on the letter of their scriptures, instead of the spirit. Hellenization meant transcending not only the Semitic past, but at the same time attaining a new, “modern” phase and form of a universal and ethical religiosity unprecedented in world history. Religiosity, associated with conservatism, was now the eclipsing paradigm, referring to formalism, localism, dogmatism, and absence of agency. In this larger scholarly discursive change, from its very inception in late nineteenth century as an academic discipline with its institutions and networks, the comparative study (or science) of religion was directed towards the analysis of “world religions,” where “religion” emerged as an all-explanatory category for the lives of non-modern people, i.e., *locals*.¹⁵⁵ Within this context, negativity was an inherent aspect of Islamic theology that rendered it unethical and unfit to be called “modern.”

C. Creation of the Aryan Modern in the Semitic Primitive: “Sufism”

Integral to the Semitization of Islam was the literal creation of the mystical “Sufism.” Scientific literature on the Semitic Islam was preceded and contradicted by the much longer standing ethnographic accounts of Muslim lands, which were depicted as full of exotic people, who ecstatically dance, smoke opium, recite poetry, come from diverse ethnic origins, and so on. It is at this point in the early nineteenth century that Islamic Mysticism emerges in Western scholarship and mediates between the Semitic parochial, immoral Islam and the diverse ethnographic Islams. While Muslims were legally-minded (as a habit of “Semites”), intolerant and violent, Sufis were agentive and free from these legal boundaries; independently connecting with god. Against the Semitic ultra-transcendent, negative god, who produced slaves without agency, the mystic’s god was immanent and experienced. The god of Sufism was the antidote to the negative theological god of Islam.

¹⁵⁵ James Freeman Clarke (d.1888), the American comparative theologian whose work attained immense popularity, explained the difference briefly:

For if we can make it appear, by a fair survey of the principal religions of the world, that, while they are ethnic or local, Christianity is catholic or universal; that, while they are defective, possessing some truths and wanting others, Christianity possesses all; and that, while they are stationary, Christianity is progressive. (Clarke 1887, p.14).

Also see Keane 2007, pp.41-47; Said 1979, p.118; Masuzawa 2005, p.78.

As the theologians, missionaries, philosophers and orientalists up to the early twentieth century underlined what Hume had already suggested,¹⁵⁶ it was this delicate balance between divine immanence and transcendence that made Christianity superior to other religions.¹⁵⁷ Accordingly, the doctrine of incarnation broke that Semitic unknowable, unsayable, impassable unity of oneness. The only alternative that they recognized as a way of breaking that self-contained, self-sufficient, disinterested unity of god was “pantheism.”¹⁵⁸ On the one hand there is “the Christian Trinity, which breaks the awful impassibility of the logically unified absolute which renders possible sympathy, affection, love, trust, which *makes god knowable*;” while on the other, we have “Pantheism, in which the many vanishes in the one, and the one vanishes in the many.”¹⁵⁹ If no moral way to unite the absolutely transcendent god of theology and the experienced, worshipped, loved, trusted god of practice is admitted, then the practice becomes the worship of diverse events and objects instead of their real creator and sustainer. By rejecting the trinity in favor of an unspeakable god, Islam in fact refused to acknowledge the way to connect the creator with creation, and rather mistook creation for its creator. As MacDonald underscored again and again, *“Islam wittingly and unwittingly chose Pantheism. All thinking religious Muslims are mystics. All, too, are Pantheists, but some do not know*

¹⁵⁶ “If we abandon all human analogy [...], I am afraid *we abandon all religion* and retain no conception of the great object of our adoration.” (Hume in Shehadi 1964, p.71; emphasis mine.)

¹⁵⁷ Christian theologians under early Muslim rule already presented this argument, which ever since played a key apologetic or polemical role. In a probably imaginary debate held in 829 CE at the court [*majlis*] of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Ma’mūn (r.813-833), the Melkite Bishop of Ḥarrān Abū Qurrah (d.ca.830) argues that Muslims made God so separated from the world that nothing sayable remains about him:

You [Muslims] have separated [*afraztum*] God from His Word and His Spirit. You ... claim that His light is a created servant [*‘abd makhlūq*] of His, so He does not need to be praised nor revered nor glorified, nor can it be said of Him: “the light of God.” (Abū Qurrah in Bertaina 2007, p.401 (English translation), p.444 (Arabic text).)

¹⁵⁸ The depiction of the Trinity and pantheism as the two collectively exhaustive alternatives for closing the gap between God and creation was inherited to the twentieth century from earlier missiological writings. K. G. Pfander (d.1865), itinerant evangelist famous for his polemics, had made the same observation: *“He who denies the Trinity is obliged to believe in an absolute Unity which excluded knowledge and will in God, as also His other moral attributes, leads to a denial of Revelation, and if followed up, plunges its advocates into Pantheism!”* (Pfander in Vander Werff 1977, p.42; my emphasis.)

¹⁵⁹ MacDonald 1910, p. 29.

it.”¹⁶⁰ Along with earlier scholars such as Clarke,¹⁶¹ Pfander, Palmer, Zwemer,¹⁶² Hughes,¹⁶³ the Anglican orientalist W. H. T. Gairdner (d.1928) made the same claim in the 1910s, which has been often cited.¹⁶⁴ According to this widespread representation, even if the rigid negativist theology of Islam does not equip them with any rational system, Muslims somehow connect to the divine and it is only Muslim mystics who explicitly violate this impossible ultra-transcendence. They love, worship, believe and trust in a god that is immanent, and tangible. In practice, thus, every Muslim is a mystic, and every mystic is by definition a pantheist, finding god freely everywhere and in every kind of antinomian, or rather ascetic, practice. Pantheistic mysticism, the only alternative way to mediate the transcendent with the world, was the practical religion of Muslims. This widespread association of Islamic negative theology with pantheism indicates the early twentieth century conviction that Muslims did not have a tenable, well-grounded theology, except an uncritical, unthoughtful practice. Gairdner asked “*how can this Unknowable, Unimaginable, and Inconceivable be nevertheless ‘reached’ by mystic souls?*”¹⁶⁵ Uncompromising theological transcendence had left no rational basis, leaving illogical, ecstatic, and thus, mystical paths to unite the unclosing abyss.¹⁶⁶ “*On the agnosticism is reared an unintelligible gnosticism.*”¹⁶⁷ A theologically unknowable and transcendent god means a practically pantheistic god.

¹⁶⁰ MacDonald 1910, p. 36; emphases mine.

¹⁶¹ “In this one sentence, ‘*lā ilāha illā Allāh*,’ is summed up a system which, for want of a better name, I may be permitted to call the Pantheism of Force, or of Act, thus exclusively assigned to God.” (Clarke 1887, p.486.)

¹⁶² E.g. Zwemer 1905, p.65.

¹⁶³ Hughes 1885, p.147.

¹⁶⁴ In his popular book the *Closing of the Muslim Mind* (pbl.2010), a senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, Robert R. Reilly (b.1946) presents the problem he sees in Islam succinctly:

An overemphasis on God as One can easily morph into God as the only One, which then ineluctably incorporates everything into the only One, with nothing outside of it. *We are left with either monism or pantheism.*” (Reilly 2010, Ch.4; my emphasis.)

Reilly’s book, even if it is recently published, relies on the early twentieth century scholarship on Islamic theology, Gairdner and Macdonald in particular. Hence it not only displays the problem of uniting the gap between God and creation in early twentieth century scholarship, but also the influence of such apparently outdated works that still haunt the depictions of God in Islam.

¹⁶⁵ Gairdner in al-Ghazālī 1924, p.9; my emphasis.

¹⁶⁶ Gairdner 1914, p.133.

¹⁶⁷ Gairdner 1914, p.133; my emphasis.

“Sufism” is this pluralistic, mystical locus of agency in the Semitic, thus, non-universal, Islam for a wide variety of philosophers, theologians, and prominent scholars of religion until the 1940s, who occupied key roles in the study of religion, Islam, and Sufism.¹⁶⁸ A rich variety of intellectuals had diverse assumptions about the origin, history, status and functions of Sufism in relation to Islam. On the other hand, invariably all of them agree that Sufis have an immanent god clearly different from, if not diametrically opposed to, the apophatic tyrant god of Islam.¹⁶⁹ The opposition between Sufi immanence and Semitic apophasis was most clear for the Dutch scholar and colonial advisor Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), who is considered the founder of modern Islamic Studies in Europe along with the German Theodore Nöldeke (d.1930) and the Hungarian Ignác Goldziher (d.1921). Accordingly,

by emphasizing God’s immanent presence in this world Sufi doctrines inevitably clashed with the Qur’ānic idea of God’s absolute transcendence vis-à-vis his creation. This feature of Sufism ... along with its tolerance toward other religions and beliefs, allowed it to overcome the intolerant and exclusivist spirit of “scriptural” Islam, making it a perfect forum for dialogue with other religious traditions.¹⁷⁰

The American clergyman John Weiss (d.1879), who translated Goethe (d.1832)’s *Dīvān* into English in 1877 explains that the tolerance of Sufism “is by no means

¹⁶⁸ For an analysis of the depictions of Islam since late nineteenth century as a Semitic religion, and Sufism as an Aryan category in tension, if not antagonism, with Islam, see Masuzaw 2005a, pp.179-205.

¹⁶⁹ Some of these names are: Goethe (d.1832), von Humboldt (d.1835), Weiss (d.1879), Palmer (d.1882), Palgrave (d.1888), von Kremer (d.1889), E. B. Cowell (d.1903), Otto Pflieger (d.1908), William James (d.1910), T. Patrick Hughes (d.1911), Hauri (d.1919), Browne (d.1926), Gairdner (d.1928), E. Sell (d.1932), Hurgronje (d.1936), Rudolf Otto (d.1937), Wensick (d.1939), Krymskii (d.1942), Macdonalds (d.1943), Miguel A. Palacios (d.1944), R. Nicholson (d.1945), F. Harold Smith (d.af.1951), Zwemer (d.1952), L. Massignon (d.1962), T. Robinson (d.1964), and Arberry (d.1969).

For an overview of the German understanding of Sufism as a “universal and positive mysticism,” see Geaves 2014, p.238.

¹⁷⁰ Knysh 2005, p.113.

Knysh also points out that Agafangel Krymskii (d.1942) and Valentin Zhukovskii (d.1919), the two principal authorities on Sufism in Russia, described a similar hostility between Sufism and Islam, the “Arab character” of which was “incapable of mystical feeling.” (Knysh 2005, p.119.) For the study of Sufism in the Russian context, see Knysh 2002.

an ordinary Mohammedan sentiment.”¹⁷¹ Palmer (d.1882), whom Weiss mentioned as “the distinguished orientalist,” published his seminal *Oriental Mysticism, a Treatise on the Sufiistic [sic] and Unitarian Theosophy of the Persians*, in 1867. This book, wrote Palmer, aimed “to prove that Sufiism is really the development of the Primaeval Religion of the Aryan race.”¹⁷² This definition of Sufism as an Indian and Persian reaction to the “Semitic genius” of the Arabs was reproduced in the influential works of Browne (d.1926), von Kremer (d.1889) and R. Nicholson (d.1945)¹⁷³ among many others.¹⁷⁴ As *The Elements of Comparative Theology* (pbl.1937) briefly put it, Sufism was an imminentist, humane reaction to the cold and rigid ultra-transcendence of Semitic Islam:

The warmer aspect of deity as near to man, implied in the doctrine of the divine immanence, has found expression in minority movements, *in reaction against an overstressed transcendence*. The most important of these reactions [was] the mystic movement of the Sufis.¹⁷⁵

The “morbid” imbalance of the apophatic god of Islam and the immanent god of Sufism is the major theological theme in this vast body of the orientalist

¹⁷¹ Weiss in Goethe 1877, p.201.

¹⁷² Palmer 1867, p.xi. Also discussed in Schimmel 2011, pp.9-10, and Ridgeon 2014, p.131.

¹⁷³ Nicholson’s approach to Sufism is very much influenced by the linguistic theory of polygenesis, which led him associate the heart of mystical experience with the Aryan languages and cultures. While he acknowledges the presence of Arab poets, Nicholson has a hard time in appreciating the mystical aspect of the Arabic poetry, and argues that Arabs, like all Semites, are unable to unite the profane and the sacred. They are capable of writing only on the carnal, erotic or sexual themes of desire, like “the beauty of the mistress,” if they ever produce poetry.

The Arab has no such passion for an ultimate principle of unity as has always distinguished the Persians and Indians. He shares with other Semitic peoples an incapacity for harmonizing and unifying the particular facts of experience: he discerns the trees very clearly, but not the wood. [In his art we find] ... nowhere large apprehension of a great and united whole. (Nicholson 2005, pp.125-126.)

Considering this inability of uniting the experienced and the transcendent, it is no surprise that the Semitized, Arab Islam goes to extreme negation, while Aryan Sufism follows just the opposite, i.e., pantheism and monism, in the absence of a guiding theological system.

As Ernst keenly observes, this kind of racial interpretation of mysticism has proven to be remarkably tenacious, so that some of the most prominent modern admirers of an Arab Sufi poet such as Ibn al-‘Arabī have presented him in a de-Semitized fashion to make him fit into a model of universal mysticism. (Ernst 2014, p.34.)

¹⁷⁴ See e.g. Rice 1964, p.28. Also see Knysh 2005, p.114.

¹⁷⁵ F. H. Smith 1937, p.95; my emphasis.

literature. The Christian clergyman, Johannes Hauri (d.1919) claims that Islam has a conception of “*god about whom we know nothing.*”¹⁷⁶ Arguably the most impressive and productive scholar of Sufism in the twentieth century and the teacher of many experts of Islam today, A. J. Arberry (d.1969), claims in his *Aspects of Islamic Civilization* (pbl.1964) that the Islamic scholarly tradition is “*defining God exclusively in terms of negation.*”¹⁷⁷ Writing in 1947 and 1951 respectively, W. Sweetman¹⁷⁸ and A. S. Tritton (d.1973)¹⁷⁹ echo the same idea in similar words. Following Nicholson, Arberry also argues that it is pantheistic Sufism that represents the positive, experienced dimension of the sacred. William James, and later Rudolf Otto, a key figure in the still very prominent phenomenological approach to the study of religion, simply revisit the critique of the apophatic, “numinous” side in Islamic theology,¹⁸⁰ which turns god into a “capricious despot,”¹⁸¹ and believers into slaves who lack morality.¹⁸² The

¹⁷⁶ Hauri 1882, pp.44-45; my emphasis. Also cited in Zwemer 1905, p.21. Cf. Ivry in al-Kindī 1974, p.15.

¹⁷⁷ Arberry 2008, p.13; my emphasis.

¹⁷⁸ “All that is said of God is said with a difference, and it has become proverbial that nothing the mind can devise can convey anything about Allāh.” (See W. Williams 2009, p.19.)

¹⁷⁹ “There was a tendency to define god by negatives—a tendency not confined to Islam.” (Tritton 2013, p.39.)

¹⁸⁰ Both for James and Otto, pure negation is immorally destructive, and theology should supply it with an experiential affirmation of the “holy.” James points to the inherent affirmation in the negative theology of Pseudo Dionysius:

...these qualifications are denied by Dionysius, not because the truth falls short of them, but because it so infinitely excels them. It is above them. It is *super-lucent, super-splendent, super-essential, super-sublime, super* everything that can be named. Like Hegel in his logic, mystics journey towards the positive pole of truth only by the “*Methode der Absoluten Negativitat.*” (James 1902, p.408.)

Similarly, writes James, Meister Eckhart or Angelus Silesius (d.1677) come up with paradoxical expressions that abound in their mystical writings. This is “a dialectical use ... of negation as a mode of passage towards a higher kind of affirmation.” (James 1902, p.409.)

¹⁸¹ “[A]ttributing to God an absolutely fortuitous will, which would in fact turn Him into a ‘capricious despot.’ These doctrines are specially prominent in the theology of Islam.” (Otto 1923, p.105)

¹⁸²

No religion has such a leaning to predestination as Islam; and the special quality of Islam is just that in it, from its commencement onwards, the rational and specifically moral aspect of the idea of God was unable to acquire the firm and clear impress that it won, e.g., in Christianity or Judaism. In Allāh the numinous is absolutely preponderant over everything else. So that, when Islam is criticized for giving a merely fortuitous character to the claim of morality, as

abolition of slavery, a key gesture towards modernity and its moral standards, “would strike at the very foundations of the code of Muḥammadanism” according to Hughes (d.1911), because “slavery is in complete harmony with the spirit of Islam, while it is abhorrent to that of Christianity.”¹⁸³ The “flabby morality” of Islam, in Zwemer’s words, is directly related to the over-emphasis on negation and divine transcendence in Islam.¹⁸⁴ In his introduction to the *Niche of Lights* [*Mishkāt al-Anwār*] of the medieval theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111), Zwemer’s colleague Gairdner agrees that the unknowable, “wholly and entirely” transcendent god of Islam is not simply unethical¹⁸⁵ and “nonsensical,” but also dramatically “*self-negating*,” but in a pejorative sense:

the doctrine ... that the divine essence and characteristics wholly and entirely “differ from” the human appears to be asserted as this treatise’s *last* word ... Nevertheless, the *Mishkāt* itself seems to be one long attempt to *modify or even negate* this its own bankrupt conclusion.¹⁸⁶

Here Gairdner points towards the key problem at the core of the theology of Muslims: how can there be a *religion* if it puts god so distant from the world that it suspends speech about god? Islam could not be a religion if it were to maintain this absolute transcendence. The influential American orientalist D. B. MacDonald (d.1943), whom well-established Islamicists including Nicholson, H. Wolfson, A. Guillaume (d.1965), and S. H. Nasr (b.1933) praise or cite often,¹⁸⁷ indicates the matter he finds at the heart of Islam, arguably in the most eloquent way: “*it is magnificent, but it is not–religion!*”¹⁸⁸

The abstract theological tension remained unsolved from the Western perspective as the incomprehensible god of Islam stood absolutely separated

though the moral law were only valid through the chance caprice of the deity, the criticism is well justified. (Otto 1923, p.94)

¹⁸³ Hughes 1885, p.600.

¹⁸⁴ See J. I. Smith 1998, p.362.

¹⁸⁵ “He [Gairdner] says Islam’s monotheistic creed is so simple and rigid as to be intelligible by the densest mind, providing as little challenge to the intellect as it does to the Muslim’s moral faculty.” (J. I. Smith 1998, p.361.)

¹⁸⁶ Gairdner in al-Ghazālī 1924, pp.28-29. (“Last” is italicized in the original; the emphasis on “modify or even negate” is mine.)

¹⁸⁷ See e.g. Nasr 2015, min.4.49-6.25.

¹⁸⁸ MacDonald 1910, p.36; emphasis mine.

from creation.¹⁸⁹ *Closing of the Muslim Mind* (publ.2010) repeats the same argument, extensively citing MacDonald and Gairdner, praising their reading of negativity of Islamic theology as “extremely penetrating insights.” Accordingly, uncompromising emphasis on divine transcendence and unknowability is the main cause of the “intellectual suicide of Islam,” while Sufism stands at the “extreme opposite” of Islamic theology with its “pantheistic” emphasis on the experienced god.¹⁹⁰ Radical negativity results in parochialism, violence and immorality, and embodies the major defect of Islam that has prevented it from meeting the modern ethical standards of being counted as a religion.¹⁹¹ Setting aside a few scholars whose approach to Islamic divine transcendence remained

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Allāh is so separate from his creatures, is so incomprehensible, has so little touch of kinship with them, is not their father, has not borne their flesh and known their sorrows, has not tabernacled with them, has not been revealed to them by his Word made flesh; has not been to them an indwelling Holy Ghost, is so absolutely separated from all sympathy with them by his remote, unkindred nature—verily a god afar off! (MacDonald 1910, p.33.)

¹⁹⁰ Reilly 2010.

¹⁹¹ The argument of “not–religion” has survived to date. B. Carson, one of the presidential candidates of the United States declared on Jan. 29, 2016 that Islam is not a religion, but a life organization system that has an “apocalyptic vision.” Such arguments were brought in legal cases as well. In 2010, the opposition to the project of building an Islamic Center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee employed the same, now official, strategy of showing that “Islam,” with its violence, parochialism and immorality, did not fit into the *modern* definition of religion. Although under the county law religious facilities are exempt from public hearings, the plaintiff attorney Joe Brandon argued that the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro is not a religious facility because Islam is not a religion:

Brandon: Is Islam a religion?

Unidentified Male: In my opinion?

Brandon: Yes, sir.

Unidentified Male: Yes, sir.

Brandon: What do you based that on?

Unidentified Male: They have a belief in a deity and afterlife.

Brandon: Now you say an afterlife, is that like when you yell “Allāh Akbar” and blow yourself up in a bunch of people that you get seven virgins, is that the afterlife you're talking about? Where strap a bomb on your chest, blow up unsuspecting people that didn't know anything about you the day before, and then—so you get you some virgins. Is that the afterlife that you're calling a religion? (O'Brien 2011, min.26.58-28.09)

an exception,¹⁹² the apophatic god of Islamic theology was carefully put against the sustained values of modernity, all (or most) of which were found in the anti-apophatic teachings of Sufism until we arrive at the 1950s.

D. Modern Gods of Post-Modernity

Even in the 1950s and 1960s, god's unknowability and unsayability were seen as major theological dimensions of Islam, while the god of the Sufis is consistently depicted as anti-apophatic and immanent. These associations were well-rooted, hence, authoritative, even for Islam's Muslim and non-Muslim defenders who communicated with Western philosophy and the comparative study of religion. The first philosophical monograph in English devoted to the topic was the Lebanese Christian philosopher Fadlou Shehadi (d.2012)'s *Ghazālī's Unique Unknowable God*, published in 1964. With abundant references to al-Ghazālī's key apophatic book *The Highest Aim [al-Maqṣad al-Asnā]*, Shehadi asks whether there are tenable answers to the following four philosophical questions: (1) how can one assert the unknowable? (2) How is an ethics based on emulating god possible if god is unknowable? (3) How can one attach names or attributes to the unknowable? (4) How is revelation possible if god is unknowable? Shehadi analyzes unknowability as an abstract philosophical problem that should be treated with rigorous logical analysis instead of a trivial fallacy. He does not limit himself to the analysis of al-Ghazālī's ideas and discusses logical problems in theology particularly in terms of divine negativity. Shehadi does not use the term "apophasis," while "unsayability," "unknowability" and "ineffability" are the major themes of the analysis.¹⁹³ He does not employ these terms to refer to a commendable theological aspect, or to a critical philosophical potential, in Islamic theology. Instead, the terms are already filled with negative connotations that Shehadi seeks to challenge. Very much like what Vladimir Lossky would do for Christian theology in *In the Image and Likeness of God* (pbl.1967), Shehadi apologetically aims to show that "unsayability," "unknowability" and "ineffability" are not absurd theological ideas of Islam, but they can be consistent if analyzed closely.

¹⁹² E.g. Goldziher 1981, p.96, 154-155; Goldziher 1917, p.148, 186, 236; Widgery 1923, pp.130-131. Goldziher's reformist reading of the Islamic heritage aimed to replace the Semitic/Aryan dichotomy as the fundamental framework of the orientalist scholarship with a universalist historicist binary between the medieval and modern. (See Moshfegh 2012.)

¹⁹³ These three terms serve in the contemporary scholarship as the best common denominators of apophasis and "the essential principles of the *via negativa*." See Carabine 1995, p.323.

Negativity has unfavorable connotations not only for the non-Muslim intellectuals of the last century, but also for their Muslim contemporaries who were conversant with Western philosophy. Muḥammad Iqbal (d.1938) resisted the German historian O. Spengler (d.1936)'s description in his revolutionary *Decline of the West* (pbl.1918) "that Islam amounts to a complete negation of the ego."¹⁹⁴ In the apologetic book *Islam versus Christianity* (pbl.193?), M. Hossain, on whom we do not have any knowledge otherwise, employs the term "negation" with reference to Christianity. Responding to missionary works, particularly to L. Levonian's harsh *Moslem Mentality* (pbl.1928), Hossain undertakes a criticism of Biblical morals and ethics, arguing that "the Ten Commandments constitute a *worthless negative philosophy*."¹⁹⁵

Later Muslim scholars adopted the sustained, distasteful language on negation beyond apologetic contexts. In two informative cases, Sufi masters asserted that Sufism is, indeed, affirmative and positive. Maḥmūd Abū al-Fayḍ al-Manūfī (d.1970?) was an Egyptian Sufi master who founded the Fayḍiyyah (or Manūfīyyah) branch of the Shādhiliyyah order in 1927. His *Unadulterated Islamic Mysticism [al-Taṣawwuf al-Islāmī al-Khāliṣ]* (pbl.1969) advocates just the opposite of what he calls "negative mysticism" [*al-taṣawwuf al-salbī*]. For him, per his European contemporaries, the term "negative mysticism" indicates nihilism, associated with Buddhist and Hindu mysticism, or philosophical mysticism, which he links with "mystical doctrines permeated by Greek Gnosticism and Christian Neo-Platonism."¹⁹⁶ Negativity means immorality and lack of individual agency for him and his followers—hence one should avoid it in constructive and moral inquiries. Like al-Manūfī, a Shādhilī Sufi master of Cairo, Abū al-Wafā' al-Ghunaymī al-Taftāzānī (d.1994) was familiar with the European philosophical writings, especially those of Bertrand Russell, Henri Bergson and W. T. Stace, which gave an ethically positive description of mystical experience. Along the same lines, al-Taftāzānī's classic *Prolegomena to Islamic Mysticism [Madkhal ilā al-Taṣawwuf al-Islāmī]* (pbl.1974) aims for the affirmative, and firmly opposes the apophatic. The terms he uses and associations he makes in his description clearly indicates the influence of Western descriptions of mystical experience. Negative mysticism, accordingly, produces "psychopaths, neurotics, frightened, disorientated, self-absorbed personalities which are *emotionally high*

¹⁹⁴ Iqbal 2013, p.87.

¹⁹⁵ Hossain 193?, p.77; my emphasis.

¹⁹⁶ Christman 2007, p.179.

but morally low."¹⁹⁷ Authentic Sufism is "positive mysticism" [*al-taṣawwuf al-ijābī*], which brings "moral strength, happiness, optimism and psychological tranquility."¹⁹⁸ Making similar assumptions, the famous Pakistani Muslim scholar Fazlur Raḥmān (d.1988) adopts the same distinction between positive and negative Sufism. Narrating Muḥammad Iqbal (d.1938)'s approach to Sufism, Raḥmān praises the life-affirming, "positive Sufism" as opposed to the "negative Sufism," which marks the decline of spirituality and morality:

Positive Sufism, the inculcation of a dynamic personality in service of truth, he [Iqbal] appreciated deeply; but that was gone, and a *negative Sufism*, an escape from the problems of the world, was all that remained. In its growing influence upon the 'ulamā' it had also destroyed the dynamism of the orthodox.¹⁹⁹

In the same vein, Muslim scholars of Sufism writing in the 1960s especially highlight that the Sufi conception of the annihilation of the human soul [*fanā'*] is not merely negative. Explicit references to morality, insistent efforts to distance Sufism from pantheism, and the comparisons they make directly speak to the modernizing concerns and standards set in the study of religion.²⁰⁰

The importance of the attack on negative theology, and the emphasis on the positive, hence moral, aspects of their religion by these Sufi masters and Muslim scholars in the first half of the twentieth century cannot be overemphasized. The ethical problems they identify in "negative mysticism," the specific groups they identify with it, and the rather socially active, positive mysticism they defend were clearly following into the vast Western literature on comparative religion. Masuzawa's study suggested that the category of "world religions" emerged as Christian scholars negotiated with modernity, and with the availability of more concrete information about the rest of the world. Similarly, we observe that the authoritative meaning of "apophasis," and more generally the theme of

¹⁹⁷ Christman 2007, p.182, 195 (fn.20).

¹⁹⁸ Christman 2007, p.182.

¹⁹⁹ Rahman 1982, p.56.

²⁰⁰

This state of *Fanā'* is of a moral and objective order. ... *Fanā'* is not merely the cessation of Self, like the Buddhist Nirvana, but ... it includes the continuation of the worshipper's self in God. ... Though *Fanā'* might lead to Pantheism if it were an end in itself, this, as we see it, is not the case... (Abdel-Kader 1962, p.82; my emphasis.)

Also see 'Abdu-r-Rabb 1967, p.61.

negativity in religion, was primarily negotiated among Christian scholars in the recent centuries. But the life of the theme cannot be reduced to its birth. The life of negativity in the study of religion was not simply about Christian intellectuals hanging the label on others, at least in the last century. However initially weak or marginal, scholars from diverse backgrounds began employing these concepts or themes, mostly adopting their sustained, authoritarian associations. It is not only Christian intellectuals, but also scholars from different religious backgrounds debating what fits into modernity and its ethical standards, and what does not in terms of apophasis and negative theology. As negation was a theologically and ethically suspicious term at least until the 1960s, Muslim apologists, very much like their Christian counterparts, underlined the positive dimensions of their religious traditions. Instead of solely Christianity, it is the multi-faith project of the study of religion that has negotiated modernity since the early twentieth century. The study of religion not only reshapes the standards of being modern, but also interpretively selects those who represent it, and those who do not.

Briefly, “apophasis” was not “triumphant” in Islam until the mid-1970s. Negative speech in “Islamic theology” was a widely unfavorable phenomenon either to be attacked or to be defended and shown that it is something else than an “awful unity.” The process of its triumph would begin only in the mid-1970s, when (1) “apophasis” emerged as a natural category of comparative study of religion; (2) negativity in speech and theology, thus the enduring values of early modernity, were solidified by being associated with the post-modern idea of “infinite critique.” Especially after the triumphant rise of apophasis in the 1970s within Western thought as a critical theology that does not fetishize god or formal religious constructs, Sufism, the perennial anti-idolatrous, non-dogmatic aspect of Islam emerged as the unique locus wherein apophasis would be found. Centuries ago, when referring to the *via negativa* that he followed, the Roman Catholic negative theologian Denys the Carthusian (d.1471) saw himself in the same line as early Muslim thinkers of the *via negativa*, al-Fārābī (d.950), Ibn Sīnā (d.1037) and al-Ghazālī—all well-known Muslim philosophers and theologians, not mystics.²⁰¹ Moreover, even if polemical or hostile, an immense body of Western literature on negativity in Islamic theology had already been established. Very impressively, since the early nineteenth century almost every year a book on Islamic theology and dogmatics had been published, many of which explicitly addressed the anti-apophatic god of the Sufis.²⁰² Even the nineteenth century

²⁰¹ See Turner 1995, p.212.

²⁰² For a brief overview of Western studies on Islamic theology, see Holtzman 2010.

dictionaries on Islam were explaining how various early theologians and theological schools, such as the heterogeneous group of the Mu'tazilites, or the branches of the Najjārites all agreed on negating all attributes from god.²⁰³ Hence this switch in the representations of Sufism and Islamic theology that accompanied the change in the significance of "apophasis" in Western philosophy was astonishing. Once "apophasis" as the moral standard of modernity emerged in the study of religion in the late 1970s, it was found in the bosom of "Sufism," which had been consistently depicted as inherently anti-apophatic. Even if "apophasis" was employed interchangeably with a specific (i.e., negative) form *theology*, religionists largely neglected Muslim theologians and philosophers, but focused on Sufis to find the critical, hence self-reflective, pluralistic, anti-dogmatic, and moral performances of apophasis.

A brief comparison of the literature before and after the 1970s will be illuminating. Harry Wolfson's studies published between 1952 and 1976 employed the term "apophasis," and contextualized it within the field of Islamic theology. Like earlier studies such as those by Gairdner and H. Wolfson, Shehadi's book (pbl.1964) on the unknowable and ineffable god focused on Islamic theology and on al-Ghazālī the mainstream theologian, not a mystic. Religionists writing after the mid-1970s, on the other hand, cite invariably the mystics Ibn al-'Arabī (d.1240) and Rūmī (d.1273) as the best representatives of Islamic apophasis or even Islamic negative theology.²⁰⁴ Apophasis is already associated with anti-dogmatism and critique (or outright infinite critique) in most of these writings. The unspeakable, ineffable god of Muslim theologians and philosophers from various schools such as the plethora of early Baṣran and Baghdādian Mu'tazilite dialectical theologians [*mutakallimūn*], Ismā'īlīs, Peripatetic Philosophers, Ibādīs, Sunnī and Shī'ī theologians simply embody the "old-school" transcendence, prone to turn into a tyrant who leaves no agency,

²⁰³ See e.g. Hughes 1885, p.428.

²⁰⁴ See e.g. Corbin 1977; Sells 1994; Franke 2007, Vol.1.; Almond 2004; Huntington 1995, p.283; Dabashi 1999, pp.272-273; 600; Shaikh 2012, p.114; Taji-Farouki 2007, pp.15-16; 257; Katz 1992, pp.3-32. For apophasis in other mystics, al-Ḥallāj (d.922) and al-Niffarī (d.977), see Mayer 2008, p.259. Here Mayer argues that "in common with other mystical theologies, it [i.e., Sufism] strongly inclined to an apophatic rather than a kataphatic approach to the divine mystery, expressing God through denial, not affirmation, through 'unsaying' rather than saying."

Ibn al-'Arabī and Rūmī until recently were unanimously depicted as the champions of "sense pantheism" or "pantheistic monism." For a brief summary of the literature on Rūmī "the greatest pantheistic poet of all times," see Ch.8: "Thirty Birds United in the Mirror Sun: Apophatic Apotheosis and Divine Union in the Making of the Mawlawiyyah."

moral space, or freedom to the dogmatically-oriented believer. The ineffable god of the “Sufi mystics,” on the other hand, becomes the embodiment of a self-critical consciousness that is aware of the narrativity of truth and of the limiting nature of religions, celebrating multiple rival narrativizations in favor of pluralism and universalism.²⁰⁵ The two-volume collection *On What Cannot Be Said* (pbl.2007), for example, depicts “apophasis” as the move of infinite critique present in every deconstruction; “apophatic reflection belongs to periods of crisis, when confidence in established discourses crumbles.”²⁰⁶ Pre-modern, modern and post-modern theologians, philosophers, musicians, poets, survivors of catastrophes as well as their diverse silences and works are intensively defined as “apophatic” in the collection. Unsurprisingly, the editor chooses Ibn al-‘Arabī and Rūmī as the two representatives of Muslim apophasis.²⁰⁷ Yet the two Muslim representatives have in common more than the label “Sufi” and the assumptions that accompany it. They both lived in a distant, pre-modern past.

The earliest works celebrating apophasis in Islam were produced by one of the most erudite intellectuals of the last century, Henry Corbin (d.1978). Corbin was the translator of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* into French, and Heidegger was almost exclusively read in France through Corbin’s translation.²⁰⁸ Much of Derrida’s early essay in 1948 contains unattributed citations from Corbin. Corbin’s full influence on Derrida awaits further study.²⁰⁹ In 1977 Corbin responds to the accusation of nihilism directed towards negative theology, as the

²⁰⁵ The gesture for an infinitely critical pre-modern thinker can be found in Hamid Dabashi’s depiction of ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī (d.1131). Dabashi here refuses even to define al-Hamadānī as a “Sufi,” or “poet,” etc., because apparently he was such a subversive intellectual that he transcended his time, and succeeded in displaying the narrativity of all religious epistemological claims and dependent identities, including those of his own. (E.g. see Dabashi 1999, pp.17-19; 222-223.) A brief look at the critical reviews of his book suffice to display how much Dabashi failed in presenting an undistorted portrait of this subversive medieval intellectual by fetishizing the idea of subversion.

²⁰⁶ Franke 2007, Vol.1, p.31.

²⁰⁷ Franke 2007, Vol.1, pp.223-240.

²⁰⁸ Baring 2011, p.74, 104.

²⁰⁹ In a letter to his “old Arab” friend Gabriel Bounoure (d.1969), Derrida writes, “I would so much like you to tell me about Ibn Masarraḥ [an Andalusian Muslim intellectual who died in 931], Corbin, Massignon.” (Derrida in Peeters 2013, p.161) On the other hand, in 1968, now competent in German, Derrida described Corbin’s translation of *Being and Time* as “monstrous,” and argued that in his translation Corbin missed the philosophical motives behind Heidegger’s project. (Baring 2011, pp.74-75.)

title of the piece makes clear: “Apophatic Theology as Antidote to Nihilism.”²¹⁰ Here, as he did in “the Paradox of Monotheism” in 1976, Corbin employs “apophasis” and “kataphasis” interchangeably with “negative theology” and “affirmative theology” respectively.²¹¹ Corbin describes them as two different “modalities of theology,” but gives the moral capacity to apophasis. “Cultural nihilism is no more than the socialized aspect of an unfortunate or failed resolution of this dialectic in which the primacy of apophatic theology is abolished. This leaves the dogmas, purported absolute by positive or affirmative theology.”²¹² Affirmative theology “does no more than sublimate creatural attributes in order to confer them upon the divinity, ... succumbing to the very *idolatry* that it elsewhere denounces.”²¹³ Thus, even if Corbin employs the term “dialectics,” for him kataphasis is dogmatic and fetishizing while apophasis is the “radically anti-idolatrous,” critical way that oversees the “propositions dictated by a cataphatic theology.”²¹⁴ Corbin finds this anti-dogmatic, moral, pluralistic, thus, modern theology in the mystical traditions across religious systems: Kabbalah, and Christian mystics such as Sebastian Franck (d.1543), Valentin Weigel (d.1588), Meister Eckhart (d.1328), and Jacob Boehme (d.1624). For Islamic apophatic theologies, Corbin points to Sufis and “Persian mystical theosophical” traditions. Ibn al-‘Arabī is by far the most cited name in the piece, while other names are those of the Persian Sufi masters Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d.1221), al-Simnānī (d.1336), ‘Azīz Nasafī (fl.13th CE), and masters of what Corbin defines as the still living, distinctly Persian “Avicennian mystical theosophy” and “Hermetic tradition,” from such figures as Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d.1191), Mullā Sadrā (d.1641) and the Persian Ismā‘īlīs.²¹⁵ The influential German-American religionist of Harvard, Annemarie Schimmel (d.2003) began associating negative theology with Sufism at the same period, with her monumental *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (pbl.1975), followed by other works published in the late 1970s and 1980s. She persistently argued that the Sufi

²¹⁰ Corbin 1977.

²¹¹ The Arabic terms that Corbin associates with *apophasis* and *kataphasis* are *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, respectively. See Corbin 1981.

²¹² Corbin 1977.

²¹³ Corbin 1977; emphasis mine. “So monotheism perishes in its triumph, degenerates into the idolatry that it fiercely wished to avoid. This was the fate of affirmative theologies when they cut themselves off and isolated themselves from the strong-hold of apophatic theology.” (Corbin 1977.)

²¹⁴ Corbin 1977.

²¹⁵ Also see Corbin 1981.

master al-Biṣṭāmī had a distinct negative theology, which gained an audience among later Sufi orders such as the Naqshbandīs.²¹⁶ “Apophasis,” like “negative theology” began to be called for in Sufi contexts, with a strongly ethicalizing tone. This new negativity, unlike the old-school negative God of Islamic theology, had a modern standing, and chose Sufism as the place to assert it.

Harry Wolfson’s situating of apophasis within its historical, theological, and philosophical contexts, survives today with instructive lessons on the role of mysticism in differentiating the new and old transcendence of god in Islam. A colleague of H. Corbin’s, the prominent Muslim intellectual S. H. Nasr associates “apophatic theology” with the “neo-Pythagorean and Hermetic philosophy” that emerged among Muslims in the eighth century. Accordingly, the followers of these schools, such as the Brethren of Purity (fl.late 10th CE) “differed from the Peripatetics in their apophatic theologies.”²¹⁷ Later, Ismā’īlīs adopted the neo-Pythagorean philosophy of the Brethren, according to Nasr. Nasr’s association of apophaticism with Ismā’īlism and partially with Hermetism is reminiscent of Corbin. Yet, by situating apophasis in theology and philosophy rather than mysticism, Nasr stands in the school of H. Wolfson, who was one of his dissertation advisors, and “a key person” for him at Harvard.²¹⁸ In this historicist line, negativity has no modernizing agenda. Another French Islamicist, H. Laoust (d.1983) ascribes “negative theology” to an early school of theology, the Jahmites. Laoust associates their “negative theology” with the Arabic “*ta’ṭīl*”—a very unfavorable term indicating ineffectualizing God and divesting Him of any agency.²¹⁹ Like Nasr and Laoust, prominent scholars like A. Ivry (b.1935), P. Walker (b.1941) J. Van Ess, Y. Michot, or T. Mayer also associate apophaticism with various schools of Islamic philosophy and theology. However, the absence of self-criticism, pluralism, universalism, or morality is striking in these well-contextualized employments of “apophasis.”²²⁰ Instead, in many of these cases, negativity tends to indicate a philosophical problem that needs to be addressed, like Shehadi aptly did. The translator of the philosopher al-Kindī (d.873)’s *On First Philosophy* (pbl.1974), Alfred Ivry is vocal in his criticism of the *via negativa*:

²¹⁶ Schimmel 1975, p.49; Schimmel 1976, p.63; Schimmel 1982, p.79; Schimmel 1993, p.10.

²¹⁷ Nasr 1981, p.68.

²¹⁸ For Nasr on Wolfson, see Nasr and Jahanbegloo 2010, pp.45-48.

²¹⁹ Laoust 2012a.

²²⁰ E.g. Van Ess 2006, p.88; Mayer 2008, p.259, 263, 269, 284; Poonawala 2013, p.173; 183; Walker 1974, p.13; Walker 2013, p.191.

The *via negativa* can lead only to a *Deus Negativus* or *Absconditus*; a Creator—the one non-philosophical term al-Kindī uses—about whom, however, we know nothing. This problem is sensed by al-Kindī, though *he was certainly not aware how ultimately self-defeating his negative approach is.*²²¹

In the same vein, P. Walker's *Early Philosophical Shiism* (pbl.1993) asks whether the Ismā'īlī "theology of unqualified or absolute transcendence eliminates reason from theology."²²² Y. Michot also claims that the great majority of traditional Muslim scholars avoided the "excesses of the apophatic, negationist, theologies" of the Mu'tazilites and Philosophers.²²³ In his work on Jewish Ismā'īlism (pbl.1984), R. Kiener similarly argues that Ismā'īlīs, Jewish or Muslim, resort to "a typically complex Neoplatonic *waffling*" to bridge the theological "abyss of transcendence and immanence."²²⁴ While apophasis is celebrated as a modernizing dimension of Sufism, such dimensions are absent, if not reversed, in the historicist approach to apophaticism in Islamic theology.

"Apophasis," the specific Muslim groups with which it is associated, and the moral content and limits of its negative capacities are debated among a variety of scholars from different religious and cultural backgrounds at least from the 1960s. The association of ethicalizing and modernizing values with negativity in Sufism, and the absence of such gestures with reference to negativity in Islam or Islamic theology, is a corporate scholarly inclination. Muzammil H. Siddiqi (b.1943), the current chairman of the Fiqh Council of North America, shares the critical perspective of Ivry and Walker towards negativity in Islamic theology. At the interfaith Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue in March 1985 he argues:

God is not an abstract idea but is a living and loving Person. The Qur'ān, hence, devotes much space to describing God, His person, His essence and His attributes. It tells us what God is and what He is not. But the characteristic of the Qur'ānic description of God is that it contains "short negations and detailed affirmations." *Negations are necessary to emphasize the transcendence of God, but via negativa alone makes God remote and "empty."* *The God of the Qur'ān is certainly not a remote or empty God.*²²⁵

²²¹ Ivry in al-Kindī 1974, p.15; my emphasis. Cf. Hauri 1882, pp.44-45; Zwemer 1905, p.21.

²²² Walker 1993, p.80.

²²³ Michot 2008, p.192.

²²⁴ Kiener 1984, pp.262-263; my emphasis.

²²⁵ Siddiqi 1989, p.66; my emphasis.

Occasional works on Islamic theology or philosophy employ the rapidly proliferating “apophasis,” but they are devoid of pluralistic or moral dimensions. With its negative performances, “apophasis” becomes an ethicalizing and modernizing label only if it is associated with mysticism and its newly-constructed transcendence, instead of the old-school monotheistic transcendence of “Islamic theology.”

The apophatic turn from theology to mysticism in the study of Islam after the 1970s coincides with the intensified study of apophasis in “world religions.” Scholars realize that “*apophatic speaking not only crosses the centuries. It also crosses religious traditions and shows up ... in Sufis such as Rūmī and in Zen Buddhists such as Dōgen (d.1253).*”²²⁶ Accordingly, if not every discursive construct,²²⁷ at least every religious tradition should have apophatic—thus self-critical and modern—mystical aspects, thinkers, or texts waiting to be selectively discovered and put into the context of the pluralistic vocabulary of comparative religion. Similarly, influential scholars of religion such as S. Katz,²²⁸ G. Scholem,²²⁹ E. R. Wolfson,²³⁰ M. Sells,²³¹ W. Franke,²³² E. Cousins (d.2009),²³³ to cite a few, invariably turn to mysticism in order to find “apophasis.” If scholars are not

Bahrawi also associates negative theology with the Mu’tazilites, depicting it as a reductive theological position that was transcended by the Sufi master Ibn al-‘Arabī. See Bahrawi 2013, pp.53-56.

²²⁶ Harmless 2008, p.237; emphasis mine. On apophasis in Zen Buddhism, see Faure 1992, pp.159-167.

²²⁷ Franke and Woods 2013.

²²⁸ Katz 1992, pp.3-32; Katz 2000, pp.15-49.

²²⁹ See Idel 2005, pp.13-19.

²³⁰ E.g. E. R. Wolfson 1994, pp.v-xxii.

Moshe Idel points to an overemphasis on apophasis in the works of G. Scholem (d.1982) and E. R. Wolfson. (See e.g. Idel 2011, p.448.) Idel observes a tendency in the Kabbalah scholarship to marginalize the kataphatic elements and to center “upon an apophatic, or negative, theological approach.” (Idel 2011, p.442.)

²³¹ Sells 1994.

²³² “Both the unnameable Name of God in revealed religions and the One in Neoplatonic discourse play the role of the unsayable source of all saying, and indeed of all being. Agreement on an inarticulable first principle, recognized as supreme principle and source of ail, allowed the integration of Neoplatonism into monotheistic apophatic traditions and especially into their mystical offshoots, such as Islamic Sufism, Jewish Kabbalah, and Christian mysticisms.” (Franke 2007, Vol.2, p.33.)

²³³ Cousins 1992, pp.237-254; Cousins 2000, pp.121-135.

adopting a historicist or strictly contextualist approach, they tend to see “apophasis” as the supposed house of critique, non-dogmatism and morality. Apophasis is depicted as the self-reflexive, radically philosophical way of being modern, while the selective processes and hierarchical associations via which this self-definition of modernity is constructed remain largely unthought.

E. Summary

In order to trace the history of the scholarly term²³⁴ “apophasis,” and to define the contemporary context of its connections with the study of religion in general and Islam in particular, this chapter has introduced a rough sketch of a set of intertwined processes: (1) the attack on the transcendent god and the negativist theology of Islam in the last three centuries as a tyrant who leaves no agency, thus no space for morality, to the believers; (2) the perennial representation of Muslim mystics as pantheists and their conception of god as the immanent and anti-apophatic; (3) the shift of “apophasis” from an ordinary rhetorical figure of speech into a term of comparative religion and theology that is subsequently associated with the idea of “infinite critique” in the last four decades; (4) the parallel transformation of the immanent god of Muslim mystics into an apophatic god, while the old-school transcendence of the Islamic theological god remains mostly untouched. After the late 1970s, with the triumph of apophasis in Western philosophy as the “infinite critique” associated with agency and pluralism, religionists turned their focus to the supposed locus of agency, morality and universalism in Islam, i.e., to “Sufism,” and not to Islamic philosophy or theology in order to find “apophasis.” While “Sufi theology” had been widely depicted as pantheistic, it has swiftly shifted into an apophatic god especially in the late 1970s, when apophasis was already associated with the theological and philosophical idea of “infinite critique.” These processes betray the assumptions of contemporary religionists on agency, pluralism, and universalism, which define “modernity,” as “a term of self-description in a narrative of moral progress.”²³⁵ The depictions of Islam as well as Sufism play fundamentally shifting roles in this self-assertion and the autobiographical reproduction of the identity of “the modern” as such, along with its perpetual Others. Yet it should be re-emphasized that this negotiation of what form of theology counts as modern and moral is not limited to Christian missiology’s authoritarian efforts at labeling various Christian movements and other religions.

²³⁴ For the inspiration of the approach to apophasis as a second-order, scholarly category of religion, see J. Z. Smith 1982, p.xi; Schmidt 2003.

²³⁵ Keane 2007, p.201.

Instead, at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, it has been a joint project of scholars of religion with various affiliations debating, interpreting, selecting, and editing what form of divine transcendence is modern, and with which group the moral autobiography of modernity should be associated.

The critique of the transcendent god of monotheism is a very prominent theme in philosophy and theology today. A heterogeneous group of intellectuals with diverse orientations, mostly quite rightly and justly, point to conflicts and moral problems that the concept of god as an entity over and above us poses. Their denouncements embody a rich variety of moral, spiritual and liberationist responses to formal, dogmatic and immoral models of monotheistic theology. On the other hand, the ultra-transcendent god of apophatic-negative theologies are generally not only protected from these critiques, but they even ground them, because they are already depicted as the endless critiques of the oppressively transcendent god.²³⁶ While their supposed experiential individualism gives them agency and spirituality (as opposed to formalism and immorality), apophasis provides them self-criticism, non-dogmatism, and non-parochial, pro-peace universalism. Within this context, the pre-modern transcendence of an imagined “Islamic theology” is undermined by the modern apophatic transcendence of an imagined “Sufi theology,” which exists only as it *infinitely* criticizes the old-school transcendence. In the hierarchical construction of the old and the new transcendence, we observe that modernity is re-asserting itself in terms of agency, morality, pluralism and universalism by making its long-standing values and associations not only unquestioned, but also fetishized.

At the more theoretical level, then, the selectively moralizing, pluralistic, but also hierarchical discourses of apophaticism hide on the one hand the direct connections between the rising paradigms of mysticism and personal religion, on the other hand the modern distaste for institutions that regulate human transactions, the privatization of religion like any other consumer good,²³⁷ the

²³⁶ In a recent edited book on contemporary Christian negative theology, the arguments underpinning a general critique of the transcendent god “over and above us” in Christianity, Judaism and Islam are analyzed. The author presents sophisticated arguments that save the Christian and Jewish (but not Islamic) transcendent god from being a tyrant. (See Davies and Turner 2002.)

²³⁷

Religion becomes privatized. In a consumer society it becomes just another consumer good, a leisure-time commodity no longer affecting the centres of power or the operation of the system – even at the level of social control,

political indifference of the experiential, which is itself a political decision,²³⁸ and the conception of the human being as an inaccessible “romantic monad” who is “infinitely interested in their own ineffable depths.”²³⁹ To adapt Schmidt’s reflections on the scholarly invention of the term “mysticism,” “apophasis”

socialization, and the organization of the emotions and of motivations. Religion becomes a matter of choice, but whatever religion is chosen is of no consequence to the operation of the social system. (Wilson in King 1999, pp.12-13.)

James’ employment of economic terms in describing the modern, ethicalized version of religion repeats Hume, Adam Smith, and Hegel. Dismissing “institutional religion” as ritualistic and immoral, James turns to describe what he considers genuine religion:

In the more personal branch of religion ... *the individual transacts the business by himself alone*, and the ecclesiastical organization, with its priests and sacraments and other go-betweens, sinks to an altogether secondary place. ... Call it *conscience* or *morality*, if you yourselves prefer, and not religion. (James 1902, p.30; my emphases.)

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Surely the way we define mysticism today has nothing to do with social or political authority. Yet this can be seen to be a misguided (if understandable) objection, if we only pause to look below the surface. The very fact that ‘the mystical’ is seen as irrelevant to issues of social and political authority itself reflects contemporary, secularized notions of and attitudes towards power. The separation of the mystical from the political is itself a political decision! (King 1999, p.10.)

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Whole dreams are dedicated to the lives and loves of the romantic monad. So the television lawyer Ally McBeal operates in the public domain as a lawyer, which domain only conceals her intensely private and unfathomable world... The public domain is made to look foolish, and ironically pompous, just because of its necessary failure to contain or express Ally’s super-abundant, unfathomable and inexpressible inner-world. ... Do we not begin to feel the shudder of recognition when we regards some modern constructions of the apophatic God? A being who is inexpressible, unfathomable, infinitely fascinating and self-fascinated, who is politically impotent... The apophatic God may be the ultimate source of the cosmos and the public domain, but just as with us, nothing is revealed to us in this public domain about God, except what God is not. Again, just like with us, God’s political and historical impotence, and God’s impassibly petitionary prayer, is a necessary symptom of God’s inexpressible self-absorption. So the proclamation of the apophatic God, far from being a letting God-be-God, is the projection into the heart of the created order of our loneliness, our political despair, and the conviction that in principle it is only ever worth being misunderstood, because to be understood is to fail to be romantically rich and self-sufficient. (Insole 2001, pp.482-483.)

definitely has served as a category to open up dialogic possibilities across cultures and traditions. The social, political, and theological conviction embedded in it has been that the bridges of sympathy marked an improvement on the bombardments of colonialism and the missiological boastings. Clearly, when imagined this way, “apophasis” has erased difference, but it has also dreamed of a common ground of modernity that is highly selective, hierarchical, politically loaded, and partially produced by, and negotiated within, the study of religion itself.²⁴⁰

²⁴⁰ Schmidt 2003, p.290.

PART 2. INTRODUCTION TO NEGATIVE THEOLOGIES IN SUFISM

Both “Sufism” and “Islamic theology” are scholarly constructs mapping, even though imperfectly, to evolving Muslim phenomena. As their juxtaposition, “Sufi theology” played an important role in the study of Islam as I made clear in the previous chapter. Unlike the modern and pre-modern Christian contexts, negative theology was not associated with mysticism or mystics in Islam until the last four decades. Different groups of scholars were called “negators” in pre-modern Islamic doxographies, but Sufis did not appear among them.

Then who were the negative theologians among medieval Muslims? I will argue that the question does not have a proper answer, mainly because “negative theology” is too broad and vague a term if we survey the theological questions that they asked, or if we recall the vast dimensions of theology. The answer will change depending on the specific theological question we are analyzing. This part narrows the study down to the nature of the divine essence, and introduces the conceptual problems involved in discussing “negative theology” as such. I argue that many scholars in fact fail to specify the question as they confuse negative theologies of the divine attributes with those of the divine essence. In accordance with the contextualization of this part, the four chapters of the next part will analyze Sufi negative theological paths specifically on the nature of divine ipseity. Within this narrower theological topography, I define four different but interconnected paths of negative speech in terms of the nature of God that circulated in thirteenth century Sufism. I show that the same scholars applied more than one of these methods of negating the discourse on God’s essence at the same time. More interestingly, the methods of negation that Sufis applied were often shared with non-Sufis, non-Muslims, and even anti-Sufis. The presence of at least four different ways of negating the kataphatic approaches to the divine essence demonstrates that there is no one “negative theological tradition” even with reference to a single problem of Islamic theology. While there is no unified theology or creed in Islam in the absence of an authoritative “church,” clergy or consistent state regulation, the questions asked and the answers given were not only diverse and contextual, but also overlapped considerably among Sufis and non-Sufis.

From a wider methodological perspective, every discourse is composed of a finite set of connected propositions and performatives, and there is neither one method nor infinite methods of negating a specific discourse. Apophatic possibilities are discourse-dependent insofar as the rules, methods and wider implications of negating a discourse are partially defined by the discourse itself.

I should add a note, however brief, in justification of my choice to concentrate on thirteenth century Sufism in this and the following parts. I will mention only of the three main reasons, which respectively correspond to the current literature on apophysis in Islam, comparative mysticism, and theories of mysticism.

First, as already indicated in the previous chapters, “apophysis” as a modernizing term has been intensively applied to Sufis since the mid-1970s, specifically to those who lived in the thirteenth century. Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240) and Rūmī (d.1273) are by far the most cited names for apophysis in Islam, while Henry Corbin’s list adds Persian Sufi masters who lived in the same century, such as Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d.1221), al-Simnānī (d.1336) and ‘Azīz Nasafī (fl.13th CE).²⁴¹ A closer focus on this period not only displays how forms of apophaticism adopted by these Sufis fit into the larger Islamicate world, but also elucidates what was apophatic in context—in which sense, under which specific historical conditions and discursive regulations, and with which peculiar performative dimensions.

Second, the description of this period as the pinnacle of Muslim apophatic mysticism, indeed, reflects the wider description of the period in a comparative scholarly perspective. Accordingly, these were the most exciting times for the study of apophaticism in general:

The 150-year period from the mid-twelfth to the beginning of the fourteenth century constitutes the flowering of apophatic mysticism. Almost simultaneously, the apophatic masterpieces of the Islamic, Jewish, and Christian traditions appeared, which would include, among others, the writings of Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240), Rūmī (d.1273), Abraham Abulafia (d.ca.1291), Moses de Leon (d. 1305), the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Beguine mystics culminating with Hadewijch (fl.1240) and Marguerite Porete (d.1310), and Meister Eckhart (d.ca.1327). Apophysis lived on after this period in the post-exilic Kabbalah of Isaac Luria (d.1572), in the Spanish mystics, in Jacob Boehme (d.1624), and widely throughout the Islamic tradition. Yet it never again held as central a place in mystical language.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Corbin 1977.

²⁴² Sells 1994, p.5.

Sells adds that a convenient end-date for these heydays of apophatic mysticism would be 1492, “the year Jews and Arabs were expelled from Spain, the colonial age began, and the civilization

The argument summarized by Michael Sells, for any student of comparative mysticism, is extremely enticing. What might be the reasons for such a synchronic and widespread blooming of apophaticism—if indeed this was the case? While the depictions of the thirteenth century as the pinnacle of Sufism are widespread, it is not always clear to which extent these representations are influenced by the earlier orientalist or Muslim modernist baggages. The pre-eminent British scholar of Sufism, Arthur Arberry (d.1969), for example, adopted an essentializing, decline paradigm of Sufism, wherein the thirteenth century became the period when Islamic mysticism bloomed, and then it has gradually decayed (for nearly eight centuries!).²⁴³ An in-depth study of apophaticism in Islam up to this period provides a better understanding for such larger comparative perspectives on mysticism. The current study does not find much evidence in support of such a flowering of apophaticism on the divine essence either in Sufism or Islam in general during this period. On the other hand, it does uncover strong trans-religious networks of apophaticism, particularly among the Muslim and Jewish mystical and philosophical traditions. But these cross-pollinations developed much earlier, and mostly beyond the mystical traditions of these religions.

The final reason is related to a theoretical curiosity about the relationship between mysticism and its institutionalization. The supposed opposition between mysticism and institutional religion has a long history in the study of religion as well as Sufism. Tringham, very much under the influence of William

held in common by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim cultures began to break apart into increasingly separate spheres.” (Sells 1994, p.221, fn.15.)

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The age of Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d.1235), Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240) and Rūmī (d.1273) represents the climax of Sufi achievement, both theoretically and artistically. Thereafter, although through the numerous and ever multiplying Religious Orders the influence of Sufi thought and practice became constantly more widespread, and though sultans and princes did not disdain to lend the movement their patronage and personal adherence ... the signs of decay appear more and more clearly, and abuse and scandal assail and threaten to destroy its fair reputation. ... The history of the decline varies from country to country according to circumstance, but the general pattern, though admitting differences of detail, is fairly consistent throughout. (Arberry 1950, p.119.)

As Weismann observes in Arberry’s approach, “apart from the salient essentialism of the text, it also hides the underlying modernist-orientalist presupposition that Sufi shaykhs lack agency and merely succumb to the external action of the forces of modernity. As in other cases of subaltern studies, this presupposition proved utterly false.” (Weismann 2014, p.265.)

James' perennialism, famously depicted a progressively institutionalized history of Sufism, which meant the gradual regression of authentic mysticism in Islam.²⁴⁴ The supposed opposition between institutional religion and mysticism has been challenged since the late 1970s. A group of comparative religionists developed what is called the constructivist approach, which reversed the perennialist claims on mysticism, and highlighted the importance of religious institutions, doctrines, scriptures, well-established norms and practices as grounding, catalyzing, and even constructing, mystical experiences.²⁴⁵ Within this theoretical context, how apophaticism relates to the institutionalization of mysticism emerges as a key question that awaits an answer. Does the organization of mysticism in the form of orders [*ṭarīqāt*] inhibit, or rather intensify apophaticism among Sufis? The period of "the flowering of apophatic mysticism" interestingly follows the institutionalization of Sufi orders in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Yet many scholars, including Sells himself, claim that apophaticism is inherently resistant to institutionalization, formality, and organization. With its focus up to the organization of Sufism in the form of orders, the current study traces whether institutionalization intensified or hindered Sufi variations of apophaticism. The present analysis does not find any intensification in apophatic theologies after the institutionalization of mysticism as Sufi orders, which further testifies that the widespread association of mysticism with apophatic theologies is a problematic one.

²⁴⁴ See Trimingham 1971.

²⁴⁵ E.g. Katz 1978; Proudfoot 1985; Katz 1992.

CHAPTER 3. WHAT IS “NEGATIVE THEOLOGY:” A CONCEPTUAL GUIDE

A. A Guide to “Sufism,” “Theology,” “Sufi Theology”

“Sufi theology,” “the doctrine of Sufis,” *Sufiism*, or *Sufismus* as a distinct ideology has played an important role in the study of religion in defining modernity and preserving European universalism in a pluralistic discourse as I underlined in the previous chapter. More recent studies have questioned the employment of the term “Sufism,” with its limitations and explanatory power.²⁴⁶ “Theology” has not yet undergone such a higher-order post-colonial, critical analysis in the study of Islam. “Theology,” as well as “Sufi theology” are employed to refer to a wide range of phenomena depending on the perspective and research focus of contemporary scholars. “Theology” denotes the Neoplatonic interreligious *kalām* discipline for H. Wolfson.²⁴⁷ In his six-volume monumental compendium, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, J. Van Ess equates theology with *kalām*, “the science of dialectical speech,”²⁴⁸ but gives it a much wider scope by discussing concrete social and practical problems, such as debates among the schools of law, or questions of politics and leadership, all under the rubric of “theology.” Various scholars go in the opposite direction indicating that *kalām* as a scholarly discipline has a specific method or set of commitments that makes it narrower than what “theology” actually covers. Holtzman, for example, considers *kalām* a specific form of theology, and renders as “speculative theology.”²⁴⁹ Renard’s recent anthology of Islamic theology also presents *kalām* “as a particular method within the larger field of inquiry called theology.”²⁵⁰ *Kalām*, as the speculative study of matters of belief in a distinct dialectical form and a rationalist paradigm, does not exhaust the field of theology from this perspective. Hence, some scholars argue that “theology” not only entails *Kalām*, i.e. “Islamic theology proper,” but also *ilāhiyyāt*, which they translate as “Islamic philosophical theology,” instead of the more common translation, “metaphysics.”²⁵¹ According

²⁴⁶ See e.g. Knysh 2002; Knysh 2005.

²⁴⁷ H. Wolfson 1976, p.4.

²⁴⁸ Van Ess 2006, p.2.

²⁴⁹ Holtzman 2010, p.56.

²⁵⁰ Renard 2014, p.xi.

²⁵¹ Cerić defines this field of “theology,” composed of *kalām* and *ilāhiyyat*, as “the study of God and his relation to the world especially by analysis of the origins and teachings of an organized religious community.” There are two basic terms used in Islamic literature which denote the meaning of theology, i.e., *kalām*, meaning Islamic theology proper, and *ilāhiyyat*, by which is meant Islamic philosophical theology. (Cerić 1995, p.107.)

to another perspective, with its alternative methodological commitments and set of problems, *‘ilm al-uṣūl* [“the science of theological principles,” or “traditionalist theology”] should be added to *Kalām* in order to present a more comprehensive picture of Islamic theology.²⁵² The differences between their respective methods and major themes help us distinguish *kalām* and *‘ilm al-uṣūl* yet keeping their joint reference to “theology.”

In addition to the problem of mapping “theology” somewhere between *kalām*, *ilāhiyyāt*, and *‘ilm al-uṣūl*, another territorial difficulty awaits the scholar of Islamic theology. The very contents of *kalām*, *ilāhiyyāt*, and *‘ilm al-uṣūl* have not been fixed, but are contested to date. For example, in his monumental *Revival of Religious Sciences*, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111) argued that *kalām*’s aim was limited “to grasp the unity of God, and study the essence of God and His attributes.”²⁵³ The narrow sense of “theology,” i.e., the study of oneness of God and His attributes seems shared with, at least some works of, Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328).²⁵⁴ Also for the Shī’ite Sufi scholar Lāhījī (d.1662) theology is limited to the knowledge of God, and it does not encompass God-world relationship.²⁵⁵ On the other hand, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1209)’s *Prolegomena to Kalām* adds other topics such as prophecy, and leadership [*imāmah*].²⁵⁶ Al-Jurjānī (d.1413)’s *Book of Definitions* goes even further, and superadds theodicy and eschatology into the field of *kalām* as well.²⁵⁷ A move in the opposite direction was also possible—the field of theology could rather shrink depending on the context. Free-will and predestination were among the key theological questions in the early centuries of Islam. Yet, when the ‘Irāqī jurist Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (d.1316) encountered the polemical attack of a non-Muslim scholar on the question of predestination, he argued that this problem is actually not among the primary problems of Islamic theology.²⁵⁸ In other words, even if we agree that “Islamic theology” is composed of *kalām* and *‘ilm al-uṣūl*, or *kalām* and *ilāhiyyāt*, the

²⁵² E.g. Shihadeh 2007, p.4; Holtzman 2010, p.56.

²⁵³ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in Holtzman 2010, p.57.

²⁵⁴ E.g. see Michot 2007, p.124.

²⁵⁵ Rizvi 2007, p.91.

²⁵⁶ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī 1978, p.247.

²⁵⁷ See Holtzman 2010, p.57.

²⁵⁸ See Shihadeh 2006, p.8.

thematic field is still not quite clear—it is constantly negotiated today as it was in the past.²⁵⁹

It is no surprise that what constitutes “theology” in relation to “Sufism” gets even more complicated. There is no consensus whatsoever on either the thematic or methodological scope of “Islamic mystical theology” or “Sufi theology” in contemporary scholarship. Various scholars define Islamic mystical theology as the “esoteric dimensions of theological dogmas.”²⁶⁰ Thus Sufi theology according to this approach receives the external questions and standard problems of *kalām*, *‘ilm al-uṣūl*, or *ilāhiyyāt*, and delves into deeper meanings and provides esoteric answers. Yet, Sufism has its distinct theology for some others. According to the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Sufi theology is a form of *love mysticism* which was already mature when it was systematized by al-Junayd (d.910).²⁶¹ Chittick defines “mystical theology as a designation for the Sufi approach to the Qur’ān, which entails focus on the issue of transforming the soul with the aim of bringing it into conformity with its divine prototype.”²⁶² Paradoxes also seem to play an important role in defining a mystical theology.²⁶³ Huda has a parallel but unique approach in ascribing a special theology to Sufism. He does not want to employ “mystical theology” with reference to Sufism. Instead he introduces what he calls an “*adab* theology,” i.e., a theology of perfect human conduct and ethics in conformity with the prophetic guidance and Qur’ānic revelation.²⁶⁴ In contrast, Pereira understands “Islamic mystical theology,” or “Muslim mystical theology,” as diverse Muslim Neoplatonic approaches specifically to God’s relationship with the world. Muslim mystical (i.e., Neoplatonic) theology, accordingly, was born in the ninth-to-twelfth centuries, and had its peak in the following two centuries in the “monism” of the

²⁵⁹ One pragmatic solution is to go with the practical, institutional and legal definitions of “Islamic theology.” In Western universities and other educational institutions, “Islamic theology” is defined *de facto* more broadly than *kalām*. But the problem of the thematic field of theology exacerbates in adopting such practical definitions. “Islamic theology” courses, very much like throughout the history, are organized in the light of contemporary challenges, diverse student bodies, educational needs, and local or international political contexts. “Islamic theology” courses in the European schools, for example, cover a thematic field equivalent to that of “Christian theology.” (See Johansen 2006.)

²⁶⁰ Keeler 2007, p.15.

²⁶¹ See Dupre 1987, p.6351.

²⁶² Chittick 2014, p.156.

²⁶³ Lewisohn and Shackle 2006, p.xx.

²⁶⁴ Huda 2004.

Akbarī School and the Iranian poeticization “under a pantheistic camouflage.”²⁶⁵ From the beginning of the sixteenth century up until today, “Islamic mystical theology” resulted in a synthesis, “combining all anteriorly realized forms of Muslim mystical speculation in one all-encompassing system.”²⁶⁶ The history of Muslim mystical theology is that of the varieties of Neoplatonism in Pereira’s approach.²⁶⁷

This brief overview of the scholarly terms scholars of religion employ with reference to Sufism and theology serves to justify the choices made at the outset of this study on negativity in Islamic theology, particularly in Sufism. As T. Asad argued, each definition is “itself the historical product of discursive processes.”²⁶⁸ Instead of looking for a transhistorical, or the authentic definition of “Islamic theology,” “mystical theology,” or “Sufi theology,” I will simply focus on the main, conventional, and probably broadest question of *theo-logy: discourses on the divine ipseity [dhāt]*. I am neither claiming that this is the proper question of theology in general, nor in Islam, nor in Sufism. Rather, I am using this definition as a springboard to explore the possibilities and limitations of it, specifically that of “negative theology.” If Sufism has peculiar apophatic contributions in fields of theology other than the divine nature—and it obviously does— they will remain unexplored in this study. Similarly, questions of religious leadership, anthropomorphism, predestination and free will, eschatology, the status of prophecy, the nature of the Qur’ān, theodicy, the origin and return, divine attributes, etc. will be beyond our scope unless they address human access to or discourse on God’s essence. Once focusing on the discourse on God’s nature, which is accepted as “theological” at least from the majority of different perspectives, it will be easier to define the role and contribution of Sufism in apophatic theologies in the thirteenth century context. In this broad sense, I define “theology” as “talking about God,”²⁶⁹ or “God-talk in all its

²⁶⁵ Pereira 2000, p.361.

²⁶⁶ Pereira 2000, p.361.

²⁶⁷ However, Neoplatonism as a source of Islamic mysticism is a problematic generalization. Even Ibn Sīnā (d.1037), whom Pereira defines as a founder of Muslim Neoplatonic mysticism, consciously diverted from Plotinus in mysticism as we will see below. Briefly, “if Avicenna was a mystic, he did not get his mysticism from reading Neoplatonists.” (Adamson 2004, p.111.) Hence the supposed overlap between “Neoplatonism” and “mysticism” should be questioned. Also see Sells 1994, pp.220-221.

²⁶⁸ Asad 1993, p.29. For reflections on the category of mysticism along the same lines, see King 1999, p.10.

²⁶⁹ Walker 1996, p.84.

forms,”²⁷⁰ and this part of the dissertation explores the Sufi varieties of discourse on God’s nature. *Thus apophatic theologies are all forms of negating speech formations on the divine ipseity by employing the tools and discursive methods of theology.* It is these paths that I will explore in what follows with a focus on thirteenth century Sufism.

B. Mu’tazilites, Sufis and “Negative Theology” Unqualified

Until the recent rise of the modernizing apophatic transcendence, scholars of religion consistently associated negative theology or negativist version of theology with Islam, particularly with a group of speculative theologians who emerged in eighth century ‘Iraq: the Mu’tazilites. “Mu’tazilites” refers to a non-homogeneous group of theologians who deeply disagreed with each other on almost every issue, including the famous “five principles” [*uṣūl al-khamsah*].²⁷¹ Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d.1023) expresses his disapproval narrating how the Mu’tazilite masters sharply disagreed with each other. Accordingly, Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī (d.916) and his son Abū Hāshim (d.933) aggressively called each other an infidel, while Abū Hāshim’s sister, who headed a women’s Mu’tazilite organization, anathematized both her father and her brother.²⁷² Indeed, Mu’tazilites were probably the most famous (or rather infamous) “negators” according to the Muslim sources. Doxographers of other theological schools usually called them “the negators,” or “deniers” of God’s attributes. When al-Ash’arī (d.936) introduced the Mu’tazilite view on divine unity [*tawḥīd*] in a few sentences, he employed the Arabic negations [*lā, laysa, mā, lam*] seventy-some times in a dizzying one-page “description,” if it can be really called so.²⁷³

“Mu’tazilites the upholders of negative theology in Islam” was also an unchallenged theme in western scholarship until late 1970s when the new, ethicalized, apophatic transcendence associated with Sufism arose. Western representations of Mu’tazilite negative theology were fundamentally shaped by the sustained image of Islam as a Semitic monotheistic religion, as I explored in the second chapter. In addition, the translations of the Ash’arite and anti-Mu’tazilite doxographical works since the first half of the nineteenth century corroborated the descriptions of Mu’tazilites as the foremost Muslim negative

²⁷⁰ Chittick 2008, p.221.

²⁷¹ Cf. Abrahamov in al-Qāsīm ibn Ibrāhīm 1990, pp.13-15.

²⁷² See Van Ess 2006, pp.9-10.

²⁷³ See al-Ash’arī 1950, Vol.1, p.216.

theologians.²⁷⁴ John Mühleisen Arnold mentioned of the Mu'tazilites, and its sects, all of whom, accordingly, "denied the divine attributes, asserting that to ascribe eternal attributes to Allāh, is to assume so many personalities. ... Thus *the Koranic dogma of the abstract Unity led to an utter negation of the Divine perfections!*"²⁷⁵ In more friendly terms, I. Goldziher's *Vorlesungen* (pbl.1910) also discussed the "rigid negation" of the rationalist Mu'tazilites,²⁷⁶ who followed a monotheistic purism, and saw in the addition of attributes to God "nothing less than the negation of the unity of the divine being."²⁷⁷ Similar views on the Mu'tazilites were widely shared by Muslim intellectuals of the time. In his monumental lectures *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (pbl.1930), the great Muslim intellectual Muḥammad Iqbal (d.1938) complained that the Mu'tazilites followed a "purely negative attitude" in theology.²⁷⁸ The western inclination to see Mu'tazilites as the foremost negators mirrored a dominant view that was not only represented in pre-modern Muslim sources, but also circulated among Muslim intellectuals.

After 1970s, the concept of "apophasis" as a marker of modernity began to be attributed to Sufism. On the other hand "negative theology," as long as it does not entail a specifically modernizing, i.e., critical, self-reflective, non-dogmatic or moral gesture, has kept being associated with Muslim *mutakallimūn*, specifically Mu'tazilites. Indeed, many recent studies employ "negative theology" in Islam exclusively with reference to the Mu'tazilites. Stepaniants, for example, devotes a section to "the Mu'tazilite negative theology," as presenting a distinct cosmology separate from the peripatetic and atomist cosmological views.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁴ E.g. Hughes 1885, p.425, p.428; Sell 1907, pp.194-198. Both Hughes and Sell use al-Shahrastānī's *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, which was published in English in 1842 and 1846; the German translation of Haarbrücker appeared in 1850 and 1851. (Rudolph 2015, p.3.) "So little authentic Mu'tazilite literature was available that until the publication of some significant texts in the 1960s, the Mu'tazilite doctrine was mostly known through the works of its opponents." (Schmidtke 2008, p.21.) Schmidtke provides a succinct history of the western scholarship on the Mu'tazilites.

²⁷⁵ Mühleisen Arnold 1874. pp.224-225; my emphasis. ("The Djamis" in the passage should be read "Jahmites," a Mu'tazilite sect for Mühleisen.)

²⁷⁶ Goldziher 1981, p.96.

²⁷⁷ Goldziher 1917, pp.119-120.

²⁷⁸ "The Mu'tazilah, conceiving religion merely as a body of doctrines and ignoring it as a vital fact, took no notice of non-conceptual modes of approaching Reality and *reduced religion to a mere system of logical concepts ending in a purely negative attitude.*" (Iqbal 2013, p.4.) For similar statements of Iqbal on the Mu'tazilah, see Iqbal 1908, p.51, 66.

²⁷⁹ Stepaniants 2002, pp.22-23.

Italian scholar D'Onofrio's *the History of Theology*, which is used as a textbook in Theological Studies Departments in the United States and beyond, employs the term "negative theology" solely in reference to the Mu'tazilites among Islamic theological intellectual currents.²⁸⁰ Another well-known textbook in theology, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition* claims that the Mu'tazilites "drew on Aristotle's argument that God is radically one, with no distinction between His essence and His attributes. At the same time, they called on *Neoplatonic negative theology* to accent God's transcendence."²⁸¹ More recent works in the field of Islamic Studies describe Mu'tazilites as adopting a "radical form of negative theology."²⁸² Examples are abundant. Briefly, the portrait of the Mu'tazilites as the Muslim negative theologians *par excellence* is still a popular view in different branches of the study of religion. Hence the most suitable, commonsensical place to begin the analysis of negative theology in thirteenth century Sufism is arguably to ask whether Mu'tazilism survived that time, and to elaborate on the direct and indirect connections between Mu'tazilites and Sufis of the period.

The Debate of a Mu'tazilite and a Literalist on Self-Subsistence: Thick Description of an Encounter of Two Sufis in Seville

Mu'tazilism and Sufism were not two mutually exclusive categories from early on as the Mu'tazilite Sufi theologians as well as the ninth century theological current *Şūfiyyat al-Mu'tazilah* in 'Iraq both indicate. The latter was an urban movement in Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir (d.825)'s Mu'tazilite School that denied the worldly authorities so strongly that its only future would be among the antinomian itinerant Darvīshes, the *Qalandars*.²⁸³ But to go even further back, it is well-known that both theology and Sufism trace their origins as distinct fields to the figure of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d.728).²⁸⁴ Not only a phalanx of proto-Sufis such as Ibn Wāsi', Farqad, Abān, Yazīd al-Raqqāshī, Ibn Dīnār, Bunānī and Ḥabīb al-'Ajamī, but also the two men held up as the founding figures of Mu'tazilite theology, Wāsil ibn 'Aṭā' (d.748) and Abū 'Uthmān 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd ibn Bāb (d.769), were both associated with his circle.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁰ D'Onofrio 2008, p.259.

²⁸¹ Colish 1997, p.138; emphasis mine.

²⁸² Bahrawi 2013, p.55. Also see Fontaine 1990, p.100.

²⁸³ Van Ess 1993, Vol.5, pp.329-330; Van Ess 2006, pp.148-152; Sviri 2012, pp.23-28.

²⁸⁴ Mayer 2008, p.260. Mayer also introduces how key some Sufi concepts and practices emerged with al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī.

²⁸⁵ Mayer 2008, p.260.

While Sufism flourished after the ninth century, the school of Mu'tazilism, outside the heterogeneous umbrella of Shī'ism, had largely declined by the twelfth century, except in some small circles in Khuwārazm. Mu'tazilism was reinvigorated in the region through Maḥmūd Jarīr Abū Muḍar al-Ḍabbī (d.1113), a scholar who had emigrated to Khuwārazm from Iṣfahān. Following al-Ḍabbī, prominent scholars like Ibn al-Malāḥimī (d.1141) and his student al-Zamakhsharī (d.1144) kept Mu'tazilism alive in Khuwārazm, where Ḥanafīs adhered to Mu'tazilism at least until the beginning of the fifteenth century. The prominence of Mu'tazilite material in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210)'s work, and his oral debates with the Mu'tazilites that led to his exile from the region witness this reinvigoration.²⁸⁶ 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Khuwārazmī (d.af.1401), who accompanied Timur (r.1370-1405) to Syria and acted as an interpreter between him and Ibn Khaldūn (d.1407), was a Mu'tazilite scholar.²⁸⁷ The Najjāriyyah had a formidable presence in Rayy at least until the twelfth century, and unsurprisingly the Ḥanafī theologians of Transoxania had a particular rivalry with the ideas of their master Abū 'Abd Allāh al-Najjār (d.ca.833-836). Ibn al-Dā'ī (fl.ca.13th CE) reports that al-Najjār's followers still existed in the region of Bukhārā, among other places in central Transoxanian territories. However, even if he was among the early theologians to defend the negative interpretation of affirmative predicates, al-Najjār did not belong to the Mu'tazilīyah as al-Māturīdī (d.944) had already indicated.²⁸⁸ Yet many doxographers depicted the Najjāriyyah as a Mu'tazilite branch.²⁸⁹

Except such reported circles and the better known individual Khuwārazmian representatives such as al-Muṭarrizī (d.1213) and al-Sakkākī (d.1229), Mu'tazilism dissolved into later Ash'arī, Ḥanafī-Māturīdī, *Mashshā'ī* [Peripatetic], and most significantly, Shī'ī approaches to theology. On the other hand, in terms of a negativist approach to God's attributes, later schools or movements were not the only channels between the Mu'tazilites and the Sufis of the thirteenth century. In the twelfth century, Sufis still had direct access to Mu'tazilite works, at least in Eastern Iran. In a miraculous instance of mind-reading, Aḥmad-i Jām (d.1141) surprisingly said to his disciples that it is ethically forbidden [*ḥarām*] to

²⁸⁶ Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328) already recognized the significant influence of Mu'tazilism on al-Rāzī. See Jaffer 2012, pp.511-512.

²⁸⁷ R. Martin et.al. 1997, pp.38-41.

²⁸⁸ Rudolph 2015, pp.164.

²⁸⁹ See e.g. al-Shahrestānī 2014, p.144.

read books that vilify the Mu'tazilites.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, it seems that Mu'tazilism indeed survived into the thirteenth century and maintained direct contact with the Sufis of the time. The Ṣāhirī²⁹¹ Sufi Ibn al-'Arabī (d.1240)'s four parallel accounts on his encounter with the Mu'tazilite Sufi master al-Qabrafīqī (fl.late 12th CE) of Andalusia provide a striking example. Ibn Ḥazm (d.1064) spoke of "Andalusī Mu'tazilīs" as a school,²⁹² but the presence of Mu'tazilism in Andalusia was rather meager. Especially after the fall of the Idrīsīs and the dominance of the theological literalism of the Mālikīs by the ninth century, they lost their footing in the region.²⁹³ Later, Ibn Rushd (d.1198) claimed that none of the Mu'tazilite writings reached the Iberian Peninsula, thus he could not learn the methods they adopted in discussing the divine existence from their own sources.²⁹⁴ The founding figure of the Almohadī revolution, Ibn Tūmart (d.1130), criticized the Mu'tazilites harshly but also so superficially that his case indeed supports Ibn Rushd's claim.²⁹⁵

Ibn al-'Arabī's debate with a Mu'tazilite Sufi master, before the death of Ibn Rushd, has important theological dimensions, which shed light on Mu'tazilite ideas circulating in thirteenth century Andalusia, including negative theologies. Ibn al-'Arabī narrates the encounter as follows:

This is the station of Self-Subsistence [*maqām al-qayyūmiyyah*]. ... Our companions disagreed on emulating this attribute [*yatakhkhallaqu bihi*]. I met Abū 'Abd Allāh ibn Junayd al-Qabrafīqī among the masters of the [Sufi] order—originally from Ronda and of the Mu'tazilite school [*madhhab*]. I saw that he denied [*yamna*] the emulation of Self-Subsistence, thus he rejected [*raddada*] this from his school. Instead, he was advising

²⁹⁰ Aḥmad-i Jām 2004, pp.293-294.

²⁹¹ For an introduction to Ibn al-'Arabī's affiliation with the Ṣāhirī legal school, see Mayer 2008, p.282.

²⁹² Casewit 2014, p.44.

²⁹³ Casewit 2014, p.44.

²⁹⁴ Stroumsa 2014, pp.80-81.

Stroumsa's work on the Mu'tazilites in the Andalusia misses the case of al-Qabrafīqī that I am introducing here.

²⁹⁵ Ibn Tūmart 1993, pp.15-17.

for his devotees the emulation of the [divine] actions [*kāna yaqūl bi-khalq al-af'āl lil-'ubbād*].²⁹⁶

The three accounts in the *Meccan Openings* [*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyyah*] and the account in the *Adornment of the Spiritually Transformed* [*Hilyat al-Abdāl*] strongly cohere with each other, and inform us of al-Qabrafiqī and his Mu'tazilite Sufi circle in Cabrafigo, a town in a mountainous region of Andalusia to the south-east of Cordoba.²⁹⁷ Ibn al-'Arabī describes him as “among the greatest Sufi masters of Andalusia” [*min kubbār mashāyikh hadhihi al-ṭarīqah bil-Andalus*].²⁹⁸ This honorific should be approached with caution because Ibn al-'Arabī does not mention him somewhere else, including his biographical dictionary on the Sufis of Andalusia. We also know that Ibn al-'Arabī, who did not take offense at visiting scholars, traveled long distances to meet known male and female Sufi masters, but it is al-Qabrafiqī who comes to Ishbīliyyah and finds the young Ibn al-'Arabī in this case.²⁹⁹ Still, it is clear that al-Qabrafiqī had a good following, and for Ibn al-'Arabī there was nothing particularly surprising in meeting a Mu'tazilite Sufi.

Parallel to his Mu'tazilite affiliation, al-Qabrafiqī's preclusion of the divine attribute Self-Subsistence [*al-Qayyūmiyyah*]³⁰⁰ from human access is somewhat unusual among medieval Sufis, most of whom not only allowed access to the divine names, but also stipulated emulating them as pivotal to human perfection. Ibn al-'Arabī himself saw the divine names as veils in front of the divine essence,

²⁹⁶ Ibn al-'Arabī 2004, Vol.3, p.212. Cf. Ibn al-'Arabī 2004, Vol.5, p.53. Also see Ibn al-'Arabī 1428/2007k, p.392. For an English translation of the account in the *Adornment of the Spiritually Transformed*, see Ibn al-'Arabī 2008, p.38.

²⁹⁷

Qabra, in Spanish Cabra, a town in a mountainous region of Andalusia to the south-east of Cordoba, situated at an altitude of 448 m. on the slopes of the Sierra de Cabra; at present it is the centre of a partido judicial of the province of Cordoba and has a population of 20,000. ... Conquered by Ferdinand III (the Saint) in 641/1244, the town belonged successively to the Council of Cordoba and to the Order of Calatrava. In 733/1333 the Naşrid Muḥammad IV seized Qabra, destroyed the ramparts and part of the castle, and sent the inhabitants to captivity in Granada. Re-populated shortly afterwards by the Master of the Order of Calatrava, Qabra subsequently reverted to the Crown of Castile. (Arié 2012.)

²⁹⁸ Ibn al-'Arabī 2004, Vol.5, p.53.

²⁹⁹ Ibn al-'Arabī 2004, Vol.7, p204; Ibn al-'Arabī 2004, Vol.3, p.212 [*raja' ilayy*].

³⁰⁰ For a discussion on various English translations of the divine name “al-Qayyūm,” see Hamza, Rizvi and Mayer 2008, pp.127-129.

which remained utterly unknowable; yet the divine names were to be emulated in order to proceed on the endless path.³⁰¹ Indeed, assuming the character traits of the divine names is the very definition of Sufism for Ibn al-‘Arabī.³⁰² For “Sufis,” i.e., those at the beginning level, emulating divine attributes is a duty in the path of becoming advanced “verifiers” [*muḥaqqiqūn*] who have no such concerns, and no attributes.³⁰³ In his very encounter with al-Qabraqī, Ibn al-‘Arabī makes it clear again that for him “it is permissible to emulate Self-Subsistence like all divine names.”³⁰⁴ Indeed, in his book devoted to the divine names and attributes, *Unveiling of the Meaning of the Secrets of the Beautiful Names* [*Kashf al-Ma‘nā ‘an Sirr Asmā’ al-Husnā*], he follows a tripartite structure for each name.³⁰⁵ Not just for the name “the Self-Subsistent,” but for each divine name he devotes three sections, which explore respectively how that name is connected [*ta’alluq*], realized [*tahaqquq*], and emulated [*takhalluq*] by the wayfarers.³⁰⁶ This very tripartite approach, with the exact same titles, appears in the sayings attributed to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s master ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Mahdawī (d.1221), and in turn, his master, Abū Madyan (d.1198).³⁰⁷

³⁰¹ See e.g. Chittick 1989, p.43.

³⁰² Ibn al-‘Arabī 1428/2007l, p.417. Also see Chittick 1992, p.177.

³⁰³ See Addas 1994. On the idea of *takhalluq* in Ibn al-‘Arabī, see Chittick 1989, pp.21-22, 283-288, 369-372. For *takhalluq* in medieval Sufism, see al-Suyūṭī 1934, p.78.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s placement of *takhalluq* to a low rank of spirituality resonates with the *Sijillian Questions* of Ibn Sab‘īn (d.1269). Goldziher already intuited this dimension in Ibn Sab‘īn’s mysticism. See Goldziher 1981, p.138.

³⁰⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī 2004, Vol.3, p.212; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1428/2007k, p.392.

³⁰⁵ The structure of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s book *Unveiling of the Meaning of the Secrets* is strikingly similar to that of the Andalusian mystic Ibn Barraĵān (d.1141) in the same genre. Ibn Barraĵān’s work on the divine names, *Sharḥ Asmā’ Allāh al-Husnā* has three separate levels of commentary [*fuṣūl*] on each divine name. The first is a philological examination [*istikhrāj lughawī*], the second doctrinal [*i’tibār*], and the third devotional [*ta’abbud*]. While Ibn al-‘Arabī’s work does not have a philological analysis section, but *i’tibār* and *tahaqquq* on the one hand, *ta’abbud* and *takhalluq* on the other, are very similar. Indeed, what Ibn Barraĵān meant by *ta’abbud* is identical with *takhalluq*, while he cautiously avoided the term in favor of the more neutral sounding phrase, “practice of servanthood” [*ta’abbud*], as Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328) noted (see Casewit 2014, pp.214-215). On the other hand, Ibn al-‘Arabī explicitly cites Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111)’s important piece in the field, *the Furthest Goal* [*al-Maqṣad al-Asnā*], while Ibn Barraĵān was not familiar with it when he wrote his book (see Casewit 2014, pp.178-231). Also there are differences in terms of the names contained in the works of Ibn al-‘Arabī and Ibn Barraĵān, and significant divergences in their interpretations.

³⁰⁶ For the *takhalluq* of the name *al-Qayyūm*, see Ibn al-‘Arabī in Beneito Arias 1996, Vol.2, p.140.

³⁰⁷ Abū Madyan 1996, pp.148-149; Elmore 2001, pp.608-609.

In other occasions in the *Meccan Openings*, he indicates that when Sufis mention of “emulation” [*takhalluq*], they mean what the Philosophers³⁰⁸ mean when they speak of “attaining similarity to God” [*tashabbuh bi Allāh*], and identifies this process with attaining to human perfection.³⁰⁹ An aphorism from the *Intimacy of the Recluse* [*Uns al-wāhid*] of Abū Madyan, whom Ibn al-‘Arabī calls “the voice of this Way and its reviver in the lands of the West” and “one of the Poles,” indicates that Abū Madyan affirmed that all names can be emulated by the wayfarer. Accordingly, the meaning of a divine name can even subsist in the wayfarer until she reaches the next step, in which she will be annihilated in the meaning of the name.³¹⁰ Ibn Ṭufayl (d.1185) went even further and argued that not only all divine attributes, but even the divine essence can be emulated. In the same vein, another Andalusian Sufi Shushtarī (d.1269) claimed that “attributes” [*ṣifāt*] in Sufi terminology mean the qualities of the Self-Subsistent God [*nu‘ut al-Qayyūm*],³¹¹ while all of them are open to emulation through Sufi practices.³¹² Only “Allāh” is exclusively “the interpreter of the divine ipseity” [*al-mutarjim ‘an al-dhāt*] that is the gatherer of the meanings of all names.³¹³ Indeed, this follows the position that Ibn al-‘Arabī laid in his *Unveiling of the Meaning of the Secrets of the Beautiful Names*.³¹⁴ Another western Sufi ‘Afif al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d.1291), in his commentary on ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d.1089)’s *Stations of the Wayfarer*, claims that the divine name “Self-Subsistence” indicates the transcendence of divine oneness and the unity of all divine

³⁰⁸ I am deliberately capitalizing the term “Philosophers,” in order to indicate that the reference is not “philosophers” or “philosophy” in general, but a certain strand of Islamic philosophy flourished in early ninth century and mainly melted away in other Islamic intellectual traditions after around thirteenth century. *Falāsifāh*, or the Philosophers, specifically refers to this classical Islamic speculative philosophy, which was genuinely influenced by peripatetic philosophy with a Neoplatonic flavor. Philosophical thinking in the Islamic history was reduced by early orientalist to this peripatetic philosophical stream, insofar as the dialogical contact between Western and Islamic intellectual traditions was substantially cut after this period (until the emerging pseudo-dialogue in the colonial period with the eighteenth century). See H. Corbin 1993, pp.xiii-xvii; p.153.

³⁰⁹ Chittick 1989, p.283.

³¹⁰ Abū Madyan 1996, pp.109.

³¹¹ al-Shushtarī 2004, p.167.

³¹² al-Shushtarī 2004, p.162 [*jalwah: khurūj al-‘abd min al-khalwah bi-al-nu‘ūt al-ilāhiyyah*].

³¹³ al-Shushtarī 2004, p.157.

³¹⁴ Ibn al-‘Arabī in Beneito Aris 1996, Vol.2, pp.18-20.

names.³¹⁵ Yet, as the discussion on “Self-Sufficiency” in al-Tilimsānī’s commentary on al-Niffarī (d.af.977)’s *Stations* indicates, he shares the theological approach of Ibn al-‘Arabī that makes the emulation of all names possible.³¹⁶

Sufis of earlier periods, and non-western Sufis of the same period adopt similar positions on emulating divine Self-Sufficiency. “The view was that the saint was ‘invested’ with one or another divine name or attribute;” Mayer calls it “*ṣifātī* mysticism,” which he traces back to al-Ḥallāj (d.922) and his student Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d.932).³¹⁷ According to al-Sarrāj (d.977)’s report, al-Wāsiṭī argued that all attributes of God could be emulated, except “Allāh” and the “All-Merciful.”³¹⁸ But even earlier than al-Wāsiṭī, the wife of Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d.ca.892) as far away as Transoxania had already a vision in which all the names of God “become adorned” for her.³¹⁹ Al-Sulamī of Nīsabūr (d.1021) also claims that the wayfarer should traverse all of the ninety-nine stations, all of which are associated with a divine name, in order to attain subsistence with God.³²⁰ In the south, Persian Sufi Rūzbihān Baqlī (d.1209) similarly suggests that all names of God, except “Allāh,” are associated with an attribute, which is known by the believer who possesses it.³²¹ He criticizes “the people of negation,” who deny the attributes of God

³¹⁵ ‘Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī in ‘Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī and ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī 1989, pp.47-48.

³¹⁶ ‘Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī in ‘Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī and al-Niffarī 1997, p.58.

³¹⁷ Mayer 2008, p.267.

³¹⁸ al-Sarrāj 1914, pp.88-89 (Arabic text). Indeed, this is exactly the position that Ibn al-‘Arabī adopts in his *Unveiling of the Meaning of the Secrets of the Beautiful Names*. (Ibn al-‘Arabī in Beneito Aris 1996, Vol.2, pp.18-24.) Still, Ibn al-‘Arabī does not remove the possibility of *takhalluq* from these names, indicating that their *takhalluq* is not realized in positive terms, but as the affirmation of human incapacity and dependency on God.

This special approach to the names “Allāh” and “al-Raḥmān” can be traced to ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d.1089)’s reading of Q.17:110. See al-Anṣārī in Farhadi 1996, p.67.

³¹⁹ Al-Tirmidhī 1996, p.35.

Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī himself, though he does not explicitly mention of emulation, speaks of the mystical experience of all divine attributes as available to all seekers. (See al-Tirmidhī 1996, pp.96-98.) The saintly elect even go further and “attain the illumination of knowledge of these attributes in their breasts, ... the light of these attributes shining upon their hearts within their breasts.” (Al-Tirmidhī 1996, p.98.)

³²⁰ al-Sulamī 2009a, pp.129-130.

³²¹ Baqlī 2008, Vol.1, p.16.

Kazuyo Murata translates Baqlī’s sentence as “none knows these two attributes except the *Possessor* of the attributes,” capitalizing the possessor, indicating that only God knows these attributes (K. Murata 2012, p.102). However, Baqlī considers the divine attributes, including the

following rational abstraction in order to avoid likening God to creation.³²² All divine attributes, including the essential ones, such as Unity, are open to be possessed by human beings, to emulation and visionary experience; Self-Subsistence does not play an exceptional role in Baqlī's approach.³²³ The same view also applies for the Kubrāwī master Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī (d.1256).³²⁴ Examples abound.

Long before the thirteenth century, it was the early Baṣran Sufi master Sahl al-Tustarī (d.896), who gave the name Self-Subsistence a higher rank than anyone else, thanks to a visionary experience. As he explains in his Qur'ānic exegesis:

Q.2:255: *God, There is no god except Him, the Living, the Self-Subsistent.* This is the mightiest [*a'zam*] verse in God's Book, Exalted is He. Within it is God's Greatest Name, and it is written across the sky in green light in one line from East to West. This is how I saw it written on the Night of Great Merit [*Laylat al-Qadr*] in 'Abbādān: "There is no god except Him, the Living, the Self-Subsistent." The Living, the Self-Subsistent is the One who oversees everything pertaining to His creatures: their life spans, their actions, and their provision.³²⁵

essential ones, such as "Unity," open to visionary experience. The capitalization of the word "possessor" would not be correct, because human beings can indeed possess them.

³²² Baqlī in Ernst 1996, p.41. Also see the insightful footnote, Ernst 1996, p.104, fn.59.

³²³

[Biṣṭāmī said] "And I became a bird," that is, "My spirit and conscience became like a bird whose body is singleness." That means *humanity was exchanged for the Attribute of oneness*. "The authority of power conquered me and annihilated me, so that I was annihilated in it. Oneness subsisted and humanity was annihilated." This is also part of the station of unification. (Baqlī in Ernst 1996, p.162; emphasis mine.)

³²⁴ Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī 1982, p.71.

³²⁵ al-Tustarī 2011, p.29. Also see al-Tustarī's exegesis on Q.3:1-2, *ibid.*, p.41.

Tustarī's description of Q.2:255 as "the mightiest verse" [*al-a'zam*] in the Qur'ān strongly resonates with the popular prophetic tradition that Q.2:255 and Q.2:163 contain the mightiest name of God [*ism Allāh al-a'zam*]. See e.g. al-Bayhaqī 1358/1939, p.104; Ibn Barrajān 2015, p.89.

Later, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī will also depict the phrase "God, There is no god except Him, the Living, the Self-Subsistent" as a cornerstone of divine unity. (See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in Hamza, Rizvi and Mayer 2008, p.183.) After explaining that Q.2:255 contains the *ism al-a'zam*, Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d.1221) argues that it can be attained by the wayfarer. Those who attain it perceive nothing but the All-Living, and the Self-Subsistent, instead of creation which subsists only through Him. (Najm al-Dīn Kubrā in Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and al-Simnānī 2009, Vol.1, pp.327-328.)

Al-Tustarī follows the strategy of interpreting these two divine attributes as His overseeing, sustaining and governance of creation—the reading of earlier exegetes al-Muqātil, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, al-Mujāhid, al-Rabīʾ ibn Anas, al-Ḍaḥḥāk and others.³²⁶ God’s Self-Subsistence is His governance [*tadbīr*], empowering and giving success to believers.³²⁷ Later Sufi exegetes al-Sulamī (d.1021),³²⁸ whose compilation became one of the most popular exegetical works, and Rūzbihān Baqlī³²⁹ quote al-Tustarī’s approach to the name “Self-Subsistent.” Al-Qushayrī (d.1072)’s exegesis follows the same strategy of defining God’s Self-Subsistence as God’s governance manifested in human actions: “‘Self-Subsistence’ means His governance and supervision of everything.” The one who knows that God is Self-Subsistent will be freed from all turmoil, tensions, and dependencies. As the believer knows that God has the control of everything, they will not value any created thing.³³⁰ Another Iranian Sufi, Aḥmad Samʾānī (d.1141)’s Persian commentary on the divine names simply translates al-Qushayrī’s account from Arabic, missing the subtle word-play al-Qushayrī made between Self-Subsistent [*Qayyūm*] and “the value” [*qiymah*], which the freed believer would remove from the world, and devote to the Creator.³³¹ Still, Samʾānī’s work became popular among later Persian Sufis, including Rūmī (d.1273).³³²

Even Sufis who defined Self-Subsistence as a negative attribute of God did not deny its emulation. Most famously Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111) defines Self-Subsistence as a negation indicating divine independence from an external subject to exist, very much like the “necessary being” [*wājib al-wujūd*] of the Philosophers as Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210) recognizes.³³³ In this sense, only

³²⁶ Cf. Hamza, Rizvi and Mayer 2008, 127-297.

³²⁷ al-Tustarī 2011, p.126 (Q.20:111). Among others, al-Zamakhsharī (d.1144)’s reading of al-Qayyūm in Q.2:255 also underlines that God is “the constant executor of the management of creation and its preservation.” (al-Zamakhsharī in Hamza, Rizvi and Mayer 2008, p.170. For an alternative translation, see Ullah 2013, p.152.) Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Tūmart al-Andalusī (d.1001)’s, al-Bayhaqī (d.1066)’s and Ibn Tūmart (d.1130)’s interpretations of the divine attribute “al-Qayyūm” are similarly based on divine governance. (Cf. al-Bayhaqī 1358/1939, pp.53-54; Ibn Tūmart 1993, p.11; Ibn Tūmart al-Andalusī 1999, p.29.)

³²⁸ al-Sulamī 2014, Q.20:111.

³²⁹ Baqlī 2008, Vol.2, p.503.

³³⁰ al-Qushayrī 1969, pp.209-211.

³³¹ Samʾānī 1989, p.495.

³³² Chittick 1999, pp.337-360.

³³³ Al-Rāzī claims that al-Ghazālī’s negation of divine attributes is influenced by the Philosophers, which is a reasonable claim. See Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī 1978, p.188. For al-Rāzī’s detailed treatment

God is Self-Subsistent, while creation is in constant poverty, dependence and need for His governance. It is one of the few names which truly apply only to God.³³⁴ Nevertheless, it can be emulated: “humans’ access to this attribute is proportionate with their self-sufficiency [*istighnā*] from everything except God.”³³⁵ This is very much in line with al-Qushayrī’s description. Self-Subsistence, like all positive and negative names of God, as al-Ghazālī underlines in the afterword, is applicable exclusively to God, but human beings attain a similitude [*mithl*] of them.³³⁶ The attributes are names which describe God in human terms. Thus only God knows the real meanings of His attributes.³³⁷ Al-Ghazālī cites prophetic sayings including the famous imperative “emulate the characteristics of God”³³⁸ indicating its ethical necessity. He also discusses the influential Khurāsānian Sufi master Kurragānī (d.1076) (or “Karrakānī”)³³⁹’s words on emulating the divine attributes, reported by his own master al-Fārmadhī (d.1084). Al-Ghazālī’s discussion aims to qualify Kurragānī’s words on attaining divine attributes, and to make sure that their emulation is not misunderstood as sharing them with God.³³⁹ Later Sufis, ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d.1234) and his jurist student Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām (d.1262), for example, quoted the same report of al-Fārmadhī on Kurragānī’s reference to emulating the divine attributes that al-Ghazālī had quoted.³⁴⁰ Unlike al-Ghazālī, they do not even address the question of the possibility of emulating all divine attributes, nor the possible theological fallacies and dangers that might accompany a misinterpreted approach to emulation. ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī (d.1334), whose Persian Sufi compendium *Lamp of Guidance* closely follows al-Suhrawardī’s works in Arabic, also argues for the

of the divine name al-Qayyūm in Q.2:255, see Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in Hamza, Rizvi and Mayer 2008, pp.183-191.

³³⁴ Shehadi 1964, p.19.

³³⁵ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 1999, p.110. For Burrell and Daher’s alternative English translation to mine, see Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2007, p.130.

³³⁶ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 1999, p.126; Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2007, p.150.

³³⁷ Abrahamov 2002, pp.208-210.

³³⁸ “*Takhallaqū bi-akhlāq Allāh.*”

³³⁹ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 1999, p.126; Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2007, p.150.

Citing Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, al-Suyūṭī (d.1505) later underlines the same difference to defy the accusations of *ḥulūl* and *ittihād* from Sufism. (al-Suyūṭī 1934, p.78.)

³⁴⁰ For Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām, Self-Subsistence is open to be emulated by perfecting one’s conduct. (Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām 2002, p.40.)

accessibility of all divine names to emulation, and for the presence of higher and more esoteric stations of realizing each name.³⁴¹

Al-Qabrafīqī's gap between the divine Self-Subsistence and creation, hence, is less of a Sufi theme than a typical Mu'tazilite approach to the divine attributes. More characteristically, al-Qabrafīqī makes a sharp distinction not only between different divine names, but also between names and actions, leaving only the divine actions accessible to direct contact with creation.³⁴² This categorization of the divine names indeed perpetuates the early Mu'tazilite position³⁴³ that was developed not only by the later Mu'tazilites, but also by philosophers, theologians and jurists from different backgrounds. It seems that the early Ibādī theologians, such as the prominent Kūfan Ibādī theologian 'Abd Allāh ibn Yazīd al-Fazārī (8th CE), were among the first to articulate this distinction between God's essential attributes and the attributes of action.³⁴⁴ Early Baghdādīan Mu'tazilites as well as the Baṣran Mu'tazilites led by Abū al-Hudhayl (d.841), his nephew al-Nazzām (d.846), and Abū al-Hudhayl's pupil al-Shahḥām (d.847) according to al-Ash'arī (d.936), adopted the distinction, while they differed on the content of the categories as well as their theological interpretations:

They denied [*ankarū*] ... [various attributes] from the Glorious, Eternal Producer [*al-Bāri'*], and argued that all of them were attributes of action [*sifāt al-af'āl*]. They alleged that attributes were of kinds: some of the attributes described the ipseity of the Producer [*al-Bāri' li-naḥsihi*]. ... The others described His actions, such as "the Creator" [*al-Khāliq*], "the Sustainer" [*al-Razzāq*]...³⁴⁵

The early Mu'tazilites, in line with earlier Ibādī theologians, distinguished between the essential attributes and the attributes of action.³⁴⁶ Neither Ibādīs

³⁴¹ 'Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, pp.31-32.

³⁴² Austin's edition briefly mentions of encounter, but it misrepresents the debate as related to "the knowledge of the divine Name the (necessarily) Self-subsistent." (Ibn al-'Arabī 1971, p.26.) However, all three accounts in the *Futūḥāt* coherently and clearly explain that the disagreement is rather on the accessibility of the divine name Self-Subsistent to human emulation [*takhallūq*].

³⁴³ See Abrahamov in al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1990, p.21.

³⁴⁴ The oldest surviving Muslim theological texts belong to al-Fazārī (8th CE), and discuss divine attributes among a variety of topics. One of them, *the Book of Monotheism in the Recognition of God* [*Kitāb al-Tawḥīd fī Ma'rifat Allāh*] makes the distinction between the essential attributes and the attributes of action. Especially see al-Fazārī 2014, pp.177-185.

³⁴⁵ al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.2, p.171.

³⁴⁶ Al-Māturīdī (d.944) ascribes the same distinction to the Mu'tazilite Abū al-Qāsim al-Balkhī, known as al-Ka'bī (d.931). (al-Māturīdī 2003, p.113. Also see Cerić 1995, pp.178-179.) Also the

nor Mu'tazilites divided the divine attributes into the essential and accidental ones. Philosophers like al-Kindī (d.873), who were close associates of Mu'tazilites without giving up their Aristotelianism,³⁴⁷ along with the Ash'arites would make a further distinction between the essential and accidental attributes of God.

The initial distinction of the Ibādīs and Mu'tazilites, which had parallels with the *via negativa* of the Church Fathers such as John of Damascus (d.748),³⁴⁸ became decisive not only for the Imāmī theologians like Ibn Bābawayh (d.991),³⁴⁹ but also for the fiercest enemies of the Mu'tazilites. The leader of an anti-Mu'tazilite, pietist, attributist movement, Abū 'Abd Allāh Ibn Karrām (d.869) opposed the Mu'tazilite negation of attributes from God, but he worked in their terms and kept the distinction, claiming to affirm all attributes, including the attributes of action.³⁵⁰ This meant attributing incidents that would subsist in the essence of God. Later Karrāmīs were not able to reconcile the problematic idea of God being a substratum for incidents [*qiyām al-ḥawādith*], which amounted to one of the most ridiculous of absurdities for doxographers al-Shahrastānī (d.1153), al-Rāzī,³⁵¹ the jurist al-Bayḍāwī (d.ca1286)³⁵² and Sufis such as Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (fl.1269),³⁵³ who had no sympathy whatsoever for the Mu'tazilite negation of divine attributes.³⁵⁴ Another Ash'arite doxographer 'Abd al-Qāhir al-

Fiqh al-Akbar II attributed to Abū Ḥanīfah (d.767) interestingly distinguished only between the divine attributes and the attributes of action. (See Abū Ḥanīfah in Wensinck 2008, p.188.) Kubrāwī Sufi al-Simnānī (d.1336) follows this two-fold division, arguing that God has eight essential attributes, while all others are the attributes of action. (Elias 1995, p.65.)

³⁴⁷ See Adamson 2003, pp.52-53.

³⁴⁸ John of Damascus' classification of terms which can be predicated of God were terms signifying "action," and terms signifying "what God is not," i.e., the apophatic way. (H. Wolfson 1976, p.219.)

³⁴⁹ Ibn Bābawayh 1993, p.27.

³⁵⁰ Ḥanafī-Karrāmī theologian Abū Muṭī' Makhḥūl al-Nasafī (d.930)'s *Book of Widest Insight [Kitāb al-Fiqh al-Absaṭ]* was the earliest work in Transoxania to discuss the divine attributes in detail. Both Makhḥūl al-Nasafī and later Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d.944) seem to adopt this distinction from Jahm ibn Ṣafwān, whom Makhḥūl al-Nasafī even wrote a refutation. (Rudolph 2015, pp.279-280.)

³⁵¹ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī 1978, p.158. Also see Najm al-Dīn al-Kātibī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Ibn Kammūnah 2007, p.51.

³⁵² al-Bayḍāwī 2014, pp.174-177.

³⁵³ Naṣīr al-Dīn Qūnawī in Chittick 1992, p.72.

³⁵⁴ Madelung 1988, pp.41-42.

Al-Māturīdī's unequivocal critique of this doctrine was key for the later Ḥanafism in Transoxania, as earlier scholars were sympathetic to Ibn al-Karrām's ideas. (al-Māturīdī 2003, p.114.)

Baghdādī (d.1038), who explicitly abhors Mu'tazilism, puts a version of their distinction at the heart of the way of the pious ancestors [*ahl al-sunnah*], following al-Bāqillānī.³⁵⁵ Accordingly, divine names were threefold: the names that indicate God's ipseity; the names that were non-essential but co-eternal with God's essence; and the names that derive from actions.³⁵⁶ Ash'arism, thus, inherited the distinction with a refined nuance that we find in al-Bayhaqī (d.1066),³⁵⁷ Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d.1085), his student Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111), and their later critic Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210).³⁵⁸ When we arrive at the thirteenth century, it should not surprise us to find the same three-fold approach to the divine names in 'Umar al-Suhrawardī (d.1234)'s influential Sufi manual *Gifts of Gnosis* [*'Awārif al-Ma'ārif*], Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d.1274)'s work on Shī'ite theology *the Book of Catharsis*,³⁵⁹ Ash'arī-Shāfi'ī jurist Ibn 'Abd al-Salām (d.1262)'s work on piety the *Tree of Gnosis* [*Shajarat al-Ma'ārif*],³⁶⁰ or the Akbarī Sufi al-Farghānī (d.ca.1300)'s commentary on Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d.1235)'s *Poem of the Way*.³⁶¹

The attribute that al-Qabrafīqī disallows for emulation is not one of the classical negative names of God among the early Mu'tazilite theologians. Only a few early theologians, such as the Ibādī scholars, Wāṣil ibn 'Ata' (d.748), Ḍirār ibn 'Amr (d.815), al-Najjār (d.835) and al-Nazzām (d.846) are known to have considered all attributes of God indiscriminately negative and inaccessible to human emulation. However, al-Qabrafīqī is clearly not following them by making a distinction between various names, and still considering Self-Subsistence inaccessible to human emulation. In this categorization, Qabrafīqī is closer to the later

It is interesting that Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d.1088), who narrates his face-to-face debate with the Karrāmīs on this topic, does not mention at all of the problem of the *qiyām al-ḥawādith*. (See Nāṣir-i Khusraw 2012, pp.51-56.)

For the philosopher Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d.1311)'s critique of God's knowledge being the locus of the [*maḥall lil-ḥawādith*], see Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī in Walbridge 1992), pp.265-266 (Arabic text); pp.227-228 (English trans.).

³⁵⁵ al-Bāqillānī 1987, pp.298-299. The Persian Ḥanafī Sufi Hujvīrī (d.1077) also makes the distinction in his celebrated *Unveiling of the Hidden* [*Kashf al-Maḥjūb*]. See Hujvīrī 1926, pp.14-15. For English translations, see Hujvīrī 1911, p.14; Hujvīrī 2001, p.83.

³⁵⁶ 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī [undated], p.291.

³⁵⁷ al-Bayhaqī 1358/1939, p.112.

³⁵⁸ See El-Bizri 2008, p.128.

³⁵⁹ Ṭūsī 2010a, pp.392-393.

³⁶⁰ Ibn 'Abd al-Salām 2002, p.21.

³⁶¹ Farghānī 2007, Vol.1, p.44.

Mu'tazilites than these early theologians. Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār (d.1025), for example, claimed that God's unity, one of the five fundamentals of religion, meant that God did not share any positive or negative attribute with creation.³⁶² 'Abd al-Jabbār also makes the distinction between the essential attributes and actions of God, putting Speech, Justice and Will into the latter category. The divine actions beg relations with creation, while the essential attributes are free from such a relationality, thus inaccessible to human emulation. God's non-delimitedness and Self-Sufficiency [*Ghanā*] is one of His essential attributes, though a negative one.³⁶³ It is safe to conclude that he considered Self-Subsistence, a divine name very close to Self-Sufficiency, a non-relational, negative name of God, exclusively defining His transcendence. The distinction among divine attributes that al-Qabrafīqī makes, and the attribute that he disallows for emulation perfectly reflect the later Mu'tazilite theological position in stark opposition to the widespread Sufi positions on the divine attributes and their emulation.

C. Mu'tazilites and "Negative Theology:" the Problem

Al-Qabrafīqī's brief appearance in this theological context could be a convincing case of an apophatic Mu'tazilite Sufi who considers Self-Subsistence an essential, thus negative attribute of an unknowable, inaccessible God. Al-Qabrafīqī's purportedly negative theological stance, however, presents real problems if analysed in its context. Our travel from al-Qabrafīqī's Andalusia to 'Abd al-Jabbār's Baghdād and Rayy displays a larger theoretical difficulty in the association of Mu'tazilism with "negative theology." It is correct that 'Abd al-Jabbār defined specific positive and negative names as exclusively divine, independent from relations with creation that define divine actions. 'Abd al-Jabbār, and the Mu'tazilites, however, argued that God's essence [*dhāt*], or the truth of His ipseity, was indeed *knowable* [*ma'lūm*]. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's observation is perceptive:

Ḍirār among the theologians, and [Abū Ḥāmid] al-Ghazālī among the later ones argued that we do not know the truth of the ipseity of God—which is the claim of the Philosophers. *The majority of the theologians among us [i.e., the Ash'arites] and among the*

³⁶² 'Abd al-Jabbār 1996, p.129. For an English translation, see R. Martin et.al. 1997, p.92.

³⁶³ Heemskerck 2014.

*Mu'tazilites have argued that it is, indeed, knowable [ma'lūmah].*³⁶⁴

Al-Rāzī's point on the essential knowability of God is supported by prominent Ash'arite sources.³⁶⁵ Hence there is an unjustified leap from the *negation of attributes* to the *divine unknowability* in defining al-Qabrafiqī as a negative theologian. Medieval scholars were keenly aware of the difference between the two questions, and the Mu'tazilites embodied a reference point for them to clarify their own positions. In his correspondence with Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d.1274), the philosopher Sufi master and Ibn al-'Arabī's stepson Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d.1274) argues that "everybody who ponders seriously agrees that the divine reality is unknowable [*majhūlah*]." ³⁶⁶ In his response, Ṭūsī feels obliged to correct this generic statement, clarifying his own position:

It was necessary for al-Qūnawī rather to say: "The Philosophers have agreed upon this." For, the Mu'tazilite masters among the theologians assert that the divine reality is knowable [*ma'lūmah*] to human beings in its essence.³⁶⁷

Al-Qūnawī indeed agrees with the refinement that Ṭūsī brings to divine unknowability. In his response to Ṭūsī's correction, al-Qūnawī indicates that he actually meant the Philosophers and the verifier Sufis [*muḥaqqiqīn*], and not theologians, by the phrase "everybody who ponders seriously."³⁶⁸ While Sufis and Philosophers agree on divine unknowability, the Mu'tazilites state the opposite, both for Ṭūsī and Qūnawī.

According to the later Mu'tazilites that al-Qabrafiqī follows, knowledge of the essence of God precedes not only knowledge of His attributes, but also that of the veracity of revelation. The essential knowledge of God is the basis on which they negate some attributes, and affirm others. The Ismā'īlī scholar Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d.1088) explains the importance of divine knowability for Mu'tazilite ethics succinctly:

³⁶⁴ "Dhahaba Ḍirār min al-mutakallimīn wa al-Ghazālī min al-muta'akhhirīn ilā innā lā-na'rif haqīqat dhāt Allāh wa huwa qawl al-hukamā', wa dhahaba jumhūr al-mutakallimīn minnā wa min al-Mu'tazila ilā innahā ma'lūmah." (Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī 1978, p.188.) Also see Jaffer 2012, p.520.

³⁶⁵ E.g. Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī 1950, p.28.

³⁶⁶ Ṣadr al-dīn Qūnawī in Qūnawī and Ṭūsī 1995, p.50.

³⁶⁷ Ṭūsī in Qūnawī and Ṭūsī 1995, p.100.

³⁶⁸ Ṣadr al-dīn Qūnawī in Qūnawī and Ṭūsī 1995, pp.165-166.

For theologians of the Mu'tazilite school, the doctrine of Unity [*tawhīd*] means that the first thing that is incumbent on man is to know God. Through knowledge of God, man derives the impulse to perform laudable actions and to refrain from those which are bad and blameworthy.³⁶⁹

Accordingly, the knowledge of the ipseity of God is the most "primary" [*awwal*] duty of all for the Mu'tazilites. One can know God without the support of the Scripture, and even without a teacher.³⁷⁰ Al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm (d.860), for example, "follows a later Mu'tazilite doctrine of belief which considers the intellectual knowledge of God the first act of obedience."³⁷¹ In *the Book of Divine Unity* [*Kitāb al-Tawhīd*], al-Qāsim argues as follows:

It is impossible ... to obey God without knowing Him. Man's certain knowledge of God brings him to obey Him and to perform good actions. Thus ... the gravest sin in the eyes of God and the righteous people is to deny God [*al-inkār bi-llāh*] or to doubt His existence [*al-ilhād fī Allāh*] or doubt man's knowledge of God [*al-irtiyāb fī ma'rifat Allāh*]. This is one kind of unbelief.³⁷²

The claim that "God is known" (in both senses of *ma'lūm* and *ma'rūf*) is repeated in other works by al-Qāsim as well.³⁷³ The head of the Baṣran Mu'tazilites, Abū Rashīd al-Nīsabūrī (d.ca.1068) criticizes the defenders of divine unknowability, such as Ḍirār (d.815). His *Book of Debates* follows the more celebrated *al-Mughnī* of 'Abd al-Jabbār, defends God's essential knowability by human reason, and goes as far as discussing whether children can attain it. The titles of the relevant three sections of the book are as follows:

Discussion of the claim that God cannot be apprehended by a sixth sense, as reported from Ḍirār,
Discussion on the invalidation of Ḍirār's claim that God has an essence that only He can know,

³⁶⁹ Nāṣir-i Khusraw 2012, p.56.

³⁷⁰ Abrahamov 1998, p.32.

³⁷¹ Abrahamov in al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1990, p.52.

³⁷² Abrahamov in al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1990, pp.49-50.

³⁷³ In *the Epistle of Whoever Seeks Guidance* [*Kitāb al-Mustarshid*] al-Qāsim employs both verbs 'l-m and 'r-f to emphasize that God is knowable: "People know that things can be perceived as they really are and certainly known even if they are absent from us, for God is known" [*fa-Allāhu yu'lam wa yu'raf*] (al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1996, pp.66-67). Also see al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm in Abrahamov 1998, p.64.

Discussion of the claim that God cannot be known by children unless they are granted (by God) otherwise.³⁷⁴

According to mainstream Mu'tazilite doctrine, essential knowledge of God grounds knowledge of divine attributes, the truth of scripture, and ethical judgments. As opposed to the Ḥanbalīs, Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār for example claimed that one cannot justify the veracity of the revelation with reference to revelation itself. As Mānakdīm (d.1034) repeats, the Qur'ān "is approved as a proof only when one proves that it is just and wise speech, and this derives from the knowledge of God, His unity and justice."³⁷⁵ That revelation is sent by a divine source in order to guide creation, i.e., *divine intention*, should already be known with certainty. Creation including the human self and nature is full of immediate proofs³⁷⁶ that can logically demonstrate to *every* rational person that they are created by an essentially good, omnipotent, self-sufficient, all-knowing, and just creator.³⁷⁷ In 'Abd al-Jabbār's words, "everything is evidence for Him."³⁷⁸ Once this fundamental epistemological principle is logically proven, and the divine essence is known, one can be sure that the scriptures, as well as the ethical and legal systems based on them, are revealed in order to sustain justice and to help flourishing. Else, even miracles will prove nothing.³⁷⁹ Similarly, only after knowing the divine essence with its necessary positive and negative attributes can we derive other, non-essential attributes of God. The claim that God has further non-essential, relational attributes, again, will be provable from this firm deductive basis.³⁸⁰ The approach of later Mu'tazilites, such as Ibn al-Malāḥimī,

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Mas'ala fī anna llāh lā yajūzu an yudraka bi-ḥāssa sādisa 'alā mā yuḥkā 'an Ḍirār

Mas'ala fī ibṭāl mā dhahaba ilayhi Ḍirār anna li-llāh ta'ālā mā'iyya lā ya'limuhā illā huwa

Mas'ala fī anna llāh ta'ālā lā yajūzu an yu'līma l-atfāl illā wa-yuḍamminu l-'iwaḍ 'alayhi (Abū Rashīd al-Nīsabūrī in Ansari and Schmidtke 2010, pp.248-249.)

³⁷⁵ See Abrahamov 1998, p.33.

³⁷⁶ Cf. Q.41:53.

³⁷⁷ 'Abd al-Jabbār in Renard 2014, pp.63-65.

³⁷⁸ 'Abd al-Jabbār in Shihadeh 2008, p.208.

³⁷⁹ 'Abd al-Jabbār in Renard 2014, pp.62-63.

³⁸⁰ Van Ess 2006, pp.182-183.

Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d.1044) and Mānakdīm (d.1034) follows that of ‘Abd al-Jabbār.³⁸¹

As Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī —himself a post-Ghazālīan, new-generation [*muta’akhhir*] Ash‘arite— declared, Mu‘tazilites shared this essential knowability with their fierce opponents, the Ash‘arites, among others.³⁸² Ash‘arite manuals of theology typically begin with a chapter on the sources of knowledge, then specifically address knowledge of the divine essence. Their difference with the Mu‘tazilites lies in the source of this knowledge. Al-Ash‘arī derived the obligation to know God from revelation, while Mu‘tazilites, and even some early Ash‘arites like al-Qalānisī (d.970) regard this obligation as stemming from reason.³⁸³ Ibn al-‘Arabī himself testifies to such a description in the *Meccan Openings*. He narrates how a group of Ash‘arite theologians attacked the Sufi masters al-Kharrāz (d.899) and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111) on the basis of their defense of divine unknowability. Al-Kharrāz and al-Ghazālī were holding that “only God knows God”³⁸⁴—a principle popular among Sufis from early on.

³⁸¹ See e.g. Ibn al-Malāḥimī 2008, p.60, 106. Also see Shihadeh 2008, pp.199-200; Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī in Abrahamov 2008, pp.61-62.

³⁸² Diverse claims for divine knowability appear in the earliest doxographies. Abū ‘Āṣim Khushaysh ibn Asram al-Naṣā‘ī (d.867), for example, mentions an early antinomian group called the “pneumatics” [*rūḥāniyyah*], who claimed direct vision of and communication with God. Al-Naṣā‘ī writes:

They are also called *fikriyyah* [“meditationists”] because they meditate and believe that in their meditation they can reach God in reality. Thus they make their meditation the object of their devotions and of their striving towards God. In their meditation they see this goal by means of their spirit, through God speaking to them directly, passing his hand gently over them, and —as they believe— looking upon them directly. (al-Naṣā‘ī in Karamustafa 2014, p.102.)

³⁸³ Abrahamov 1998, pp.33-34.

Especially after al-Juwaynī and al-Ghazālī, Ash‘arites more clearly join the Mu‘tazilites in deriving the obligation to know God from reason instead of revelation. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s ascription of an authoritative role to human reasoning as a source of religious knowledge is closely related to his claim for the essential knowability of God as both powerfully display his Mu‘tazilite leanings. See Jaffer 2012.

³⁸⁴ A variant of the principle is attributed, surprisingly, to Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān (d.767) by Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328). Accordingly, he said that According to Ibn Taymīyyah, Muqātil stated that “only God knows the truth of his situation [*fa Allāh a‘lam bi haqīqati ḥālihī*].” (See Sirry 2012, p.79.) While the doxographies of al-Ash‘arī (d.936), Ibn Ḥazm (d.1064), and others depicted him as an “extreme anthropomorphist,” recent studies and his own extant *Tafsīr* have shown that Muqātil’s approach to anthropomorphic verses was in fact very close to that of the traditionist scholars of his time.

Yet the Ash'arite theologians, whom Ibn al-'Arabī knew in person, believed that God has essential attributes that are known to human beings.³⁸⁵ Repeating that the essential attributes of God, let alone his ipseity [*dhāt*], are necessarily unknowable [*majhūlah*], Ibn al-'Arabī wrote as follows against the Ash'arite theologians:

Whoever claims that he has knowledge of any positive attribute of God's ipseity, his claim is false. For, that would delimit Him; but His essence cannot be delimited.³⁸⁶

However, Sufis were not unequivocally defending the unknowability of the divine essence. Especially those Sufis who were also Mu'tazilites or Ash'arites, or had close connections with these schools, defended the position that God's essence can be known. 'Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d.1089) mentions such a disagreement.³⁸⁷ His disciple, the Sufi exegete Rashīd al-Dīn al-Maybudī (fl.1150) reports that the disagreement was between Shah al-Kirmānī (fl.I.9th CE) and the later generation's foremost Khurāsānīan master, Abū al-Qāsim al-Naṣrābādī (d.ca.977), who was fundamentally influenced by Ash'arite theologians like al-Isfarā'īnī (d.1027).³⁸⁸ Accordingly, the two Sufi masters, probably when both were in Nīsabūr, disagreed on whether God can be essentially recognized or not.³⁸⁹ While al-Maybudī's narrative is historically unlikely,³⁹⁰ it remains telling of the complex, equivocal positions that Sufis took, or at least discussed, on divine knowability.

Unlike the Mu'tazilites, the depictions of Ash'arites were not univocal on divine knowability. Dramatically, the Moroccan Sufi Aḥmad Zarrūq (d.1493) would later depict Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in the opposite, Ash'arite light. According to Zarrūq, al-Ghazālī claimed that "In His ipseity, God's existence is known to intellects [*wa annahu fī dhātihi ma'lūmu al-wujūd bi al-'uqūl*]."³⁹¹ Zarrūq is absolutely right: al-Ghazālī penned these exact words in the deeply Ash'arite creed he presented in

³⁸⁵ See Abrahamov 2014, p.63.

³⁸⁶ Ibn al-'Arabī in Elmore 1995, p.149; with my minor modification.

³⁸⁷ See 'Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī in Farhadi 1996, p.102.

³⁸⁸ See al-Qushayrī 1409/1989, p.33. For an English translation, see al-Qushayrī 2007, p.11.

³⁸⁹ al-Maybudī 2015, Q.17:53, p.377. Also cf. al-Qushayrī 2007, pp.87-88, 397.

³⁹⁰ Al-Qushayrī says that Shah al-Kirmānī died before 300 AH/912 CE. (al-Qushayrī 2007, p.52.) Yet in another occasion in his *Epistle*, we learn that Sahl al-Tustarī (d.896) was actually alive when Shah al-Kirmānī died. (al-Qushayrī 2007, p.246-247.)

³⁹¹ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in Karīmullah 2007, p.94.

his monumental *Revivification of the Religious Sciences* [*Ihyā' al-'Ulūm al-Dīn*].³⁹² To complicate the picture even more, Zarrūq challenged this knowability of the essence with reference to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who actually claimed that al-Ghazālī defends divine unknowability, while he himself suggested that God's essence is knowable! Zarrūq quotes al-Rāzī from the *Oriental Investigations* [*Mabāhith al-Mashrīqiyyah*] in which the latter forcefully declares that “perception of the reality of Necessary Being [*haqīqatu wājib al-wujūd*] and what He, of necessity, possesses of attributes of beauty and descriptions of perfection does not occur to our souls.”³⁹³ Hence the issue of knowing the divine ipseity was a more complicated issue on the later Ash'arite side than the clearer Mu'tazilite position. Still, well-known Ash'arite masters of the time supported divine accessibility via apodictic knowledge [*burhān*] attained either by reasoning or by the sacred texts [*naṣṣ*]. The Ash'arite Qāḍī al-Bayḍāwī (d.1286)'s *Rising Lights* [*Ṭawālī' al-Anwār*] supports the position of Ṭūsī, al-Qūnawī, and al-Rāzī; he defines the Philosophers as the champions of divine unknowability, and “theologians” as those who defend divine ipseity as indeed knowable [*ma'lūm*].³⁹⁴ Al-Bāqillānī (d.1013), “the greatest” of the Ash'arites according to Ibn Ḥazm, claims that God can actually be known, and perfectly apprehended [*idrāk*].³⁹⁵ Later, the Ash'arite theologian Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d.1085) cites his master [*al-ustādh al-imām*] al-Isfarā'īnī (d.1027) when he demonstrates that it is a logical necessity [*wājib*] for God to be essentially Self-Subsistent [*qā'im bi-dhātihī*].³⁹⁶ God's Self-Subsistence cannot be shared with human beings, but they can certainly and demonstrably know and also discursively prove that God is essentially Self-Subsistent. The Sufi Philosopher in the Ash'arite line, Quṭb al-Dīn al-Aharī (d.1260) follows the same notion.³⁹⁷ Scholars of an Ash'arite bent vocally defending the essential knowability of God had been present in al-Andalus from the late tenth century. Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Tūmart al-Andalusī

³⁹² Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 1957, Vol.1., p.89.

³⁹³ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in Karīmullah 2007, p.94; with my slight modification.

³⁹⁴ al-Bayḍāwī 2014, pp.168-169.

³⁹⁵ al-Bāqillānī 1987, pp.304-309.

³⁹⁶ Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī 1950, pp.33-34.

³⁹⁷ Interestingly, however, al-Aharī argues that “Self-Sufficiency” is applicable only to God, unknowable to human beings. Al-Aharī argues that God's essential Self-Sufficiency has two dimensions: one His being in need of nothing for existence, the other His being the source of the existence of everything else. In both meanings, argues al-Aharī, “Self-Sufficiency” is a name “peculiar to God, and nobody has entrance to it by no means, neither literally not metaphorically.” (al-Aharī 1358/1979, pp.123-124.)

(d.1001), a scientist about whose life we know little, made a distinction between divine attributes and the divine actions, and adopted a reading of divine self-sufficiency in line with his contemporary Ash‘arites.³⁹⁸ The Andalusian scholar argued that the ipseity of God was innately open to everybody, Muslim or not:

He is, of course, elevated [*munazzah*] from creation in His ipseity, attributes, and actions. Of course, He is not comparable to anything: He is the First without a beginning, the Last, without an ending; *He is a thing known in His very existence as He is.*³⁹⁹

Now it has become clear that the inaccessibility of the divine attribute of Self-Subsistence to human emulation did not mean that it is unknowable from al-Qabraqī’s Mu‘tazilite perspective. On the contrary, the divine essence, with its positive and negative attributes, was necessarily knowable and logically demonstrable for the later Mu‘tazilites. One should not forget that it was indeed the Mu‘tazilites who provided the first proofs of God’s existence.⁴⁰⁰ In the encounter of the two Sufis in Seville, it is not al-Qabraqī but Ibn al-‘Arabī, who would insist that God is unknowable, while his attributes are accessible. Ibn al-‘Arabī repeatedly negated the knowability of the divine essence. In his *Fabulous Gryphon* [*‘Anqā’ Mughrib*], just to give an example, he explains that the divine essence is utterly unknowable, and will remain so forever:

What! What do they want? And what are they seeking so far away? By God, surely no one can attain it! No soul can comprehend His gnosis, and no body can contain it. He is the Most-Precious, Who cannot be comprehended, and the Existent, Who takes possession but is not possessed. Hence, in learning of His attributes, intellects become perplexed and hearts confused—so how could they ever attain unto His Essence? ... As for the gnosis of the divine ipseity [*ma‘rifat al-dhāt*], it embraces the

³⁹⁸ Cf. al-Bayhaqī 1358/1939, pp.53-54; Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart 1993, p.11; Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Tūmart al-Andalusī 1999, p.29.

³⁹⁹ “*Huwa shay’ ma’lūm al-wujūd bi al-dhāt min ḥaythu huwa.*” (Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Tūmart al-Andalusī 1999, p.37.)

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The principle remained valid so long as the concept of God was strictly apophatic; if God is the Other par excellence, he is beyond our reason just as he is beyond our senses. The world can be analyzed through phenomena, but God is accessible only through revelation. That view is still expressed by Ḍirār, but no longer by Abū al-Hudhayl. (Van Ess 2006, pp.88-89.)

Abū al-Hudhayl employed atomism to prove God’s existence.

most-radiant light in a blindness, concealed by the veil of protecting-might, preserved in the divine attributes and names. ... The utmost of seekers is to remain behind that veil—here and in the Hereafter. ... But he who is among the people of insights and intuitions, disciplined in the requisite refinements [*ādāb*—if he arrives only at the veil which He (Praised be He!) never lifts from His face, he [nevertheless] shall be given to understand His essence, even though actual knowledge of the divine essence is impossible, for there is no way to raise that veil as such.⁴⁰¹

Here Ibn al-‘Arabī is making two significant moves. First, he is quite iconoclastic towards his stereotypical representations, insofar as he describes the ultimate knowledge and experience of the most advanced wayfarers as still limited and doomed to failure concerning the divine essence. Second, and unusual for his time, Ibn al-‘Arabī claims that God will remain veiled not only in *this world*, but also in the *next one*. While the theological discussions on the possibility of the vision of God [*rū’yah*] focused primarily on this world, the majority of Muslim scholars from diverse schools, orientations, and backgrounds affirmed that God would somehow unveil His reality at least in the afterlife. Ibn al-‘Arabī rather argues for the essential unknowability of God, and the presence of the veils of majesty even in the encounter, and reunion, after death. Simultaneously, he was also quite consistent in insisting on the accessibility of the divine attributes to human emulation. After introducing the negative, essential, and operational divine attributes in the same work, *the Fabulous Gryphon*, he boldly celebrates their accessibility: “praise be God! There is no attribute thereamong in which we do not participate and to which we do not have a direct path!”⁴⁰²

D. Summary: No “Negative Theology” Anymore

*A person who does not answer a question is not blamed if it is evident that the questioner has to refine the question. The refinement of the question is the path forward, and the fountainhead of, a refined answer.*⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī in Elmore 1995, pp.131-135.

⁴⁰² Ibn al-‘Arabī in Elmore 1995, p.156.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s commentator ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Maqābirī (d.954/1547) rightly interprets the sentence as relating to our emulation [*takhallūq*] of the divine attributes.

⁴⁰³ Aristotle in Ibn Fātik 2013, pp.390-391; Aristotle in Kaya and Ibn Fātik 1987, #160, p.285.

It was not the Mu'tazilite Sufi of Cabrafigo, but the Zāhirī, "literalist" Ibn al-'Arabī who made all divine attributes accessible to human emulation, but kept God's essence unknowable, utterly transcendent, and inaccessible to discourse or vision. It can be argued that the Mu'tazilites adopted a negative theological approach to the nature of *divine attributes*; but most of them were far from being negative theologians on the question of the knowability of the *divine essence*. These two questions were held by Muslim theologians to be closely related, yet distinct and different.⁴⁰⁴

Many scholars, failing to recognize the distinction that was made in medieval intellectual landscapes, confuse different positions on the divine attributes and divine essence as in the case of al-Qabrafīqī and Ibn al-'Arabī. The widespread contemporary appeal to the designation "negative theologian," or "apophatic thinker," in addressing Ibn al-'Arabī, Mu'tazilites, Maimonides etc. hides more than it reveals. First, negating all attributes from God, as the Mu'tazilites did, does not support the over-hasty leap to an unknowable, ineffable divine essence. Also, an emphasis on an apophatic divine essence, as Ibn al-'Arabī pursued, does not automatically mean that all attributes are to be negated from God. The generic term "negative theology" ignores the fundamental distinction between diverse theological questions, such as the divine attributes and the divine essence.

Secondly, in a broader sense, "negative theology" inevitably assumes that one is adopting a negativist position in the entire field of theology. Yet it fails to define what a negativist position is in terms of a broad variety of questions that are widely considered "theological"—issues no less than religious leadership, anthropomorphism, predestination and free will, theodicy, eschatology, the status of prophecy, the nature of the Qur'ān, and divine love. "Negative theology" not only fails to identify the specific question and its terms, but it also reduces the rich field of theology down to a single issue, i.e., God's nature—into *theomania*, and its negation. What would a negative theology of theodicy, or of religious leadership look like? We do not know yet, exactly because the blanket term "negative theology" monopolizes the broad field of theology with its theomaniac emphasis on the divine essence, and inhibits the analysis of other theological questions. The very fact that the pre-modern Muslim scholars applied the terms for negation to diverse theological questions indicates that

⁴⁰⁴ See Abrahamov 1995.

their conception of theological negativity was much broader, and definitely less theomaniac than ours.

The encounter of two Sufis, the “literalist” Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Mu‘tazilite al-Qabraqī, shows that “negative theology,” when the specific theological problem is not defined, is a generic concept with limited, if any, explanatory power. Do we mean a negative theology of the divine essence, divine attributes, theodicy, divine will, religious leadership, free-will, or divine love? One can adopt a negative theology on one of these questions, but this does not make one a negative theologian in all these other fields of theology. The Mu‘tazilites had a *negative theology of divine attributes*, but the majority of them were far from adopting a *negative theology of divine essence*. Sufis in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s line largely followed a negative theology of divine essence, yet their approach to the divine attributes was far from, and even critical of, being purely negativist. “Negative theology” is contextual, at least in the sense that an apophatic approach to a specific theological question does not automatically entail apophaticism on another theological question even if they are closely related. In other words, the unqualified employment of the term “negative theology” in the study of religion indicates that its content is already presumed, generally an extension of our contemporary interests, at the expense of a better understanding of what is really negative or positive in different theological positions in context.

**PART 3. NEGATIVE THEOLOGIES OF THE DIVINE ESSENCE IN THIRTEENTH
CENTURY SUFISM**

CHAPTER 4. DOUBLE NEGATION: ISMĀ'ĪLĪ APOPHATICISM IN SUFISM

A. The Ismā'īlī Background

Mu'tazilites were depicted as the foremost champions of an extreme negative theology by the later tradition and by their adversaries. This depiction, however, needs to be qualified: it could be appropriate to call the Mu'tazilites "negative theologians" only in terms of the nature of the divine attributes, not that of God's essence. In the accounts of doxographers, the names of Mu'tazilites were generally accompanied by another group of "negators," "the Esoterics" [*al-Bāṭiniyyah*]. When introducing the Esoterics, Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d.1085) employed a term which is the most literal Arabic counterpart of the Latin *via negativa*—"the path of negation:"

Some sects of Esoterics say: "Nothing can be attributed to God."

... They believed that if one describes Beginningless as the "Necessarily Existent," this will entail likening Him to creation, as they are existent [too]. Hence their path is *via negativa* [*sulūkihim maslak al-nafy*] when asked to affirm the attributes. If they are asked whether the Creator exists, they negate it, and say: "He is not not-existent."⁴⁰⁵

Juwaynī's plural term "some sects of Esoterics" [*ṭawā'if min al-Bāṭiniyyah*] describes a diverse group of theological currents that were associated with the official sect of the Fāṭimids, Ismā'īlism. "Bāṭiniyyah" does not appear in al-Ash'arī's earlier doxography, and the group "Ismā'īlīs" briefly appears as an insignificant Shī'ite sect among many others. However, in less than a century thanks to the rise of the Fāṭimids in Egypt, the expansion of Būyids from Northern Iran to 'Iraq, and the intensified, organized proselytization of Ismā'īlism, "Bāṭiniyyah" becomes a major theme of the Sunnī doxographers with increasing intolerance towards what they perceive as their foremost religious and political threat. More harshly than al-Ash'arī, al-Isfarā'īnī (d.1016) removes Ismā'īlism, now called the "Bāṭiniyyah," from the category of "Shī'ites," and puts it under "the Resemblers" [*al-Mushabbihah*], who claim to be Muslims, but do not constitute one of the seventy Muslim sects.⁴⁰⁶ Al-Baghdādī follows the categorization of his master al-Isfarā'īnī, with an even more harshness.⁴⁰⁷ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's doxography the *Beliefs of Sects* [*I'tiqād al-Firaq*] has very

⁴⁰⁵ Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī 1950, p.37; emphasis mine.

⁴⁰⁶ al-Isfarā'īnī 1983, pp.140-142.

⁴⁰⁷ 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī [undated], pp.247-255.

innovative dimensions, yet it does not deviate from their categorization.⁴⁰⁸ In 1257, when the Īlkhānid pagan warlord Hūlāgū destroyed the Ismāʿīlī stronghold in Iran, his official court historian ‘Aṭā’ Malik al-Juvaynī (d.1285) would compare the conquest dramatically to that of Khaybar,⁴⁰⁹ and to the struggle of the Prophet with the disbelievers.⁴¹⁰ By the time of the Imām al-Ḥaramayn’s student Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, “Bāṭiniyyah” already meant Ismāʿīlism first and foremost, but it could be employed to accuse anybody of diversion from their own standards of normative Islam. For example, Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328), whose attacks had a wider scope than most, applied the term “Bāṭiniyyah” not only to Shīʿites in general, but also to specific Sufi groups and to elitist Philosophers such as the famous Ibn Rushd (d.1198).⁴¹¹

Medieval Ismāʿīlīs are well-known for a peculiar appropriation of Neoplatonism into their theological system. For early Ismāʿīlīs, in line with Plotinus (d.270), God was the unknowable absolute One who can neither be comprehended by reason nor accurately described. Their doctrine removed all the attributes, including “Being,” from God, and unlike the majority of the Muʿtazilites, they kept God’s essence utterly unknowable and ineffable. As early as the early tenth century, they developed a radically apophatic theology via a method of “two negations” [*salibatān*], which employed a theological “discourse” that removed God from the very realm of discursivity. The “description” of divine nature in Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī (d.972)’s *Wellsprings* is extremely difficult to translate due to the originality of its language:

The pure He-ness [*al-huwiyyah al-maḥḍīyyah*] associated with the glorified Originator [*al-Mubdiʿ*] transcends “He” and “not-He.” It is not that He-ness is existent and not-He-ness is not-existent. ... The originator is not “He” unlike the He-ness of the existents, and not “not-He” unlike the not-He-ness [*lā-huwiyyah*] of the non-existents. His He-ness is the manifestation of the negation of the He-nesses and not-He-nesses from the transcendent Originator.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁸ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī 2009, p.263-264.

⁴⁰⁹ ‘Aṭā’ Malik al-Juvaynī 1958, p.618.

⁴¹⁰ “Copy of the *fathnāmā* of Alamūt: ‘Praise be to God, Who keepeth His promise, and aideth His servant and strengtheneth His host, and routeth the sects, He alone!’.” (‘Aṭā’ Malik al-Juvaynī 1958, p.622.)

⁴¹¹ See Hodgson 2012.

⁴¹² Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī 1965, p.71. For Walker’s English translation, see Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī 1994, pp.49-50. Also see Alibhai 1983, pp.44-47.

Here al-Sijistānī is negating all possible descriptions of God, and all discursive identities attributable to the “Originator” — a directional, vague designation⁴¹³ they preferred instead of “God” — as noted by non-Ismāʿīlī scholars like Abū Maṣūʿ al-Māturīdī (d.944) as distant as in Samarqand.⁴¹⁴ *God’s identity is a negation of all discursive possibilities, including this very negation itself.* Hence the negativity in this line was very different from the Muʿtazilite negation of the divine attributes, which kept the divine essence knowable. Most evidently, Ismāʿīlī scholars not only negated attributes, but also their negations.

Al-Sijistānī refuses to apply not only “he-ness,” or “identity,” but also their negations, even if one supplies these attributes with an emphasis on divine incomparability. This was a radical critique of widespread theological approaches to the divine transcendence circulating among different schools. The Zaydīte and Muʿtazilite polymath, Nashwān al-Ḥimyarī (d.ca.1194) of Yemen illuminates this major point of divergence, focusing on the applicability of *thingness*:

The Ismāʿīlīs among the Jaʿfarīs say: “God is not a thing [*lā shayʿ*], and not no-thing [*lā lā shayʿ*]. For, if one says ‘He is a thing,’ they will compare Him; and if one says ‘He is not a thing,’ they will deny Him.” So they say this both in terms of negation and affirmation altogether [*fa-qālu fihi bi al-nafy wa-l-ithbāt jamīʿan*].”⁴¹⁵

The term “*shayʿ*” that the Ismāʿīlīs negated was grammatically much more than what “thing” signifies in modern English. The term indicated the entire field of *logos* in its widest sense possible. The influential Baṣran grammarian Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Mubarrad (d.898), for example, declared that *shayʿ* was the most universal noun. The doyen of Arabic grammar, Sībawayh (d.796) is reported to have said that it is “the most universal of universals” [*aʿamm al-ʿamm*].⁴¹⁶ The negation of thingness, from a grammatical perspective, was radical enough to cancel *any* linguistic possibility.⁴¹⁷ As al-Māturīdī (d.944), very much like al-

⁴¹³ Walker 1999, p.87.

⁴¹⁴ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.162. As an early critical and perceptive reader of Ismāʿīlism, he also challenges the Ismāʿīlī negation of naming, arguing that naming does not cause any similarity or comparability [*tashbīh*] among the named. (See al-Māturīdī 2003, pp.162-163.)

⁴¹⁵ al-Ḥimyarī in H. Anṣārī [undated], p.119.

⁴¹⁶ See Frank 2005, p.268, fn.44. Cf. al-Bāqillānī 1987, pp.265-266.

⁴¹⁷ From an alternative grammatical perspective, we can see the negation of thingness as an even more direct gesture towards divine unknowability. The grammarian al-Zajjāj (d.923) describes *shayʿ* as anything that is knowable [*kulli maʿlūmun huwa shayʿ*] (See Frank 2005, p.257). The

Bāqillānī (d.1013),⁴¹⁸ explains it, *shay'* is only “a name of confirmation and a negation of ineffectuality [*ism al-ithbāt wa nafy al-ta'īl*].” Its negation [*lā-shay'*] meant either the negation of the reality of that thing, or diminution of something established [*nafy al-haqīqah aw taṣghīr al-thābit*].⁴¹⁹

Hence *shay'* was a term that based the very discourses on divine incomparability. Prominent Sunnī as well as Shī'ī scholars at least from eighth century onwards such as Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (d.806), al-Māturīdī (d.944), and Ibn Bābawayh (d.991)⁴²⁰ developed popular discourses of transcendence for God, often employing phrases such as “God is a thing not like anything [*Allāhu shay'un lā ka'l-ashyā'*].”⁴²¹ The Ismā'īlī doxographer Abū Tammām attributes the phrase to “the Weeds” [*nābitah*]⁴²²—a derogatory term for anti-intellectual traditionism—but it was much more common. Al-Ash'arī (d.936) approvingly reports that the vast majority of Muslims [*ahl al-ṣalāt*] attribute “thingness” to God, while it was only Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d.745),⁴²³ and a group among the Zaydīs⁴²⁴ who avoided employing the name.⁴²⁵ Ibn Ḥanbal (d.855), who wrote a refutation to Jahm, also found the phrase self-contradictory. Yet, some Jahmites and the followers of Ibn Ḥanbal, like Abū Muḥammad al-Tamīmī (d.1095) used the phrase.⁴²⁶ Works

claim that God is knowable [*ma'lūm*] was popular among the Mu'tazilites, and the refutation of divine knowability could have led the Ismā'īlīs to the more radical negation of *shay'*.

⁴¹⁸ al-Bāqillānī 1987, pp.34-35

⁴¹⁹ al-Māturīdī 2003, pp.105-106.

⁴²⁰ Ibn Bābawayh 1993, p.22

⁴²¹ al-Māturīdī 2003, pp.104-107. Also see Cerić 1995, pp.150-151. For the *Fiqh al-Akbar II*, which was attributed to Abū Ḥanīfah, but was written much later, see Abū Ḥanīfah in Wensinck 2008, p.190.

⁴²² W. Williams 2009, p.35.

⁴²³ al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.2, p.180, #241; al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1996 pp.73-84.

For other sources on the Jahmite negation of thingness, see Abrahamov in al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1996, p.12.

⁴²⁴ al-Ash'arī 1950, p.238.

One wonders whether this Zaydī branch is the Khalafiyyah in Yemen that the Ismā'īlī doxographer Abū Tammām (fl.late 10th CE) introduced. (See Abū Tammām in Madelung and Walker 1998, p.92.)

⁴²⁵ One of the forerunners of al-Ash'arī, 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Makkī (d.854) appealed to *shay'* in describing God. (Abrahamov in al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1996, p.12.)

⁴²⁶ See Frank 2005, p.268, fn.44.

attributed to Abū Ḥanīfah including the *Fiqh al-Akbar*,⁴²⁷ Abū Muṭī' Makḥūl al-Nasafī (d.930)'s refutation to Jahm,⁴²⁸ and later Ḥanafī creeds such as Maymūn ibn Muḥammad al-Nasafī (d.1114)'s *Ocean of Discourse* [*Bahr al-Kalām*] or the famous *Fiqh al-Akbar II*⁴²⁹ employ "thing" for God as well.⁴³⁰ Most of the Zaydites, the Ash'arites and Māturīdites as well as Mu'tazilites like al-Ṣāliḥī⁴³¹ (fl.ca.913) and al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm⁴³² hold this view. The prominent Ibādī theologian al-Fazārī (8th CE) also applied the attribute "thing" to God, even though its meaning is a negation, i.e., God's being not non-existent [*laysa bi-ma'dūm*].⁴³³ Philosophers also did not hesitate to call God "thing" in order to enable speech about Him, even if it is employed metaphorically in order to preserve His transcendence. Al-Fārābī for example argues that God cannot be called "existent" [*mawjūd*], but He can be called "thing."⁴³⁴ Ibn Miskawayh (d.1030)⁴³⁵ follows al-Fārābī, and the philosopher Sufi Ibn Sab'īn (d.1269) argues that God is *the Real Thing*, i.e., the term applies to Him *via eminentiae*.⁴³⁶ The application of *shay'* to God makes the very discussion of the beatific vision in the Afterlife possible, as the *Discourses* of the Sufi master 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d.1166) indicate.⁴³⁷ Other Sufis like Ibn Khafīf (d.982), in the line of al-Ash'arī, would claim that God is a thing unlike things.⁴³⁸ In al-Andalus, a scientist named Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Tūmart (d.1001) employed the phrase "*shay'*" in an emphasis on divine otherness with a set of negations.⁴³⁹ The discourses of divine

⁴²⁷ "Allāh is thing, not as other things." (Abū Ḥanīfah in Wensinck 2008, p.190; also Abū Ḥanīfah in Watt 1994, p.63.)

⁴²⁸ God is a thing not like anything, because he is the creator of all things. Cf.Q:67:3; also see Rudolph 2015, p.90.

⁴²⁹ "God is a thing, unlike things. The meaning of 'thing' is 'what is established' [*al-thābit*]." (Abū Ḥanīfah in Wensinck 2008, p.190; Abū Ḥanīfah in Watt 1994, p.63.)

⁴³⁰ Maymūn ibn Muḥammad al-Nasafī 2000, p.99.

⁴³¹ See Frank 2005, p.268, fn.44.

⁴³² Abrahamov in al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1990, pp.31-33; al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1996, pp.12-13, 73-84.

⁴³³ al-Fazārī 2014, p.176.

⁴³⁴ Cf. al-Fārābī 1998, Ch.1-2.

⁴³⁵ Ibn Miskawayh 1993, p.141.

⁴³⁶ Ibn Sab'īn 1941, p.40.

⁴³⁷ al-Jīlānī 1427/2006, Ch.33, p.134. For an English translation, see al-Jīlānī 1992, Ch.33, p.209.

⁴³⁸ Bell and Al Shafie in al-Daylamī 2005, p.xxxiii.

⁴³⁹ Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Tūmart al-Andalusī 1993, p.37.

transcendence based on God's dissimilarity to other "things" were so popular that it was seen problematic enough to cause heated debates among Philosophers when Abū Zakariyyā al-Ṣaymarī (fl.11th CE) in Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d.1023)'s circle refused to call God "thing."⁴⁴⁰

Early Ismā'īlīs negated *shay'* in this grammatical and theological context.⁴⁴¹ The Yemenī scholar Nashwān al-Ḥimyarī's report is corroborated by his contemporary Ismā'īlī fellow countryman al-Ḥāmidī's *Treasure of the Disciple* [*Kitāb Kanz al-Walad*], which criticizes all of those who claim that "God is a thing unlike anything."⁴⁴² Al-Sijistānī had already seen in these supposedly negative statements blatant anthropomorphism [*tashbīh*], as they still indicate a shared basis, in this case thingness, for comparability.⁴⁴³ What can only be said of God is His abstraction as a negation from creation and all discursive spaces. "If the Originator, Transcendent He is, had a comparable He-ness within creation other than negating He-nesses and Not-He-nesses, then with what would creation compare Him?"⁴⁴⁴ Any discourse that claims to address God's absent ipseity should be negated, and then re-negated in order to indicate the limits of all discursivity. Al-Sijistānī calls for an unprecedented form of double negation:

There does not exist a glorification [*tanzīh*] more brilliant and more splendid than that by which we establish the absolute transcendence of our Originator through the use of these phrases

Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyawsī (d.1127) displays that not all Philosophers in Andalusia agreed with this popular position. See al-Baṭalyawsī 1408/1988, p.95.

⁴⁴⁰ al-Tawḥīdī 1992, #30, pp.186-188.

On al-Ṣaymarī, see Griffel and Hachmeier 2010-2011, p.251, fn.73.

⁴⁴¹ Al-Māturīdī was familiar with the Ismā'īlī negation of *shay'* from the divine. See al-Māturīdī 2003, p.163.

⁴⁴² Ibrāhīm ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī 1971, pp.14-15.

Before al-Ḥāmidī, the *Treasures of Proof*, composed during the reign of al-Ḥakīm (r.996-1021) probably by a disciple of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, devoted a chapter explaining that God is not a "thing." (See Ivanow 1936, pp.10-11.)

⁴⁴³ Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī 2011, Ch.11; Walker 1993, p.77.

A similar critique comes from the grammarian and philosopher al-Baṭalyawsī (d.1127), as discussed below. The parallels between al-Sijistānī and al-Baṭalyawsī are eye-catching. See al-Baṭalyawsī 1408/1988, Section 3.2.2.1.

⁴⁴⁴ Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī 1965, p.71; Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī 1994, p.50.

in which a *negative*, and a *negative of a negative* apply to the thing denied.⁴⁴⁵

Al-Sijistānī's first negation cancels any positive discourse on God by removing all attributes. The second negation cancels the negative discourse of the first step itself, by canceling all, including negative, discursive possibilities. Al-Sijistānī carefully underlines that the second move is directed towards the entire act of the discursive negation in the first step, not just towards its content.⁴⁴⁶ The difference is enormous, because the form of negative theology that focuses on removing attributes from God falls into anthropomorphism by tacitly affirming the objecthood itself. Of the first directly targeted group in his *Keys*, al-Sijistānī claims that "those who worship God by denying his attributes and limitations do not worship Him in a beneficial manner since such is applied to some created beings."⁴⁴⁷ Thus the *via negativa* of the Mu'tazilites and the Philosophers is compared to anthropomorphism, and in the *Keys* is listed under the heading, "hidden anthropomorphism" [*tashbīh khafīyy*]⁴⁴⁸ "Whoever worships God by denying the attributes falls into a *hidden anthropomorphism*, just as someone who worships Him by affirming them falls into *obvious anthropomorphism*."⁴⁴⁹ These groups, argues al-Sijistānī, "*maintain that God is indescribable, indefinable,*

⁴⁴⁵ Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī in Madelung 1988, p.78; my emphasis. Also see Walker 1974, p.18; Walker 2013, p.195.

⁴⁴⁶ Morrow has a clear misreading. He assumes that the first step negates a positive statement (such as "God is Merciful"), and the second negates this affirmation (such as "God is not Merciful"). (Morrow 2013, p.13.) This is evidently different from what is happening in al-Sijistānī's and al-Kirmānī's works.

Alibhai's dissertation describes al-Sijistānī's moves as "two negations" instead of "double negation" to make this difference clearer.

The term *salibatān* is properly rendered as "two negations" instead of "double negation." The latter is likely to suggest "negation of the (first) negation," which is not what al-Sijistānī is arguing for. "Two negations" also has the advantage of referring to two negations of different domains. (Alibhai 1983, p.52.)

Alibhai is right to point out that the two negations refer to two different domains, but these domains are for him merely the bodily [*jismānī*] and spiritual [*rūḥānī*] domains. Sijistānī's apophaticism goes beyond that. (Walker 1993, p.78.)

For other summaries of the double negation, see Walker 1974; Walker 2013; Daftary 2013; Poonawala 2013, pp.173-183.

⁴⁴⁷ Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī 2011, p.61; pp.77-82.

⁴⁴⁸ Walker 1996, pp.88-92. For al-Māturīdī's parallel critique of the Mu'tazilite master al-Ka'bī (d.931), see Rudolph 2015, p.293.

⁴⁴⁹ Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī in Walker 1993, p.75; my emphasis.

uncharacterizable, unseeable, and not in a place."⁴⁵⁰ This method of constant negation of attributes, on the other hand, indirectly affirms the presence, thingness, or existence of an object. The statements "G is not X," "G is not Y," or "G is not Z" all assume discursive access to G. If the double negations were in the form of "G is not not X," "G is not not Y," "G is not not Z," then they would be still operating on the same discursive ground, and they would still assume the comparability between G and the attributes X, Y, Z that are negated. Instead, the second step of the double negation should negate the entire negative discourse, such as "not (G is not X)," "not (G is not Y)," or "not (G is not Z)." Only in this way God will be removed from the space of both positive and negative discourse. Al-Sijistānī's fellow Ismā'īlī intellectual Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d.1021) aims to clarify this process, by giving propositional examples to his reader indicating the subtle difference from the Mu'tazilite path. "God cannot be named" is the first step and "not 'God cannot be named'" is the second step that removes God—*not (not Transcendent He is)*—beyond the discursive field.⁴⁵¹

The double negation of al-Sijistānī and al-Kirmānī presents a radical, and as far I know, a unique form of apophatic theology that is even more radical than it appears when we put it in context.⁴⁵² Earlier representatives of negative theology such as Proclus (d.485) and Plotinus put the ineffable One beyond the first emanation, the Universal Intellect.⁴⁵³ Ismā'īlīs go even beyond this classical

⁴⁵⁰ Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī in Walker 1993, p.75; my emphasis.

Not only the philosophers and the Mu'tazilites, but also the Imāmī theologians of al-Sijistānī's time followed a negative theology of the divine attributes. Ibn Bābawayh (d.991)'s influential creed, for example, argues as follows: "The Shaykh Ja'far [al-Ṣādiq] ... said: when we describe God (Exalted is He) via essential attributes, by all of them we mean the negations [*nafy*] of their opposites from the Exalted." (Ibn Bābawayh 1993, p.27.) Hence the Ismā'īlī critique also applies to Ibn Bābawayh's theological position, which was not followed by his student Shaykh al-Mufīd (d.1022). (See Shaykh al-Mufīd 1371/1951, pp.40-41.)

Similarly, the critique of the negative reading of the divine attributes can be easily extended to the Ibādī theologian al-Fazārī (8th CE), who also read the essential divine attributes as negations. See al-Fazārī 2014, pp.172-176.

⁴⁵¹ Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī 1983, pp.148-149. For an interesting comparison of the Ismā'īlī double negation with that of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and T. Adorno, see Finlayson 2012, pp.17-19.

⁴⁵² Cf. Walker 1974, pp.20-21; Walker 2013, p.197.

⁴⁵³ The One is beyond the need for thinking (see Plotinus 2014, Vol.7.6.6, pp.322-327.)

The distinction between absolute and relative oneness also goes back to Plotinus, but is found in even more detail with Proclus. Proclus opens his compendium of Neoplatonic metaphysics, the *Institutio theologica*, with it. And

Neoplatonic schema, which was accepted by the Philosophers. In their cosmology Ismāʿīlī thinkers creatively put the Divine Word [*kalimah*], or the Divine Command [*Amr*], above the Universal Intellect, which is itself unknowable in its oneness.⁴⁵⁴ Hence the Ismāʿīlī cosmology deepens the divine transcendence. As the Brethren of Purity [*Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*] (fl.10th CE) put it succinctly, “the realm of intellects is devised by the Divine Word, which cannot be comprehended by human thought.”⁴⁵⁵ Al-Sijistānī also depicts the Divine Command, not God, as the “cause” of the celestial intellects:

We negate all He-nesses from the Real Originator because every He-ness requires a cause. We found that the most noble of those things possessing a He-ness is the Intellect, and the He-ness of the Intellect necessitates a cause, which is the Divine Command, may His glory be exalted. It is thus “He” who is the true Originator without a cause –exalted is “He” above that— and accordingly “He” does not require a He-ness. “He” does not require a He-ness, nor the negation of it—“He” is not the negation of He-ness either. Thus, beyond the non-He-nesses there is no affirmation of a thing that is “He.”⁴⁵⁶

The apophatic cause of the first creation is not God, but His command, which doubles the divine transcendence. The conjoining of the Divine Word as the one-many with the Universal Intellect marks the emergence of plurality, coloring, and creation.⁴⁵⁷ Let alone the absolute One (God), even the numerical one, or the one-many below it (i.e., the Divine Word) cannot be known in its self-contained

this text was also accessible in the Islamic world, where it was circulated starting from the third/ninth century in two paraphrased Arabic summaries. (Rudolph 2015, pp.276-277.)

⁴⁵⁴ Landolt 2013, pp.365-374; Daftary 2013, p.18; Ebstein 2014.

⁴⁵⁵ Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ 1983, Vol.4, p.199. Also see Baffioni 2013, p.69.

⁴⁵⁶ Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī 1965, pp.72; Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī 1994, pp.50.

For the explanation of the role of the Divine Command, see Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī 1965, p.73-75; Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī 1994, pp.51-52.

⁴⁵⁷ Here lies the Ismāʿīlī cosmological difference from that of the Philosophers. In al-Kindī’s *On First Philosophy*, “one” is, similarly, not a number, but the principle of oneness and pluralism in creation. (Ivry in al-Kindī 1974, pp.20-21.) However, in al-Kindī’s system the Divine Word does not play the function that it plays in the Ismāʿīlī cosmology. Instead, al-Kindī puts divine ipseity [*huwiyyah*] between the One and the universal intellect. (al-Kindī 1974, p.98; al-Kindī 1978, p.87-88).

oneness.⁴⁵⁸ This Ismāʿīlī deepening of negativity through cosmology is overlooked if it is reduced to a decontextualized, generic “Neoplatonic apophaticism.”

The trans-transcendence of the unknowable God beyond the Divine Word, which is beyond the Universal Intellect, is a general Ismāʿīlī theme, which was employed not only by Ismāʿīlī thinkers, but also adopted by diverse schools of thought.⁴⁵⁹ With its apophatic cosmology, the Ismāʿīlī approach to the divine essence was philosophical and refined. It differentiated God as the apophatic one from the Divine Word, or the Universal Intellect, which was “one” in terms of its negative relation with God, but “many” as the source of creation. Jaʿfar ibn Maṣūʾir al-Yaman (d.957)’s *Secrets of the Logoi* [*Sarāʿir al-Nuṭṭaqāʾ*], in a philosophically dense language, explains the apophatic origination of the one-many, the First Intellect, and then, the latter’s creation of the universe:

He forged a continuous link [*sabab*] between Himself and His creation, and prevented them [His creation] from knowledge of Him except through His link. He veiled Himself from His creation with the veil of His eminence. He signified Himself with Himself. The eminence of His Lordship was so concentrated that it could not be realized by sense or known by touch, and His essence could not be known by *jinn* or human. In His kingship, He partners with no one.

Origination [*ibdāʾ*] preceded creation [*khalq*], so He transcends comparability [*tashbīh*] with what He originated. Rather He made His strength and majesty, the brilliance of His light and the splendor of His power emanate upon His origination [*ibdāʾ*], which negated divinity from his he-ness [*nafy ʿan huwiyyatihi al-ulūhiyyah*], and confessed the unicity [*waḥdāniyyah*] of his Originator. If he had not applied the negation to himself from the beginning [*ibtidāʾ*] of his *logos* [*nuṭṭiqihī*], then none would have a path to the knowledge of their Object of Worship [*maʿbūd*]. Yet,

⁴⁵⁸ For the non-numeric oneness of the designation “*al-wāḥid*,” see Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī 2008, pp.509-510.

Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d.934) differentiates “uniqueness” [*al-aḥad*] and “oneness” [*al-wāḥid*], the former of which goes further beyond non-numerical oneness and fits better to designate the apophatic essence for al-Rāzī. (See Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī 2008, pp.510-511).

⁴⁵⁹ For Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, see Ali 2008, pp.154-155. For Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Nasafī (d.943), see Leaman and Rizvi 2008, p.78-79. For later Muslim and Jewish thought, see Ebstein 2014, pp.33-72.

no confession was affirmed: *the negation was affirmative* [fa-kāna al-nafy tathbītan] as his saying “*but God*”—this indicated the Originator Divinity to the origination. Hence *the origination’s negation of divinity from his ipseity was an affirmation of his Originator*. And this affirmation of divinity after the negation was a link [sabab] for the appearance of creation. So the originated one was the creator [khāliq], elevating [tanzīhan] the Originator and exalting [ta’zīman] His power. Thus, origination was from “*not*” [lays], and creation was from “*not/all*” [ays].⁴⁶⁰

Ja’far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, like other Ismā’īlī scholars, named the first origination, that is, the First (or Universal) Intellect “the creator” [khāliq], which was otherwise an inalienable name of God for other Muslim schools of thought. The First Intellect, as it relates to God, was but pure negation: it affirmed nothing but the negation of his own godhead. Hence, from the perspective of the lower intellects, the excess of negativity in the gift of the First Intellect serves as the affirmation of its apophatic beyond. The “link” with beyond intellect is, thus, a joint affirmation and negation, which is geared to an excess of negation. Accordingly, the declaration of faith [takhliīl] “there is no god but God” summarizes this apophatic position: an excessive, impenetratable negation, and an affirmation which is actually based on negation, are united. As explanation, the Egyptian *dā’ī* Abū ‘Īsā al-Murshid (d.ca.980) speaks on behalf of the First Intellect. When realizing how it is negatively connected to the Originator, which it cannot know, the First Intellect can only declare “there is no god but God, *that is, ‘I am not god’*.”⁴⁶¹

Ismā’īlī thinkers like Ja’far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman and Abū ‘Īsā al-Murshid preserved the double transcendence of God beyond the beyond-intellect, but they did not employ the “*not not*” of al-Sijistānī and al-Kirmānī. Instead, they indicated this beyond discursivity by the more straightforward way of negating all binary attributes through radicalizing the negation in favor of God’s transcendence, associating it with the declaration of faith “there is no god but God.”⁴⁶² In other words, the two steps remained the same, while it was the expression of the second step that was now simpler. The first step, “G is not X,”

⁴⁶⁰ Ja’far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman in Hollenberg 2006, p.246 (Arabic text). For Hollenberg’s own English translation, see *ibid.* pp.221-222.

⁴⁶¹ Abū ‘Īsā al-Murshid in Hollenberg 2006, p.244; my emphasis.

⁴⁶² For the Egyptian *dā’ī* Abū ‘Īsā al-Murshid (d.ca.980) on the *takhliīl*, see Hollenberg 2006, pp.243-244.

negated the kataphatic discourse on divine essence. The second step kept indicating the inapplicability of both positive and negative discourses. It was expressed in the form “neither (G is X), nor (G is not X),” which is actually the logical equivalent of al-Sijistānī’s double negation, “G is not X” and “not (G is not X).” The former structure was already prominently applied by many Ismā’īlī scholars, including al-Sijistānī and al-Kirmānī themselves. Indeed, one of the earliest Ismā’īlī scholars whose writings survive, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d.934) rather preferred this format. He already claimed that all positive and negative attributes had to be constantly negated if one wanted to address God:

No attribute can ever belong to the Originator [*al-Mubdi*], Glorious and Exalted. And we do not describe Him [even] as the “perfectness” or the “perfect” One. ... We do not say either that He (i.e., God) is perfect, that He is perfectness [itself], that He is not perfectness [itself], nor that He is not perfect.⁴⁶³

Such a method of perpetual double negation of all binaries removed not only all relationality and discursivity, thus the ground for anthropomorphism, but at the same time the misplaced negation associated with the Mu’tazilites. Arguably Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī’s “neither-nor” form was pedagogically, rhetorically and liturgically a more viable option than its equivalent “not not,” which appeared in the works written for advanced Ismā’īlī scholars. Al-Sijistānī and Kirmānī themselves had employed al-Rāzī’s strategy in their writings even more intensively than the explicit double negation as it was extensively shared with other Ismā’īlī thinkers. In the same vein, Muḥammad al-Nasafī (d.943), the politically controversial *dā’ī* active in Transoxania, negated all possible ascriptions to the apophatic God, including Being. “Non-Being and nothingness, like Being, follow Being; they are negations of an existent.”⁴⁶⁴ Compared to the “not not” strategy, perpetual double negation of binaries could be employed more widely, in the texts addressing the novice. It was suitable even for the public sermons of the Ismā’īlī imāms! At the Major Festival during the siege of Abū Yazīd at Kiyāna in 947, the Fāṭimid Caliph al-Manṣūr opened his oration [*khutbah*] as follows:

Praise be to God, unified through His lordship, solitary in His oneness, praised with power and permanence, glorified by majesty and grandeur, the first without limit, the last without end,

⁴⁶³ Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī in Nomoto 1999, p.176.

For the divine unknowability and human incapacity, see Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī 2011, pp.29-30.

⁴⁶⁴ Walker 2005, p.79.

*exalted from the anthropomorphism of the ignorant, definitions of the describers, the conditions of the attributers, and the comprehension in visions of those who speculate.*⁴⁶⁵

The caliph's public performance of this apophatic theology was symptomatic of its larger proliferation and influence. The most celebrated Fāṭimid theologian of his time, al-Mu'ayyad fī al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d.1078) followed the Caliph al-Manṣūr in preaching apophatically. Having attained the highest ranks of "the Gate of Gates" [*Bāb al-Abwāb*] and "Chief Missionary" [*dā'ī al-du'āt*], al-Mu'ayyad fī al-Dīn was probably the most influential and popular preacher of the time. According to the Yemenī Ismā'īlī theologian al-Ḥāmidī (d.1162), he strongly negated all attributes, names, and discourses on God in his public orations. In one of these sermons probably to a wide audience, al-Mu'ayyad fī al-Dīn preached as follows:

One cannot speak of the Unseen, transcendent and glorified is His majesty, with a name among names; He cannot be described with what His creation is associated; but there is no way around appealing the beautiful names as metaphors [*isti'ārah*]. ... So unifying [*tawḥīd*] Him is coming to know one's limits; negating divinity from them means its purification [*tajrīd*]; the negation [*salb*] of names and attributes from it means its incomparability [*tanzīh*]; He is the Transcendent: not-negated, not ineffectualized [*lā yu'tal*], nothing said about his creation can be said on Him, and not annulled [*lā yubṭal*].⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁵ Caliph al-Manṣūr in Walker 2009, p.18 (Arabic text); my emphasis.

Walker's translation missed the key movements indicating God's transcendence. He translates "*mutawaḥḥid*" as "unifies," but this should be "unified," because it is the human action that the text emphasizes. More importantly, the unusual choices of *muta'azziz*, *mutajabbir*, and *muta'alī* instead of *'Aziz*, *Jabbār*, and *ta'alā* in the original text indicate that God gets these attributes from human beings: translating them "Almighty" ignores the key aspect of these attributes. God becomes Almighty by human ascriptions of names, but God is not Almighty in Himself. Cf. Walker's translation below:

Praise be to God who unites through divine lordship, who is unique in oneness, who is almighty in ability and endurance, all-powerful in majesty and grandeur, the first without limit, the last without end, transcending the comparisons of the ignorant and the definitions of the describers, the conditions of the attributers, and the comprehension in visions of those who speculate. (Caliph al-Manṣūr in Walker 2009, p.107 (English text).)

⁴⁶⁶ al-Mu'ayyad fī al-Dīn in Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī 1971, pp.11-12.

These public performances display only one manifestation of the wide and sustained diffusion of this apophatic theology. Insistence on a *via negativa* that depicted God as the unknowable beyond of the beyond of all negations spread from North Africa to greater Iran and Transoxania where Ismāʿīlī *dāʿīs* were active. Ismāʿīlī political expansion to al-Andalus, even for a short time, seems to have had sustained effects as in the case of Ibn Masarraḥ (d.931) and even Ibn al-ʿArabī.⁴⁶⁷ According to Ibn Ḥazm's *Fiṣal*, Ibn Masarraḥ and his self-styled successor Ismāʿīl al-Ruʿaynī (d.ca.1040) professed dimensions of Ismāʿīlī apophaticism. Accordingly, God was too sublimely transcendent to have any contact with His creation; hence it was not God Himself, but His throne, i.e., the prime matter from which the universe is created,⁴⁶⁸ that governed the world.⁴⁶⁹

Ismāʿīlī apophaticism becomes a major theological position no longer limited to Ismāʿīlīs, but adopted by scholars of diverse orientations under their intellectual and political sway, and even beyond. Especially under their direct rule, the adoption of aspects of Ismāʿīlism was much more evident. In his popular theological compendium in Judeo-Arabic entitled *Garden of Intellects* [*Bustān al-ʿUqūl*], the head of the Jewish community in Yemen, Nethanel ben al-Fayyūmī (d.ca.1165) adopts the Ismāʿīlī negative theology of the divine essence:

Nothing is like unto Him; He created all things out of nothing. Unto Him we cannot apply definition, attribute, spatiality or quality. He has no throne that would imply place nor footstool that would imply sitting. He cannot be described as rising up or sitting down, as moving or as motionless, as bearing or being born, as having characteristics or as in any way defined. ... He does not enter or go out, descend or ascend. He is far beyond the reach of the human intellect, transcending apprehension, conception, and even conjecture. His essence is indescribable and cannot be grasped by means of the attributes. He is exalted even beyond the sublimity and the greatness ascribed to Him by the Philosophers, as the Prophet, peace be with Him, praised Him and said in his

⁴⁶⁷ See Ebstein 2014. While Ebstein's analysis is fundamentally important in displaying doctrinal convergences between Ismāʿīlism and Ibn al-ʿArabī, his analysis does not entail the twelfth century—the key period when a new form of orthodoxy emerged in al-Andalus. See Casewit 2014, Ch.1.

⁴⁶⁸ Abrahamov 2014, p.101.

⁴⁶⁹ Casewit 2014, p.64.

outburst of praise: “Let them bless Thy glorious Name—Thy Name
be exalted above all blessing and praise! [Nehemiah 9:5]”⁴⁷⁰

What the scholarship on al-Fayyūmī, including the editor of *Garden of Intellects*, does not realize in this Ismāʿīlī negative theological Judeo-Arabic passage is that al-Fayyūmī is not only citing the Torah, but also the Qurʾān. “Nothing is like unto Him” [*laysa ka-mithlihi shayʿ*], biblical it might appear, is indeed a Qurʾānic phrase, and arguably the most widely quoted verse among Ismāʿīlīs and Muslims at large in reference to divine transcendence.⁴⁷¹ The verse is cited on the divine oneness and attributes even in the oldest Muslim theological texts that have survived.⁴⁷² Al-Fayyūmī is also entering the ongoing theological discussions on the descent [*nuzūl*], throne, or footstool, of God, with a strongly Ismāʿīlī line. The Ismāʿīlī emphasis on divine transcendence made a great impact in Yemen. Al-Fayyūmī also adopted the Ismāʿīlī cosmology, which intensified the divine unknowability. He shares the Ismāʿīlī placement of the one-many Divine Word between the apophatic One, and the first creation, the universal intellect.⁴⁷³ Hence the indescribable God is placed further beyond the divine word beyond the intellect. The interpenetration of Rabbinic Jewish and Ṭayyibī Ismāʿīlī cosmology, prophetology, numerology, and hermeneutics is so powerful in the

⁴⁷⁰ al-Fayyūmī 1908, pp.2-3 (English text); p.1 (Judeo-Arabic text).

⁴⁷¹ al-Fayyūmī 1908, p.1 (Judeo-Arabic text). Cf. Q.42:11.

For the employment of the verse in the service of divine transcendence by the early Persian Sufi exegete Rashīd al-Dīn al-Maybudī (fl.1127), the Ashʿarite polymath Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1209), and the compiler of Zaydī exegesis al-Sharafī (d.1651), see Hamza, Rizvi and Mayer 2008, p.386, 515, 555. For others, see Ibn al-Wālid 1403/1982, p.30; Ibn Masarraḥ in Stroumsa and Svirī 2009, p.224 (for the Arabic text itself, see Ibn Masarraḥ in Morris 1973, pp.257-258); al-Junayd in Qushayrī 1997, p.6; Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī in Silvers 2002, pp.142-143 (also in al-Sīrjānī 2012, p.52); Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 1957, Vol.1, p. 89; al-Bayhaqī 1358/1939, p.27; al-Sarrāj 1914, p.29 (Arabic text); Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart 1993, p.21; Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart 1997, p.216; Abrahamov 1998, p.50; Ibn Barraḡān 2015, #150, p.167; Ibn Barraḡān in Casewit 2014, p.227, 330, 344; Ibn al-ʿArabī in Elmore 1995, p.144, 246; al-Māturīdī 2003, p.121, 138; Aḥmad al-Rifāʿī 1904, p.19; Ibn Bābawayḥ 1993, p.22; al-Ḥakīm al-Samarqandī in al-ʿOmar 1974, p.167; Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī 2001, Vol.3, Ch.33, p.1173; Aḥmad al-Ghazālī 2012, Ch.43, pp.106-107; Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Tūmart al-Andalusī 1999, p.30.

⁴⁷² See al-Fazārī 2014, p.178, 185. The sophisticated treatment of the divine attributes in these Ibādī theological texts indicates that this subject developed considerably earlier in Islamic theology than previously accepted in modern scholarship. (al-Salimi and Madelung in al-Fazārī 2014, p.6.)

⁴⁷³ “The first creation of God was the Universal Intellect—the origin of life, the fountain of blessings, the well-spring of happiness. ... God made it by His word and His will, not from anything and not in anything, not with anything and not through anything.” (al-Fayyūmī 1908, p.2.) Also see Kiener 1984, p.262.

case of al-Fayyūmī that “Jewish Ismā’īlism” is the most accurate term to define al-Fayyūmī’s theology.⁴⁷⁴

Another significant example of the sway of Ismā’īlī apophaticism is the Sunnī-Shāfi’ī judge of the Fāṭimid Cairo, Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Quḍā’ī (d.1062). As a senior government official, al-Quḍā’ī worked as a judge over the Sunnī subjects under Fāṭimid rule, traveled to Constantinople as Fāṭimid emissary to the Byzantine court, served in their chancery, being scribe for a time for the vizier ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Jarjarā’ī (d.1045), and had close contact with eminent Fāṭimid scholars.⁴⁷⁵ Even though he lived under Fāṭimid rule, Al-Quḍā’ī’s scholarship was highly respected among Sunnī scholars, especially as a reliable *ḥadīth* scholar. His *Treasury of Virtues* [*Dustūr ma’ālim al-ḥikam wa ma’thūr makārim al-shiyam*] is among the earliest and best known extant compilations of ‘Alī (d.661)’s sermons, sayings, and teachings. Even though al-Quḍā’ī is not an Ismā’īlī scholar himself, the sayings on the divine essence that his compilation attributes to ‘Alī (d.661) mirror the powerful Ismā’īlī apophaticism of his time. According to al-Quḍā’ī, ‘Alī expressed his approach to the oneness of God as follows:

The first part of religion is knowledge of God. Knowledge of Him is perfected by the declaration of His oneness. The declaration of His oneness is perfected by sincere allegiance to Him. Sincere allegiance to Him is achieved by negating all attributes [*naḥy al-ṣifāt*] from Him, by the testimony of every attribute that it is other than the thing described, the testimony of every described thing that it is other than the attribute, and the testimony of both of these that they have newly come into being and thus cannot be eternal. Whosoever describes God has circumscribed Him. Whosoever circumscribes Him has quantified Him. And whosoever quantifies Him has invalidated His eternity. Whosoever asks “How?” has sought a description of Him. Whosoever asks “In what?” has confined Him. Whosoever asks “On what?” has made another space empty of Him. Whosoever asks “Where?” has defined Him. Whosoever asks “Where to?” has made Him cross over a path.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷⁴ See e.g. Kiener 1984.

⁴⁷⁵ Qutbuddin in ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, ‘Alī al-Qāḍī al-Quḍā’ī and al-Jāḥiẓ 2013, p.xix.

⁴⁷⁶ ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and ‘Alī al-Qāḍī al-Quḍā’ī in ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, ‘Alī al-Qāḍī al-Quḍā’ī and al-Jāḥiẓ 2013, #7.23, pp.170-171. Also see *ibid.*, #7.24, pp.171-174.

The tenth to twelfth centuries witness a proliferation in the circulation of such 'Alīd traditions under Fāṭimid rule, further suggesting that Ismā'īlī apophaticism was not confined to circles of theologians. *The Book of Unveiling* compiled by Ja'far ibn Maṣṣūr al-Yaman (d.957) contains such prophetic reports with such strong negations.⁴⁷⁷ Similar 'Alīd traditions are quoted by the Yemenī Ismā'īlī scholar al-Ḥāmidī. The human incapacity as the ultimate limit of human attainment, or the *docta ignorantia* as Nicholas of Cusa (d.1464) later put it,⁴⁷⁸ is tellingly attributed to Abū Bakr (d.634) among Sunnī scholars.⁴⁷⁹ Al-Ḥāmidī rather attributes the tradition to 'Alī, putting it into rhymed verses as well as a strongly apophatic context:

The supplications attributed to the fourth Shī'ī Imām 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-'Ābidīn (d.712) contain similar negations, indicating the Shī'ite background of the Ismā'īlī apophaticism. Indeed, the very opening supplication epitomizes human incapacity in front of divine transcendence and ineffability:

Praise belongs to God,
The First, without a first before Him,
The Last, without a last behind Him.
Beholders' eyes fall short of seeing Him,
Describers' imaginations are not able to depict Him. ('Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn 1988,
Supplications, #1-2.)

This and similar supplications that express the ineffability of the divine reality are among the group of supplications that are counted authentic. (E.g. see 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn 1988, Supplications, #46.72.) On the other hand, the supplication that most clearly addresses divine unknowability is most probably a later addition:

My God,
Tongues fall short of attaining
Praise of Thee proper to Thy majesty,
Intellects are incapable of grasping
The core of Thy beauty,
Eyes fail before gazing
Upon the glories of Thy face,
And Thou hast assigned to Thy creatures
No way to know Thee
Save incapacity to know Thee! ('Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn 1988, 15 Whispered Prayers,
#12.1.)

⁴⁷⁷ See Gillon 2013, p.105.

⁴⁷⁸ Cf. Nicholas of Cusa 1957, pp.360-366.

⁴⁷⁹ See e.g. al-Sarrāj 1914, p.36 (Arabic text); Ibn al-'Arabī in Elmore 1995, p.142.

[‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d.661) said:] Whatever your fantasy discerns as the most truthful meanings related to Him, indeed, have nothing to do with Him, and return to you, as they are created and originated.

He said:

Incapacity to attain is the attainment

Seeking the secret of the core of the ipseity is polytheism

Unveiling the depths of the unseen is blindness

To the one whose horizon is but the darkness of incapacity.⁴⁸⁰

The Ismā‘īlī apophatic theology with its rational, perpetual double negation of attributes from an unknowable God spread widely with the Ismā‘īlī *invitation* [*da‘wah*].⁴⁸¹ The Ḥanafī theologian of Samarqand, Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī

⁴⁸⁰ Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī 1971, p.10.

و كل ما ميز تموه في أوهاكم في أصدق معانيه فمصروف عنه مردود إليكم، مصنوع محدث. و قال:
العجز عن درك الإدراك ادراك
و البحث عن سر الذات إشراك

و الكشف عن مستجنات الغيوب عمى
عليه من ظلمات العجز أفلك

The apophatic doctrine is also found in a whispered prayer [*munājāt*] attributed to ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (d.713). Cf. ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn 1988, 15 Whispered Prayers, #12.1.

⁴⁸¹ It is difficult to know how much the geographical spread of this form of apophatic theology was thanks to other movements than Ismā‘īlīs. Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Nasafī’s disciple Abū Tammām (fl.late 10th CE) mentions of a Zaydī group in Yemen, the Khalafiyah, whose theological position was remarkably similar.

These people will not describe God with any description that is suitable for created things nor will they say of Him that He is either knowing or not knowing, powerful or not powerful, a thing or not a thing, confined or not confined. They speak about the Creator neither on the basis of reality nor through metaphor but rather they talk about Him by approximation. Thus if they were asked about God, “do you recognize Him?” They would remain silent. *They will not say that we recognize Him or that we do not not recognize Him. For them, if they were to recognize Him, their recognition of Him would encompass Him. Someone who is recognized and becomes recognizable to his recognizer cannot be a god.* (Abū Tammām in Madelung and Walker 1998, p.92; my emphasis.)

(d.944) was already familiar with the popular Ismāʿīlī ideas, including their distinction between God and the creator to whom they ascribed the divine attributes. He narrates how Ismāʿīlīs argued that “He has no name” [*laysa lahu ism*], and similar versions of this idea, such as “He does not have any essential name or essential attribute,” or “God—that which has no essential name.”⁴⁸² As far as in Nīsabūr, the Ismāʿīlī *dāʿī* Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm (fl.ea.11th CE) expressed divine transcendence by employing this apophatic strategy:

All those who know the created beings realize their inability and deficiency, negating divinity from them until negating divinity from all created beings. Thus, Unity is left unmingled, without anthropomorphism [*tashbīh*] or agnosticism [*taʿtīl*].⁴⁸³

The perpetual negation of all binaries becomes a defining aspect of Ismāʿīlī theology for the next three centuries. Nāṣir al-Khusraw (d.1088) in Iran, al-Muʿayyad fī al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d.1078) in Egypt, Ibrāhīm ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī (d.1162) in Yemen and India, and Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ (d.1124) and al-Shahrastānī (d.1153) in Iran provide us the best examples of this peculiar apophatic theology in the next centuries.⁴⁸⁴ Khusraw’s *Twin Wisdoms Reconciled* criticizes a wide array of theological positions as they undermine the unknowable essence of the transcendent God. Among them are the prattling literalists [*Ḥashwiyyah*], the “thick-headed exegetes” [*khudrayān*] who adopt the Ashʿarite position of accepting the attributes amodally [*bilā kayfa*], the Karrāmīs who claim that God has attributes unlike ours, and the Muʿtazilites, who claim that “the Eternal is One and that His attributes are not contingently created, nor are they eternal; rather, they are part of His essence.”⁴⁸⁵ Khusraw shows that each of these positions assume the accessibility, relationality, or plurality of the divine essence:

It is clear that to call God “knowing” is polytheism [*shirk*]. And if these theologians assert that God is “powerful” ... this too is

In the light of al-Ashʿarī’s report that some Zaydīs avoided calling God “thing,” one may ask if Abū Tammām and al-Ashʿarī were talking about the same group. (See al-Ashʿarī, p.238.)

⁴⁸² See e.g. al-Māturīdī 2003, pp.161-162.

⁴⁸³ al-Naysābūrī 2010, p.7 (Arabic text). I did not follow the original translation, which did not preserve the reiterated employment of *nafy*:

All those who know the created beings realize their inability and deficiency, repudiating their divinity until such time that they reject the divinity from all created beings. Thus, Divine Unity is left pure, without ascription of human qualities to God [*tashbīh*], and the denial of all attributes to God [*taʿtīl*]. (al-Naysābūrī 2010, pp.36-37 (English text).)

⁴⁸⁴ See al-Ḥāmidī 2012, Ch.1 and Ch.2.

⁴⁸⁵ Nāṣir-i Khusraw 2012, pp.41-71.

polytheism. And if these theologians say that God is “living” ... this is polytheism. If these theologians establish that God -praise be to Him- is “hearing” ... this is an innovation [*bid’ati*] which this group has created; in their ignorance they have imposed these names on God.⁴⁸⁶

The trans-transcendence of God in Khusraw’s theology is also clear in his poems where he warns not to confuse the Universal Intellect with “God,” who is beyond the Divine Word beyond the Universal Intellect.⁴⁸⁷ His commentary on earlier Ismā’īlī poet Abū al-Haytham al-Jurjānī (fl.10th-ea.11th CE)’s apophatic couplets on “One” proposed to address the problem of discursive access to the One from Plato’s suggestion, Parmenides and Zeno,⁴⁸⁸ further back to Pythagoras (d.496 BCE). In a classical Ismā’īlī spirit, al-Jurjānī had problematized calling One “the Creator”:

What is the One in whom the many exist, absolute in uniqueness?
Why do you call Him “Creator” and “Compeller”?
One whom neither doubling nor halving affects;
Who neither increases nor lessens in number?
One by necessity or by approximation, not by exactitude
How can such statements be understood?⁴⁸⁹

In his commentary on al-Jurjānī’s exquisite lines, Khusraw distinguished the absolute One from the multiple one, “from which the order of numbers comes, and which is multiple, is composite, formed of oneness and of that substance which is receptive to oneness.”⁴⁹⁰ The latter is the numeric one, which is the principle of all numbers and the source of the infinite multiplicity. Once the latter is united in its one-manness with the Universal Intellect, it becomes the First Existent and gives birth to creation. All relationalities belong to the realm under the Universal Intellect, and they are not applicable to what is beyond. Let alone the absolute One, even the multiple one cannot be known in its unity. Only

⁴⁸⁶ Nāṣir-i Khusraw 2012, p.65; with my slight modifications. Innovation [*bid’ah*] is significantly different from heresy [*zandaqa*]. Other scholars equate *bid’ah* with heresy as well (see e.g. Ibn Ṭufayl 2009, fn.283, p.236). However, the innovator [*mubtadi’*], as well as agents of corruption and public disorder [*fasad*], even under strict legal systems, were categorically different from a person deemed by a judge as a heretic [*zindīq*]. See Casewit 2014, pp.176-177.

Also see S. Jackson’s introduction in S. Jackson and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2002.

⁴⁸⁷ See Nāṣir-i Khusraw in Schimmel 2001, pp.50-51.

⁴⁸⁸ Plato 2010, 137b-144e.

⁴⁸⁹ Abū al-Haytham al-Jurjānī in Nāṣir-i Khusraw 2012, p.135.

⁴⁹⁰ Nāṣir-i Khusraw 2012, p.136.

by approximation, one can imagine what the oneness of the multiple one would be. But neither it nor the absolute one beyond it can be known.⁴⁹¹ Only perpetual double negation of all possible imaginable attributes helps un-knowing the absolute One, because it is beyond the multiple one, which is itself approximated via negation.

Questioning the applicability of the name “Creator” is by no means unique to al-Sijistānī, Ja’far ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, al-Jurjānī or Nāṣir-i Khusraw. Al-Mu’ayyad fī al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d.1078) also rejected the applicability of any term that indicates God’s being the cause, source, or originator of creation in any sense.⁴⁹² “He is beyond the attributes ‘the Creator,’ ‘the Maker’ ‘the Originator’.”⁴⁹³ It seems that he performed these negations, again, during an oration. In light of this public apophaticism, it is also unsurprising that per al-Jurjānī and Nāṣir-i Khusraw he negated the well-known Qur’ānic attributes that were popularly assumed, especially among Ash’arites, to be essential to God. Al-Ḥāmidī reports al-Mu’ayyad fī al-Dīn’s refusal to admit any of these names:

He is glorified: He does not enter under the sway of any name or attribute; He cannot be approached by indications with qualities. One cannot say that He is All-Living, nor Omnipotent, nor Omniscient, nor Intellecting, nor Perfect, nor Complete, nor Agent, because He is the originator of All-Living, Omnipotent, Omniscient, Intellecting, Perfect, Complete, and Agent. One cannot claim “Ipseity” about Him, insofar as every ipseity bears attributes, such as matter or nine accidents, and soul and its attributes.⁴⁹⁴

Al-Mu’ayyad fī al-Dīn moves to terms like “substance,” “accident,” “cause,” and then to adverbs, and discusses extensively and exclusively what *cannot* be said of God. The inapplicability of any name, including the more conventional and widespread names, re-emphasizes the importance of Ismā’īlī cosmology in further deepening Plotinus’ apophaticism. In Ismā’īlī theology, the attributes that Ash’arites ascribe to God actually belong to the Universal Intellect, which ranks below the Divine Word below the apophatic God. As al-Mu’ayyad fī al-Dīn puts it,

⁴⁹¹ Nāṣir-i Khusraw 2012, p.137.

⁴⁹² “He is beyonds the attributes ‘the Creator,’ ‘the Maker’ ‘the Originator’.” (al-Mu’ayyad fī al-Dīn in Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī 1971, p.13.) It seems that he performed these negations, again, during an oration.

⁴⁹³ al-Mu’ayyad fī al-Dīn in Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī 1971, p.13.

⁴⁹⁴ al-Mu’ayyad fī al-Dīn in Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī 1971, pp.13-14.

“‘All-Living,’ ‘Omnipotent,’ ‘Eternal,’ ‘Omniscient’ –*this is the First Existent.*”⁴⁹⁵
Such attributes do not apply even to the Divine Word, let alone the apophatic one in its beyond.

Ismā‘īlīs saw the declaration of faith [*takhlīl*] as the best summary of their apophatic theology. The formula of the *takhlīl* that “there is no god but God,” was glorifying God by negating all real or imaginable relations and binaries. Nizārī Ismā‘īlism in Iran of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, even though the records we have are scanty, continues this form of apophatic theology. Al-Shahrastānī (d.1153), whom Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d.1274) calls “the chief Ismā‘īlī master” [*dā‘ī al-du‘āt*] in his autobiography,⁴⁹⁶ describes the great Nizārī master Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ (d.1124)’s doctrine in the following way:

He [Ḥasan] put truth and error and the similarity between them on the one hand, and the distinction between them on the other hand –opposition on both sides, and order on one of the two sides [?]- as a balance to weigh all that he uttered on the matter. He said: “This balance is simply derived from the formula of *takhlīl*, which is compounded of negation and affirmation, or of negation and exception thereto.” He said: “*It does not claim the negation is erroneous, nor does it claim the affirmation is true.*”⁴⁹⁷

The beginning of al-Shahrastānī’s account is difficult to disentangle, but still it makes clear that Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ follows the classical Ismā‘īlī double negation “neither (G is X), nor (G is not X).” Al-Shahrastānī himself adopts the same approach to the *takhlīl*,⁴⁹⁸ and also criticizes the supposed negativism of theologians as well as Philosophers, as they in fact violate divine unknowability. Al-Shahrastānī undertakes the same critique of “hidden anthropomorphism” with al-Sijistānī:

Does he [Ibn Sīnā] not understand that *the negation of many deficiencies from the Real (Exalted is His Majesty!) is a deficiency for Him?* As the weavers amongst the literalists and the lowest story-tellers say: “Neither body, nor substance, nor something shaped, nor measured, nor elongated, nor round, nor square, nor pentagonal, nor obligated, nor put together,” and the rabble of humanity respond, “Glorified is God! Glorified is God!” So Ibn Sīnā

⁴⁹⁵ al-Mu‘ayyad fī al-Dīn in Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī 1971, p.14; my emphasis.

⁴⁹⁶ Ṭūsī 1998, p.26 (English text), p.3 (Persian text).

⁴⁹⁷ al-Shahrastānī in Landolt et.al. 2008, p.151; my emphasis.

⁴⁹⁸ al-Shahrastānī 2001, p.56.

set about protracting the chapters in his books with the negation of the like of these attributions from the Necessary of Existence in Itself, prior to proving It. ... This is nothing but haphazardness and shooting in utter blindness, and *a negation of deficiencies which is an affirmation of deficiencies!*⁴⁹⁹

Al-Shahrastānī's discussion of the phrase "God" [*Allāh*] as an apophatic designation that negates all identities and ipseities has evident parallels to earlier Ismā'īlī theologians:

Nothing is grasped of the majesty of God (exalted is He) except His quiddity [*huwiyyah*] alone, for He is He; amongs the established supplications is: "O He who is He." ... *The name "God" bestows the idea of His divine status through the negation of quiddity; "the One" bestows the idea of pure monotheism through the negation of quantity; and "the Absolute" bestows the idea of exaltation through the negation of quality.*⁵⁰⁰

The meaning of "divinity" as the negation of quiddity was a theme that was, as we have seen, suggested by prominent Ismā'īlī intellectuals such as al-Sijistānī, Ja'far ibn Manṣūr and al-Ḥāmidī. Moreover, also very characteristically, al-Shahrastānī defends the position that creation arose through the Divine Command [*amr*], which first wrote the *takhlīl*⁵⁰¹—as suggested Ja'far ibn Manṣūr and Abū 'Īsā al-Murshid.

A fundamental yet elusive difference in terms of the divine attributes resides in the insistent critique of Philosophers and Mu'tazilites by almost all Ismā'īlī masters. One might tend to lump the Ismā'īlī negation of divine attributes together with that of the Philosophers. Yet their negations in terms of divine attributes are different, and even antithetical to each other. In the Ismā'īlī apophaticism of the divine essence, negating the divine attributes indicates their *inapplicability* instead of *the negative application* of early Ibādīs, some Mu'tazilīs, and Philosophers. Al-Ḥāmidī repeats what earlier Ismā'īlī scholars had underlined:

[He is] the negator of the created idols from His divine ipseity;
that which reflections do not dare upon; minds do not enclose;

⁴⁹⁹ al-Shahrastānī 2001, p.36; my emphases.

⁵⁰⁰ al-Shahrastānī 2009, pp.82-83 (Arabic text), pp.144-145 (English translation); my emphases. "*Ma'nā al-ulūhiyyah bi-nafy al-māhiyyah; ma'nā al-tawḥīd bi-nafy al-kamiyyah; ma'nā al-tamjīd bi-nafy al-kayfiyyah.*"

⁵⁰¹ See al-Shahrastānī 2009, p.84 (Arabic text), p.146 (English translation).

eyes do not perceive; *transcends the names and attributes*; unsullied by the resemblance to any states; beyond the occupations of the dwellers of the two worlds and the heavens; so there is no opposite nor par unto Him.⁵⁰²

Hence one should negate the attribute, then negate the very negative discourse, in order to cancel the binary and to testify the inapplicability of divine attributes to the apophatic ipseity. This perpetual self-cancellation of attributes via double negation is in stark contrast to the *via negativa* of the Philosophers. As we will see below, “negating the divine attributes,” for most of the Philosophers means to read them as negations, per Ibn Sīnā, Maimonides, al-Baṭalyawṣī, or Thomas Aquinas. While the philosophical negation (i.e., negative indication) of divine attributes follows that of the Muʿtazilites, and perhaps the earlier Ibādīs,⁵⁰³ the Ismāʿīlī negation (i.e., self-cancellation) of divine attributes accuses the former of not properly defending divine incomparability. Philosophers negate only divine imminence [*tashbīh*] in underlying divine incomparability [*tanzīh*]. The only way of “expressing” God’s non-discursive trans-transcendence for the Ismāʿīlīs is self-cancelling double negation of both God’s incomparability and imminence.

The Crown of Creeds penned by the fifth Yemenī *dāʿī*, Sayyidnā ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Wālid (d.1215) demonstrates how the main components of Ismāʿīlī apophaticism were carried into the thirteenth century. With its dizzying negations that take pages and pages, this Ismāʿīlī creed continues the teachings of the earlier masters. The Creator [*Mubdiʿ*] of the universe is not the Originator [*Ṣāniʿ*] Himself, who is exalted from such relations in His non-numerical, apophatic oneness [*wāḥid lā min ʿadad*].⁵⁰⁴ This primal source [*al-mabdāʿ al-awwal*] of the universe is the Universal Intellect [*al-ʿaql al-awwal*], which was symbolically hinted at in the Qurʾān as the “Heavenly Pen” [*Qalam*]. It is eternal, complete, perfect, and subsistent. All perfect attributes that fellow Muslims ascribe to God, such as “All-Living,” “Omnipotent,” “Omniscient,” “Intellecting,” “Perfect,” “Complete,” and “Agent” belong to the first creation.⁵⁰⁵ Hence Ibn al-

...النافي عن ذاته الإهية للمبدع المعبود, من لا تجاسره الخواطر, لا تحويه (Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī 1971, p.1). المشاعر, و لا تدركه البصائر, المنزه عن الأسماء و الصفات, البريء من الأشباه في جميع الحالات, و المتعالي عن مشكلة أهل الأرضين و السماوات, إذ لا ضد له و لا ند...

⁵⁰³ Cf. al-Fazārī 2014, pp.172-176.

⁵⁰⁴ One of the puzzles that surface in the *Crown of Creeds* is the employment of *al-Ṣāniʿ*, in addition to, and sometimes in opposition to the classical Ismāʿīlī designation of God, *al-Mubdiʿ*. (e.g. Ibn al-Wālid 1403/1982, Ch.2, p.20.) How these two terms relate to each other are not clear.

⁵⁰⁵ Cf. Ibn al-ʿArabī in Elmore 1995, Vol.2, pp.145-146.

Wālid's exposition of the one-many is in perfect harmony with those of al-Jurjānī (fl.10-11th CE), Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d.1088), al-Mu'ayyad fī al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d.1078). With its dense apophaticism, Ibn al-Wālid goes so far to employ the declaration of faith [*takhlīl*] with regards to the Universal Intellect, and not God! His closing of the relevant section is extraordinary:

This first existent is that of which the prophetic law reports as "the Pen." Its ipseity is the One and the Many [*al-wāḥidah al-mutakaththirah*] in its relations, attributions, and conjugations. He [rather] transcends His existents, and His agent is complete and perfect. *There is no God but He who acts, which is the complete and perfect existent.*⁵⁰⁶

Within this Ismā'īlī cosmology, Ibn al-Wālid's God is utterly unknowable, far beyond comprehension, limitation, or definition. Discourse [*'ibārah*] cannot reach anything about Him, and anything that can be known or spoken of is created.⁵⁰⁷ The Originator is not a body, not a substance, not an accident, not a matter, not a form, not in space, not in time, not comparable to anything, not speakable, and so forth. Scattered among thousands of negations, we find separate sections such as "on the Negation of Naming from Him," and "on the Negation of Attributes from Him" where negative statements attain an ecstatic, incantational nature. The approach to the relationship between the divine essence and divine attributes is a familiar one: all attributes should be negated in the sense of their utter *inapplicability*.⁵⁰⁸ Neither an attribute, nor its negation apply to Him. The double negation unfolds itself in the form of "neither (G is X), nor (G is not X)." This approach was logically equivalent to al-Sijistānī and Kirmānī's more characteristic double negation, "G is not X" and "not (G is not X),"⁵⁰⁹ but was much more intensively and widely appealed to among Ismā'īlīs. This sophisticated apophatic theology can be traced further into the thirteenth century, in creative and surprising interactions with Sufism particularly in Iran and Central Asia.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibn al-Wālid 1403/1982, Ch.21, p.44. For a brief English summary of Ch.20-22, see Ivanow 1936, pp.31-32.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibn al-Wālid 1982/1403, p.30.

⁵⁰⁸ In these sections, Ibn al-Wālid employs the two popular terms for negation, *nafy* and *salb*, interchangeably.

⁵⁰⁹ One tremendously important topic that does not appear in the *Crown of Creeds* is the attribute "thingness." Earlier Ismā'īlī masters were very strong in negating thingness from God, and frequently devoted a separate section to the topic.

B. Sufi Paths of Ismā'īlī Apophaticism in the Thirteenth Century

Khwāja Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d.1274), one of the greatest thinkers in history, is among the most influential Ismā'īlī scholars. Many of his works survived the Mongol destruction mainly because he aligned with the Mongols, and apparently converted to Imāmī Shī'ism in 1256. Khwāja Naṣīr al-Dīn was born in 1201 in Ṭūs, into a Twelver Imāmī Shī'ī family, which he would later call “the believers in, and followers of exoteric aspects of the religious law,” in his autobiography.⁵¹⁰ His father was a well-educated Imāmī scholar: Ṭūsī's depiction of him (as a man whose main concern was the *uṣūl wa furū'* of *shāri'ah*) makes us think that he was interested in jurisprudence. On the other hand, his father had received education from his uncle, who was a student of the famous Ismā'īlī-inclined doxographer al-Shahrastānī. In his childhood, Ṭūsī studied with a student of Bābā Afzāl al-dīn Kāshānī (d.ca.1213), another Ismā'īlī philosopher and a master of esotericism in Ṭūsī's eyes, Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāsib (d.1242). Probably as a culmination of these manifold influences, we find Ṭūsī having left Nisābūr and living in Qūhistān among Nizārī Ismā'īlīs around 1227 where he embraced the Nizārī Ismā'īlī faith, and lived under the protection and friendship of the Ismā'īlī governor, Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥtashim (d.1257), to whom he devoted his *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī* and *Akhlāq-i Muḥtashimī*.⁵¹¹ After eight productive years in Qūhistān, he was transferred to the headquarters of Nizārīs in Alamūt, where he not only wrote many books celebrating Ismā'īlism, but he also received the honorific title “master of creation and the chief missionary [*khwāja-yi kā'ināt va sulṭān al-du'āt*],”⁵¹² and lived until its surrender to the Mongols and destruction in 1256. These three decades that Ṭūsī spent among Nizārī Ismā'īlīs were clearly the most productive period of his life.⁵¹³ His service as the philosopher/vizier of Rukn al-Dīn after the assassination of 'Alā' al-Dīn Muḥammad III continued until the Ismā'īlī surrender to Hūlāgū Khān (r.654-63/1256-65), the Ilkhānid warlord. Ṭūsī played a curious role in the negotiations between the Nizārī Ismā'īlīs and the Mongols, working with other scholars of the court towards a peaceful surrender.⁵¹⁴ He was appointed as negotiator to Hūlāgū, who was preparing the conquest of Persia.⁵¹⁵ Claiming to have been a captive amidst the Nizārīs,⁵¹⁶ he

⁵¹⁰ *Zāhir-i shāri'at rā mu'taqīd wa muqallid budānd*. (Ṭūsī 1998, p.26 (English text), p.3 (in Persian text).)

⁵¹¹ See Ṭūsī 1964, p.24.

⁵¹² Ṭūsī 2005, p.13, p.170 (English text), p.8, p.211 (Persian text).

⁵¹³ Badakhchani in Ṭūsī 1998, p.5.

⁵¹⁴ Dabashi 1996, p.531.

⁵¹⁵ Daiber and Ragep 2012.

not only survived the large scale massacre of Ismāʿīlīs, but also became the advisor of Hūlāgū, and the administrator of religious foundations, endowments [awqāf] and finances.⁵¹⁷ Having renounced Nizārī Ismāʿīlism, he apparently re-embraced what was perceived as a “milder” form of Shīʿism, Imāmīyyah, and served the pagan Mongol rulers until his death.

Ṭūsī’s works of this period present us with examples of Ismāʿīlī apophatic theology that negated the affirmation and negation of all divine attributes to and from God. In the cosmology presented in his Persian autobiography written in Qūhistān around 1240,⁵¹⁸ creation emanates from the Originator via the mediation of the Divine Decree, or Word [amr-a ū yā kalīma-ya ū taʿālā], which, in turn, is the cause of the Universal Intellect.⁵¹⁹ The Originator, beyond the Divine Word beyond the Universal Intellect, is free from all relations including causality.⁵²⁰ As early as in Qūhistān, Ṭūsī mastered Ismāʿīlī negative theology, and saw its apophatic power as a unique form of celebrating God’s transcendence. His constant negation of binaries is coupled with the reminder that the apophatic God as the absolute One is even beyond the one-many, which is the unknowable creator, ultimate cause, and source of creation:

[God] is more glorious and exalted than to be the fount of two opposites, the origin of two contraries, the source of unity and plurality, the cause of the absolvment [tanzīh] and non-absolvment [lā-tanzīh] (of attributes). He is beyond any attribute by which something could be qualified, whether it be non-existent or existent, negative or positive, relative or absolute, verbal or in meaning [lafzī yā maʿnawī]. *He is beyond, and also beyond the beyond and so forth... .. [N]o one maintains such pure unity [tawḥīd-i širf], such unconditioned absoluteness [tanzīh-i mahz], except the Taʿlīmīyyān [i.e., the Ismāʿīlīs].*⁵²¹

⁵¹⁶ Daftary 2007, p.379.

⁵¹⁷ Barhebraeus 1890, pp.500-501.

⁵¹⁸ Ṭūsī 1998, p.8.

⁵¹⁹ “The intermediary position of the divine *Amr* as the true ‘First Cause’ [*al-ʿilla al-ūlā*] belongs in particular to the doctrine of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī, whereas its identification with the *imām* seems to be a later development, knowledge of which we gain chiefly from Ṭūsī himself.” (Landolt 2013, p.365.)

⁵²⁰ Ṭūsī 1998, p.34 (English text), p.9 (Persian text).

⁵²¹ Ṭūsī 1998, p.37 (English text), p.11 (Persian text); my emphasis.

Ṭūsī's Ismā'īlī masterpiece *the Paradise of Submission*, which was also commissioned officially for use within the Nizārī Ismā'īlī *da'wā* as late as the eighteenth century,⁵²² negates the negative discourse in order to indicate the meta-discursive transcendence of God. Typically, Ṭūsī argues that God is too transcendent to be causally related to creation. It is not from God but rather from his command that creation receives its existence. Let alone God, the command cannot be known in its oneness as it transcends, and indeed creates, the intellect. It is manifested as the one-many source of creation, the first of which is the Universal Intellect.⁵²³ Hence, whatever these intellectual, spiritual, or bodily beings say about the emergence of things from Him is "limited with their own knowledge and vision. But in truth, He, the Exalted, is independent [*munazzah*] of all this."⁵²⁴ In the same vein, the phrase "God is Great," Ṭūsī argues, is applicable from the point of view of creation, not from the perspective of God's ipseity. "For, none except He can know the truth of His sublime ipseity. On the basis of the latter point of view, the denial and negation [*nafy va salb*] of attributes is necessary."⁵²⁵ The first step, "not God is Great" discursively indicates the limited human conception of divine transcendence. The second negation removes the very discursive ground of the first step. Instead of al-Sijistānī's explicit double negation "not (not God is Great)," Ṭūsī follows the more common implicit Ismā'īlī double negation of "God is great," which indicates the non-discursive transcendence of an unknowable God. "*God is Great' means that He the transcendent [ū ta'ālā] is too great to be described with this description, and He the transcendent is too great not to be described with this description.*"⁵²⁶ The negation of all discursive possibilities, continues Ṭūsī, avoids ineffectualism [*ta'ṭīl*] in favor of an apophatic, non-discursive positivity. Ineffectualism, or agnosticism, that is, not to know whether God "is", is in diametrical opposition with the unknowable God.⁵²⁷ Unknowing, in other words, is not reducible to not

⁵²² Badakhchani in Ṭūsī 2005, p.xiii.

⁵²³ See Ṭūsī 2005, #30-36, pp.27-29 (English translation), pp.25-29 (Persian text).

⁵²⁴ See Ṭūsī 2005, #30-36, p.29 (English translation), p.28 (Persian text).

⁵²⁵ Ṭūsī 2005, #431, p.178 (Persian text). For Badakhchani's translation, see *ibid.*, #431, p.143 (English translation).

⁵²⁶ Ṭūsī 2005, #429; my emphasis.

⁵²⁷ Ṭūsī 2005 #430.

While the term *ta'ṭīl* mostly meant ineffectualizing God in theological texts, here Ṭūsī appeals to the term to describe what we might better call "agnosticism."

The term attained a variety of meanings depending on the context, and had a sustained history. According to the famous historian al-Balādhurī's (d.892) report, 'Alī (d.661) and 'Ā'ishah (d.678)

knowing. On the other hand, it is also blasphemous to mistake the latter, apophatic “God is Great” with the initial step, and to assume that the apophatic phrase contains any comparison or relationality.⁵²⁸ “God transcends both [the affirmation and the negation]. And he transcends this very transcendence [‘expressed’ in the previous sentence].”⁵²⁹

This is the manner in which al-Sijistānī’s radical statement “thanks be to God who is worshipped by ‘not’ and ‘not not’”⁵³⁰ becomes the standard invocation “thanks be to God” in Ṭūsī,⁵³¹ which still keeps the same apophatic spirit, in line with Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, Nāṣir-i Khusraw, Ḥasan Ṣabbāḥ and others. This peculiar form of apophatic theology operates via a combination of the negation of all positive and negative attributes, the utter unknowability of God within a distinct cosmology, and the rational, non-mystical self-cancellation of theological discourse. A closer look at his corpus helps to identify another dimension in Ṭūsī’s thought: the subtle play of Ismā’īlī apophaticism with Sufism.

Ismā’īlī Philosopher and Ismā’īlī Sufi?

The Letters

Except for some forms of mysticism and asceticism, Ṭūsī was not opposed to Sufism. His early work the *Naṣīrean Ethics*, finished in 1235 in the Ismā’īlī stronghold in Qūhistān, holds in high esteem some ideas associated with Sufism, such as examining the ego [*muḥāsabat al-nafs*] that al-Kindī (d.873) had recommended,⁵³² taming oneself via hunger,⁵³³ and the voluntary death before physical death that Ṭūsī aptly traces to Plato. “The Philosopher [*Ḥakīm*] Plato has said: ‘die by will, and you will live by nature!’ while Sufistic Philosophers [*ḥukamā-yi mutaṣawwifah*] have put it thus: ‘die before you die!’.”⁵³⁴ It is

accused the Caliph ‘Uthmān (d.656) of *ta’ṭīl*. The fundamental allegation of those who revolted against ‘Uthmān and murdered him was that of *ta’ṭīl ḥudūd Allāh*, i.e., violating or nullifying the general spirit of Islam. (See Zaman 1988, pp.266-267.)

⁵²⁸ Ṭūsī 2005, #429.

⁵²⁹ Ṭūsī 2005, #432; my emphasis.

⁵³⁰ Abū Ya’qūb al-Sijistānī in Walker 1993, p.78.

⁵³¹ Ṭūsī 2005, #439-440.

⁵³² Ṭūsī 1964, pp.121-122.

⁵³³ Ṭūsī 1964, p.168-169.

⁵³⁴ Ṭūsī 1964, p.138. I modified the translation “Sufistic sages” suggested by Wickens as it overlooks Ṭūsī’s appeal to the term “*Ḥakīm*.”

significant that Ṭūsī describes Plato and Sufis with the same honorific term, “*Hakīm*,” which can mean “sage” or “philosopher” depending on the context.

On the other hand, Ṭūsī’s commentary on the chapter entitled “Stations of the Mystics” [*Maqāmāt al-‘Ārifīn*] in Ibn Sīnā’s *Remarks and Admonitions*, finished around 1246 after two decades of labor, does not show any enthusiasm in Sufism. Ṭūsī dryly points out that for Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī this chapter is the most important part of the entire *Remarks and Admonitions* as it explains the “Science of Sufism,” but Ṭūsī himself does not express any specific interest.⁵³⁵ We know that as a philosopher he is sharply critical of antinomian and ascetic forms of mysticism, and he does not hide his Aristotelian dislike of solitude, as well as the lifestyle of itinerant mendicants.⁵³⁶ This contempt could get violent when combined with political power. In 658/1259-1260, when a group of Qalandars introduced themselves in his court, Hūlāgū asked his advisor Ṭūsī who they were. Ṭūsī’s reply “*the excess of this world!*” sufficed for a summary execution of all the Qalandars.⁵³⁷ Ṭūsī’s contacts with what he saw as an urban, intellectual form of

⁵³⁵ Ibn Sīnā and Ṭūsī 1994, Vol.4, p.47.

⁵³⁶

[I]nclining to isolation and loneliness ... is sheer tyranny and injustice to choose loneliness and solitude, and to turn away from co-operation with the rest of mankind. ... There are, however, some such who account this behavior a virtue, as with the class who isolate themselves by cleaving to their cells or by dwelling in mountain-clefts; this they call 'abstention from the world'. Another group will sit looking to other men to help them, while themselves totally blocking the road of aid; this they call 'resignation'. Then there are those who go touring from cities to cities, nowhere taking up their abode or contracting any association likely to bring about an intimate relationship: they claim to be deriving a lesson from the state of the world and regard this as a virtue. Such people, and those like them, use the provisions which others have acquired by co-operation, while giving them nothing in return or requital; they eat their sustenance and they don their clothing, but they make no payment for these things, having turned away from that which effects the ordering and the perfection of the human species. Yet since, by the fact of their solitude and loneliness, they do not bring into act the vices of those characteristics that they naturally have in potency, some shortsighted people fancy them to be persons of virtue. Such an estimation is erroneous. (Ṭūsī 1964, pp.194-195.)

⁵³⁷ Karamustafa 1994, p.5; emphasis mine. Ṭūsī’s strong hatred against the Qalandars was shared by prominent Sufis. In a Persian treatise titled *The Idiocy of Antinomians* [*Ḥamāqat-i ahl-i ibāḥāt*], Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111) advised political rulers to ruthlessly exterminate the permissivist [*ibāḥī*] Sufi-pretenders” [*Ṣūfī-numā*] who propagated antinomianism and tainted what he saw Sufism proper. Some of the issues that al-Ghazālī raised and the answers he gave were later reproduced in Ibn al-Jawzī (d.1200)’s famous *Devil’s Delusion* [*Talbīs Iblīs*]. Hence “it is certain

Sufism become more frequent in the last eighteen years of his life. His exchange of letters with Sufis,⁵³⁸ particularly with the great Sufi master of his time, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d.1274) is of fundamental importance, because it indicates at least three key points, the first of which has been barely studied, while the second and third ones have completely eluded scholarly attention.

The first point is his close acquaintance with intellectual Sufism. As much as al-Qūnawī's long letter and questions to Ṭūsī display the former's skills in Peripatetic Philosophy, Ṭūsī's brief analysis of al-Qūnawī's Sufi treatise *Raṣhī al-Bāl* demonstrates Ṭūsī's genuine knowledge of the Sufi path.⁵³⁹ Here Ṭūsī shows an evident respect to the Sufi master al-Qūnawī, and even gives a succinct description of the states and stations that the Sufi novice underwent.⁵⁴⁰

The second issue that the exchange of letters with al-Qūnawī brings up is Ṭūsī's overlooked dissimulation [*taqiyyah*] that barely hides his still strong affiliation with Ismā'īlism. Apparently Imāmī Ṭūsī's theological affiliations get complicated when we read his responsa to al-Qūnawī's challenging questions. Ṭūsī opens the responsa with a rich address to the Guide [*hādī*] that God sends to creation, supports via His support [*'ayyadahu bi-tā'yīdihī*] and chooses as regent [*nā'iban*] to the Prophet. The felicitous Guide is also the one who calls [*al-dā'ī*] all creation to the most glorious path [*ashraf al-ṭarīqah*]. Subsequently, in stark contrast with Ṭūsī's authoritative tone throughout the letter and with the conventions of scholarly and courtly writing, he directs these series of praises to al-Qūnawī. He continues apparently extolling the recipient of the letter, employing an Ismā'īlī

that Ibn al-Jawzī had access to an Arabic version of al-Ghazālī's treatise or another Arabic text that reproduced this latter's content." (Karamustafa 2014, p.112.) Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī's violent opposition against the Qalandars should be well-informed by the authoritarian Sufi critics of antinomianism. See Karamustafa 2014.

⁵³⁸ One of these masters was the Kubrāwī Sufi Shams al-Dīn Kīshī (d.1295), who was a teacher of Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d.1311), like Ṭūsī himself. As an interesting note, in one of his letters to Ṭūsī, Kīshī asks the difference between affirmative proposition in a negative form [*mawjiba-ya ma'dūla*] and a simple negation [*sālība-ya basīṭa*] (Kīshī 2011, pp.155-156). Both Kīshī's question and Ṭūsī's response are concerned with logic, but the correspondence has important implications for theology as it elaborates on whether it is possible to negate a statement without affirming the presence of its subject. Ṭūsī's response is positive. (See Ṭūsī in Kīshī 2011, pp.161-163.)

⁵³⁹ Chittick 1981, pp.100-101. Chittick's article gives a good introductory analysis of the correspondence.

⁵⁴⁰ Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī 1995, pp.89-92.

terminology that would be excessive and unusually extravagant even for a scholar of the caliber of al-Qūnawī:

*In our time, indeed, God has appointed a great teacher to this position [i.e., regency]. He is the great imām, the pole of God's friends, the caliph of the prophets, the inviter to Truth, the guidance of creation, the heart of the nation and religion ... Ibn Ishāq [al-Qūnawī].*⁵⁴¹

Arguably, this is one of the most concrete textual examples of dissimulation that betrays Ṭūsī's Ismā'īlī devotion. To the best of my knowledge, this evidence has eluded the attention of Ṭūsī scholars who debate his religious convictions. Landolt attentively questions Ṭūsī's appeal to the "imām" in addressing al-Qūnawī, but does not suggest or hint any answer.⁵⁴² Chittick also intuits that there is something unusual in these exorbitant expressions of admiration,⁵⁴³ especially in light of Ṭūsī's political and scholarly reputation, his general authoritative voice in the correspondence, and his polite but critical comments on al-Qūnawī's Sufi treatise that immediately follow the eulogy.⁵⁴⁴ To me, the tribute is indeed not intended for al-Qūnawī at all. It employs all well-known honorifics of the Ismā'īlī imāms, and indeed, is directed towards the Ismā'īlī imām instead of al-Qūnawī.

The third key aspect is a culmination of the first two points: Ṭūsī's apophatic theology in his post-Alamūt career and its blending of Sufism and Ismā'īlism. The prominence of Ismā'īlī thought in Ṭūsī's post-Alamūt corpus pushes us to look at the Ismā'īlī apophatic theology of his later writings as well. This form of apophasis continues in Ṭūsī's theological works, even after his apparent conversion to Imāmism. In his *Divisions*, for example, he gives a brief overview of alternative views on the divine nature. Accordingly, the Mu'tazilites argue that God's attributes are neither existent nor non-existent, while Ash'arites present the eight classical attributes as self-subsistent with God's essence. His own view is that the appropriate way is to negate all binaries and attributes since they are inapplicable: "the ipseity of God, transcendent He is, is One from all aspects. No

⁵⁴¹ Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī 1995, p.94; my emphasis.

⁵⁴² Landolt 2013, p.378.

⁵⁴³ "Ṭūsī praises al-Qūnawī and his spiritual attainments in glowing language, which one might expect from one of al-Qūnawī's spiritual disciples, but which one is surprised to see coming from the greatest philosopher and one of the most powerful political figures of the age." (Chittick 1981, p.101.)

⁵⁴⁴ Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī 1995, pp.90-91.

existing attribute can be attached to it.”⁵⁴⁵ While I discuss Ṭūsī’s apparent and much debated re-conversion from Ismā’īlism to Imāmiyyah elsewhere, suffice it to say that Ṭūsī’s post-Alamūt writings are full of allusions to Ismā’īlism, or even direct Arabic translations of his Persian Ismā’īlī works. Both Sufism and Ismā’īlism do play a fundamental and persistent role in Ṭūsī’s corpus from early on until his death in 1274.

Origin and Destination: an Ismā’īlī Eschatology?

The prominence of Sufi themes is unexpected but quite evident in Ṭūsī’s early writings. The positive approach to urban Sufism in his *Naṣīrean Ethics* is manifested not only in his post-Alamūt writings. His early work in Persian on Ismā’īlī eschatology, *Origin and Destination* [*Āghāz va Anjām*], has conspicuous Sufi elements. Here Ṭūsī writes that on the Day of Reckoning [*rūz-i ḥisāb*] people will be divided into three groups, all of which, in turn, are composed of three subgroups. The first group is composed of those who will directly enter Paradise. “The people of the right side who have not committed any sin,” and “those whose books of reckoning are empty of bad deeds” are in this first group of the elect, but the foremost and highest position is reserved, quite unexpectedly, for *Darvīshes*.

First are the foremost [*sābiqān*] and the people of the greatest Height [*a’rāf*], that is, those who are above reckoning and accountability. It is reported in a tradition [*dar khabar ast*]: “When *Darvīshes* are brought to the place of reckoning [*ḥisābgāh*], the angels will demand their accounts. In reply they say ‘What have you given us that makes us accountable to you?’ Then the commandment of the Exalted Lord will be heard: ‘They are right, their account is not any concern of yours’.”⁵⁴⁶

While at least a verse [Q.15:92] in the Qur’ān is clear that everyone without exception will be judged, Ṭūsī is evidently following the Sufi reading of another verse, according to which it is the *Darvīshes* who “will be kept far from [the trial],” and the first to arrive [*al-sābiqūn*] in Paradise.⁵⁴⁷ The earliest prophetic traditions had many references to those who will enter the paradise without a reckoning.⁵⁴⁸ Prominent traditionists like the Ḥanbalī al-Dāraquṭnī (d.995)

⁵⁴⁵ Ṭūsī 1992, p.1.

⁵⁴⁶ Ṭūsī 2010b, pp.69-70; with my minor modification.

⁵⁴⁷ Cf. Q.21:101. Also see Q.56:10-11.

⁵⁴⁸ See Wensinck 1927, p.182.

reported the traditions about the 70.000 believers who would enter Paradise without reckoning or any torment [*bi-ghayr ḥisāb wa lā ‘adhāb*].⁵⁴⁹ Such traditions widely circulated among Sufis: Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī, for example, cited one of them in accordance with his philosophical Sufism.⁵⁵⁰

Also from early on, Sufis associated the *sābiqūn* with *the elect* [*khawwāṣ*] and *the friends of God* [*awliyā’*], which they soon incorporated into Sufism. Al-Sulamī (d.1021)’s compilation of Sufi exegesis displays how early Sufis like al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Faḍl⁵⁵¹ among others [*ba’duhum*],⁵⁵² as well as Sahl al-Tustarī’s *Tafsīr*⁵⁵³ associate the *sābiqūn* with the elect and the friends of God. Ṭūsī’s association of the *sābiqūn* with *Darvīshes*, and exempting them from the ultimate reckoning fits perfectly into this popular Sufi exegesis. Sahl al-Tustarī’s cautionary remark on the verse of all-inclusive reckoning, for example, has significant overlaps with Ṭūsī’s account:

Q.15:92: *By your Lord, We will question them all.* In this verse there is specificity [*khuṣūṣ*] [within the “all”]. For indeed there are among this nation [*ummah*] those who are gathered up from their graves [and taken] directly to paradise, who do not attend the reckoning [*ḥisāb*], or experience any of the horrors [of the day]. They are those of whom God, Exalted is He, says, *they will be kept away from it* [Q.21:101]. And indeed the Prophet said: “Verily, the friends of God [*awliyā’ Allāh*] leave their graves for paradise and

⁵⁴⁹ al-Dāraqutnī 2005, p.103.

⁵⁵⁰ al-Qūnawī 2012, p.428.

⁵⁵¹ I am not sure about the identity of this Sufi. He might be a companion of Abū ‘Uthmān al-Ḥīrī, Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn al-Faḍl al-Balkhī (d.931) that al-Sulamī cites in his other works, such as *Risālat al-Malāmatīyyah*. (Cf. al-Qushayrī 2007, pp.48-49; Hujvīrī 1926, p.18; Hujvīrī 2001, p.85; Hujvīrī 1911, p.16.)

⁵⁵² See al-Sulamī 2014, Q.21:101.

⁵⁵³

Q.56:10: They are those for whom God’s election [*ikhṭiyār*] and special friendship [*wilāyah*] preceded them before they were even brought into existence. The ones who are brought near [to God] [Q.56:11] are in stations of proximity [*manāzil al-qurb*], and [enjoy] the ease of intimacy [*rawḥ al-uns*]. They are the ones who were the foremost [*sabaqū*] in this life. The prophets were the foremost in having faith in God; the veracious [*ṣiddīqūn*] and martyrs [*shuhadā’*] among the Companions and others were the foremost in having faith in the prophets. (al-Tustarī 2011, Q.56:10, p.218. Also see Bowering 1980, pp.233-234.)

they do not stop for the reckoning, nor do they fear the length of that day. They are the first to reach paradise. *God is well-pleased with them and they are well-pleased with Him. That is the great triumph* [Q.5:119].”⁵⁵⁴

Sufi exegesis is particularly helpful in uncovering the Sufi themes in Ṭūsī’s designation of the most perfect friends, who will not be questioned on the day of reckoning. ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d.1330)’s great work of Sufi exegesis, which was attributed to Ibn al-‘Arabī himself, has significant convergences with Ṭūsī’s description as well. In the very sentence that follows Kāshānī’s introduction of those who “will not be made to stand for the reckoning,” he quotes Q.18:28—exactly like Ṭūsī.⁵⁵⁵

The editor of the *Origin and Destination* could not determine Ṭūsī’s source for God speaking on behalf of the Darvīshes, who skip the step of reckoning in the afterlife as they enjoyed in this world a complete, both physical and mental poverty—a key Sufi theme. Indeed, we find such popular accounts in Sufi hagiographies and works of the period. The hagiographies of al-Biṣṭāmī (d.848)⁵⁵⁶ and Dhū al-Nūn (d.861) narrated identical or parallel accounts, which widely circulated in Sufi works, such as the famous *Conference of the Birds* of

Al-Tustarī’s *Tafsīr* attributes charismatic wonders [*karāmāt*] to the friends of God, assuring that the *awliyā’* is a designation that embraces Sufis. He also discerns a gradation of perfection among the *awliyā’*, such as the “substitutes” [*abdāl*], and the pole [*quṭb*] (see al-Tustarī 2011, pp.89-90; Bowering 1980, pp.235-237.)

⁵⁵⁴ al-Tustarī 2011, Q.15:92, pp.105-106. Also see Bowering 1980, pp.233-235.

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Thus the one who stands with God in [his] affirmation of Oneness ... will not be made to stand for the reckoning. Rather he will be among those of the greatest prize of whom He says: *and restrain yourself along with those who call upon their Lord at morning and evening, desiring His countenance* [Q.18:28]; you are not accountable for them in anything [Q.6:52]; and he will be rewarded by all kinds of bliss in all of the gardens. (‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī [undated], Q.6:30, pp.221-222.)

⁵⁵⁶

A number of people dreamt of Abū Yazīd after his death. One of Abū Yazīd’s disciples, for example, asked him in a dream how he went through the questioning of *Munkar* and *Nakīr* [i.e., the interrogator angels]. Abū Yazīd answered that when they asked him questions, he urged them to go back to God and enquire from Him what he was to Him; for, whatever he would say about his acts of worship would be of no use unless God considered him as one of His servants. (‘Abdu-r-Rabb 1970, p.122.)

‘Aṭṭār (d.ca.1229),⁵⁵⁷ or the lectures of Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī (d.1182) penned by his students.⁵⁵⁸ Far off in al-Andalus, Ibn al-‘Arīf’s *Splendors of Sessions* [*Maḥāsīn al-Majālis*], which clearly depends on ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d.1089)’s Sufi treatise *‘Ilal al-Maqāmāt*,⁵⁵⁹ appeals to the same theme. Enumerating the wonders [*karāmāt*] given to the gnostics [*‘arīfīn*] in the afterlife, Ibn al-‘Arīf cites some of the verses that Ṭūsī cites, and presents the following:

No.26: Being protected from the unrest of interrogation in the tomb [*fitnat sū’āl al-qabr*]. Prompting of the right answers [*talqīn al-ṣawab*], and being saved from the ordeal. ... No.33: The easing of the reckoning. Among them are those for whom there won’t be any reckoning ever.⁵⁶⁰

The theme of God responding to the question of the angels on behalf of the Darvishes was a key devotional aspect of Turkic Sufism of the period as well. In his description of the Day of Reckoning, the most well-known representative of popular Islam in Anatolia in the late thirteenth century, the Darvish poet Yunus Emre (d.ca.1320) was expressing in Turkish the same concern that Ṭūsī was addressing:

The interrogator angels arrived, and asked diverse questions,
Lord, you respond to them instead of me! God, I hand myself over
you.⁵⁶¹

Ṭūsī’s *Origin and Destination* does not have any direct or indirect reference to imāms, or to the backbone of Ismā‘īlī epistemology, instruction [*ta’līm*]. Instead of instruction, the highest form of knowledge is acquired through direct vision, or witnessing⁵⁶²—the major source of Sufi epistemology.⁵⁶³ The work itself aims to explain discursively the visionary, non-discursive accounts of those who

⁵⁵⁷ ‘Aṭṭār [undated] #3108-3115.

⁵⁵⁸ Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī 1425/2004, pp.171-172.

⁵⁵⁹ See Meier 1999, p.245.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibn al-‘Arīf 1933, p.102. For a new French translation, see Ibn al-‘Arīf 2012, pp.54-55.

⁵⁶¹

Geldi Münker ile Nekir

Her birisi sordı bir dil

İlahi sen cevap virgil

Allah sana sundum elim (Yunus Emre [undated], #184, p.148.)

⁵⁶² Ṭūsī 2010b, pp.47-48. Cf. Ṭūsī 1998, #20, p.33 (English text), p.8 (in Persian text).

⁵⁶³ See Chittick 1981, p.89.

possess direct vision: the prophets and the saints [*avliyā'*].⁵⁶⁴ Hence at the very beginning Ṭūsī acknowledges the insufficiency of language and instruction as eschatology is a field of witnessing the ineffable by the people of insight [*ahl-i bīnīsh*], not that of descriptions by scholars [*ahl-i dānīsh*].⁵⁶⁵ The key theme of the book is the inseparability of the origin and destiny of creation as they draw a complete circle beginning and ending with divine oneness. Nothing originally had an existence separate from God, therefore death is nothing but return to the origin and the completion of the circle. As a return, death is the second non-existence, annihilation in Unity [*fanā' dar tavhīd*], but at the same time the second creation.⁵⁶⁶ Hence human perfection is attained by this return to the absolute oneness, which is coterminous with self-annihilation. The realization of complete nothingness and divine oneness coincide. Those who have already not attained the self-annihilation will experience it in the next one:

[T]here are people in this world who are united with their Hereafter: "Even if the veils were removed, my certainty will not increase." ... "I worship God not out of love or fear, but because He is worthy of being worshipped." ... For others than these, It will be disclosed in the second creation [*nash'at-i thāniya*] that their existence was non-existence and their non-existence has been existence; possessing a self has been selflessness and their selflessness has been possessing a self; and *having an attribute was the lack of attribute and attributelessness was having an attribute*.⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁴ Ṭūsī 2010b, pp.47. Badakhchani renders the term "*avliyā'*" as "imāms," aiming to situate Ṭūsī into a Shī'ite theological context, which is in my opinion misleading at least in this context. Cf. Badakhchani in Ṭūsī 2010b, pp.17-20.

⁵⁶⁵ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.47.

⁵⁶⁶ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.52.

⁵⁶⁷ Ṭūsī 2010b, pp.74-75; my emphasis.

This is a crucial passage on eschatology, because a very similar version of it appears in 'Aṭṭār's *Book of Secrets* [*Asrār-nāma*]. (See 'Aṭṭār in Landolt 2006, pp.16-17.) H. Landolt argues that this passage indicates that 'Aṭṭār was familiar with Ismā'īlī ideas of eschatology, and suggests that the *Conference of the Birds* can be actually read from an Ismā'īlī lens on death and resurrection. In other words, instead of finding 'Aṭṭār's influence on Ṭūsī, Landolt goes to the opposite direction by looking for similar passages on Ṭūsī's *Paradise of Submission* and Ḥasan-i Maḥmūd-i Kātīb's *Seven Chapters* [*Haft Bāb*], written around 596/1200, and wrongly attributed to Bābā Sayyidnā, that is, Ḥasan Ṣabbāh (see Landolt 2006).

I find Landolt's argument unconvincing for a few reasons. First, the Ismā'īlī sources, as Landolt concurs, do not give clear support to an Ismā'īlī reading of 'Aṭṭār. Ṭūsī's *Paradise of Submission* itself, admittedly, is very different from the account we find in 'Aṭṭār's *Asrār-nāma*. Landolt

Here Ṭūsī is following a distinctly Sufi form of apophatic apotheosis that can be traced back to Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d.848), Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d.ca.892), al-Nūrī (d.908), al-Junayd (d.910), and al-Shiblī (d.946)'s "man without attributes," widely represented among Sufi masters in different landscapes in the thirteenth century. For example, Rūzbihān Baqlī (d.1209), who unites the Sufi traditions of 'Iraq and southern Iran, cited al-Sahlagī (d.984)'s anecdote on al-Bisṭāmī, and

argues that 'Aṭṭār's his *Book of Secrets [Asrār-nāma]* might have employed the term "the cycle of Adam," which he sees as evidence of 'Aṭṭār's Shī'ī and specifically Ismā'īlī leanings. However, the same phrase appears in the exchange of letters between two Kubrāwī Sufis of the time, one of which, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī (d.1219) was, tellingly, a master of 'Aṭṭār. (Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī in Meier 1999, p.278 (Persian text).) In other words, the phrase supports 'Aṭṭār's closer affiliation with Kubrāwī Sufism, instead of Ismā'īlism.

Second, the above-quoted passage from Ṭūsī's *Origin and Destination* indicate that the removal of the difference between binaries like body and soul, or pure and dust, are actually framed within human apotheosis, not just resurrection. Ṭūsī notes that those who have perfected their soul have already realized their complete annihilation, which removes them beyond such binaries. The two quotations "Even if the veils were removed, my certainty will not increase," and "I worship God not out of love or fear, but because He is worthy of being worshipped" clearly display this context of Sufi apotheosis, as they are found exactly in this context within Sufi writings. This quotation further supports the context of Sufi apotheosis as it cites the verse Q.14:48 immediately after the passage quoted above. This verse was consistently cited by Sufis like 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī within the context of soul's perfection, with similar unifications of binaries. (See especially 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī [undated], p.386, 382; Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2012, p.325; 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī 2012, p.407. Q.14:48 is also one of the most cited verses in Ibn Barrajan's *Īdāh*, insofar as the final transformation of this earth into a new earth and heavens on the Day of Arising is a key theme of his Qur'ānic exegesis. Ibn Barrajan's approach is particularly interesting as he reads the verse literally. Cf. Casewit 2014, p.299-300; Ibn Barrajan 2015, pp.33-34, 202, 214, 304, 427, 441, 451, 484, 517, 543, 602, 676, 700, 702, 705, 778, 822, 834.) More significantly, we find a strikingly parallel conception of soul's perfection in the *Book of Descent* of 'Azīz Nasafī (d.ca.1299), another Persian mystic with strong Kubrāwī ties:

The wayfarer ... becomes translucent, reflective and glasslike ... then the real light – which is God's essence – becomes like one thing with this wayfarer's existence ... in such a way that one cannot distinguish the light from the glass or the glass from the light. It is just like a glass goblet that is extremely translucent and reflective, and which has a very fine and pure wine poured in to it. It is not possible to distinguish the goblet from the wine or the wine from the goblet. This is because the two things are like one. From this perspective the prophets said, "Our spirits are our bodies and our bodies are our spirits." ('Azīz Nasafī in Ridgeon 2014, p.139; my emphasis.)

For these two main reasons, it makes better sense to read the similar eschatological positions of 'Aṭṭār, Ṭūsī and Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī within the context of Persian Sufi, specifically Kubrāwī, apotheosis instead of Ismā'īlism, unless we have stronger evidence to read otherwise.

wrote a commentary on it. Here al-Biṣṭāmī claims that he is devoid of any attribute.⁵⁶⁸ Though for different purposes, Ibn al-ʿArabī also cited the anecdote:

The perfect ones ... have no attribute or description. Abū Yazīd was asked, “How are you this morning?” He said, “Morning and evening only belong to one who is limited by the attribute, but I have no attribute.”⁵⁶⁹

Similar words are also widely narrated from Ibn Abī al-Khayr (d.1049), who famously described himself as “nobody, the son of nobody.”⁵⁷⁰ The popular Sufi manual of al-Kalābādhī narrates a parallel account on Moses, and adds a beautiful poem that he ascribes to al-Nūrī.⁵⁷¹ Al-Sīrjānī (d.ca.1077) quotes al-Kharrāz’s remarks on those who have attained divine union [*muwaḥḥidūn*]: “they have no senses, no apprehension, no existence and no food or blessing—yet they are the most blessed in creation.”⁵⁷² Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d.996) describes those who have perfected their soul in terms of invisibility: “He desired them to be unknown, their grant be without quality [*naṣībuhum lā yukayyaf*], and the magnitude of the profundity of their destination without description.”⁵⁷³ There were Sufis critical of this apophatic notion of human perfection, such as the writer of another authoritative manual, al-Sarrāj (d.977).⁵⁷⁴ Still, in Iran, Central

⁵⁶⁸ Rūzbihān Baqlī in Ernst 1993, p.8. Ernst dates al-Sahlagī’s death 1083.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibn al-ʿArabī in Ernst 1993, p.7.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibn Abī al-Khayr in Nicholson 1921, p.53.

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God sent distracting cares to cover me,
And I am hid from all humanity:
His power unconfined
Dismays th’ appraising mind.

Time knows not that I have in it no share,
And of time's chances I am unaware.
On God's command I wait,
And scorn the hand of fate. (al-Nūrī in al-Kalābādhī 1935, p.114. For the Arabic text, see al-Kalābādhī 1993, p.137.)

⁵⁷² al-Sīrjānī 2012, p.57 (Arabic text).

⁵⁷³ al-Makkī 2001, Vol.1, p.338, 414.

⁵⁷⁴ “They assert that in ecstasy they lose their senses, so that they perceive nothing and transcend the qualities which belong to objects of sensible perception. But this is wrong, since loss of sensation cannot be known except by means of sensation; and sensation is inseparable from human nature.” (al-Sarrāj 1914, #151, p.120 (English text); p.433 (Arabic text).)

Asia and Anatolia, Sufis widely adopted this apophatic conception of apotheosis, which found its way in Ṭūsī's exposition of eschatology.

In addition to the designations "Darvīshes," or "Avliyā" Ṭūsī's *Origin and Destination* describes these most preeminent beloved friends of God in a Sufi vocabulary. They are foremost [*sābiqān*], "the people of unity [*ahl-i vaḥdat*], exalted above the path and travel; rather, they themselves are destination for travelers. 'And let not your eye pass away from them in quest of the fineries of this life' [Q.18:28]."⁵⁷⁵ "The people of unity" was a designation employed not only by Sufis, but also Ismā'īlīs. However, the context of human perfection transforming the desirer or traveler [*murīd*] into the object of desire or the destination [*murād*] is unmistakably a key aspect of Sufi apotheosis that we find widely circulating among thirteenth century Sufis.⁵⁷⁶ 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣaqaḷī (fl.late 10th CE)'s commentary on Sahl al-Tustarī differentiates the *murīd*, who desires God, from the one who is already the *murād*, who is desired by God.⁵⁷⁷ Al-Tustarī's own Qur'ān commentary makes the same distinction:

Q.6:125: Truly God has distinguished between the one who seeks [*murīd*] and the one who is [divinely] sought [*murād*], even though they are both from Him [*min 'indihī*]. But He simply wanted to distinguish the elite [*khuṣūṣ*] from the generality [*'umūm*], and so He singled out the one who is sought [*murād*] in this chapter and others.⁵⁷⁸

That perfect seeker becoming the sought one was indeed one of the most common Sufi tropes for human perfection in Ṭūsī's time.⁵⁷⁹ "The seeker is in reality the sought, and the Sought the Seeker" appears in popular Sufi manuals, including that of al-Kalābādhī (d.990).⁵⁸⁰ The same theme can be found in Ibn al-'Arabī's own writings and in his circle as well.⁵⁸¹ Also Ibn al-'Arabī's close disciple Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥabashī (d.1221), for example, writes that "one is not 'a desirer' so

⁵⁷⁵ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.62.

⁵⁷⁶ See Bowering 1980, pp.153-154.

⁵⁷⁷ See Bowering 1980, p.232.

⁵⁷⁸ al-Tustarī 2011, p.66.

⁵⁷⁹ See e.g. Muḥammad Pārsā 1975, p.23. Also see the next part on apophatic apotheosis in Rūmī's circle.

⁵⁸⁰ al-Kalābādhī 1993, Ch.63, p.158; al-Kalābādhī 1935, p.141.

⁵⁸¹ For *murīd* and *murād*, see Ibn al-'Arabī 1428/2007l, p.407. For the *ḥālāt al-murīdīn* and *ḥālāt al-murādīn*, see Ibn al-'Arabī 1428/2007m, p.258. Also see Chittick 1989, p.229, p.389n.8.

long as one is not ‘desired,’ one is not ‘desired’ so long as one is not ‘a desirer’.”⁵⁸²

Even more significantly, Ṭūsī continues his description with a citation from an evidently Sufi source, without translating from Arabic into Persian: “of these are the group that: *‘if present, they are not recognized, and if absent they are not missed’*.”⁵⁸³ The citation expresses one of the major principles of the path of self-blame [*malāmatīyyah*], which originated in Nīsabūr in the ninth century, and became a widespread theme among later Sufis. The public invisibility of the most intimate friends of God is in unison with the apophatic apotheosis wherein human self, existence and attributes are perfected through their negation. Hence, Ṭūsī’s people of unity, who are not recognized if present and not missed if absent are of particular importance here. While the source of Ṭūsī is difficult to determine, popular Sufi works of al-Kharkūshī (d.1016) and al-Sulamī (d.1021) among others contain similar accounts on the people of blame.⁵⁸⁴ Similar accounts inundate the corpus on Malāmatīs and Sufis. Al-Sulamī’s treatise on the self-humiliation of the poor aspirants [*Kitāb Bayān Tadhallūl al-Fuqarā’*], for example, describes the sincerest level of seekers, “the poor” [*fuqarā’*] in similar lines with Ṭūsī: “He does not seek excessively; nor does he frequent a particular place by which he may be known, nor does he wear garments that discern him from his own kind.”⁵⁸⁵ Ṭūsī’s attributeless Darvīshes will be also exempt from the reckoning exactly because they were perfectly *fuqarā’* in this world—they have nothing to be accountable. Again, Sufi exegesis indicates further connections with Ṭūsī’s attributeless friends of God. Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d.932)’s interpretation of Q.21:101, the very verse that Sahl al-Tustarī quotes in his account of the *sābiqūn*, the friends of God who will skip the reckoning, is of particular relevance here:

Q.21:101: “*Those to whom the good went beforehand [sabaqat] from Us, they will be kept away from it.*” Those are a people whom God has guided. He guides them by His Essence and He makes them holy with His attributes. Thus, He makes witnessings, transitory things, and beholding recompenses fall away from them. *They have no way to allude to their secret hearts and*

⁵⁸² al-Ḥabashī in Gril 1979, p.106 (Arabic text). For an English translation, see al-Ḥabashī 1994.

⁵⁸³ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.62; my emphasis.

⁵⁸⁴ See e.g. al-Kharkūshī 1999, p.41; al-Sulamī 2009a, p.133; al-Sulamī 2009b, pp.136-137, 145, 155.

⁵⁸⁵ al-Sulamī 2009b, p.155.

*nothing to express their places. He veils them from being settled in the homesteads [mawāṭin]. They are not they through themselves and they are not present in their presence through their presence.*⁵⁸⁶

Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d.932)'s interpretation is significant for Ṭūsī's hidden, beloved friends of God, who will skip the reckoning, at least for two reasons. First, it associates the attributeless friends of God with the *sābiqūn*, as Ṭūsī does. Second, al-Wāsiṭī's interpretation is preserved in al-Sulamī (d.1021)'s prominent compilation of Sufi exegetes, *Truths of Qur'ānic Exegesis [Ḥaqqā'iq al-Tafsīr]*, which, as we have seen above, has outstanding convergences with Ṭūsī's account of the Darvīshes.

But there is an even more striking potential source for the *Origin and Destination* than al-Sulamī's famous compilation of Sufi exegesis. Ṭūsī's quotation, "*if present, they are not recognized, and if absent they are not missed*" almost verbatim appears in Ibn al-'Arabī's descriptions of his admired master, Abū Ja'dūn al-Ḥinnāwī (d.1201). Apparently a simple henna siever, who had ill-vision because of his vocation, al-Ḥinnāwī also suffered from a tied tongue and spoke only with great difficulty. Ibn al-'Arabī writes, "*when he was absent he wasn't missed and when he was present no-one sought his advice.*"⁵⁸⁷ For Ibn al-'Arabī, however, he was one of the most impressive Sufis, indeed, one of the four poles [*awtād*] arcanelly living on earth. As a perfectly hidden master of self-blame, if al-Ḥinnāwī "spoke he appeared foolish, when he sat down others began to get up

⁵⁸⁶ I used the English translation of Silvers; see Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī in Silvers 2002, pp.171-172; my emphasis. For the original Arabic text, see Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī in Sulamī 2014, Q.21:101

قال الواسطي رحمة الله عليه: أولئك قوم هداهم الله فهذبهم بذاته، وقد سهم بصفاته، فسقطت عنهم الشواهد والأغراض، (ومطالعات الأعواض، فلا لهم إشارة في شواهدهم، ولا عبارة عن أماكنهم، وحجبهم عن الاستقرار في المواطن. فلا هم، هم (بأنفسهم ولا هم حاضرين في حضورهم بحضورهم

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This shaykh was one of the four Supports [*awtād*] through whom God preserves the world. He had asked God to remove his good repute from the hearts of the world. *When he was absent he wasn't missed and when he was present no-one sought his advice; when he arrived in a place he was accorded no welcome and in conversation he was passed over and ignored.* (Ibn al-'Arabī 1971, pp.114-115; my emphasis. For the original Arabic, see Ibn al-'Arabī 1414/1994, p.107.)

Cf. al-Sulamī 2015, p.104, 106.

and leave and when he was present in a company the others found his presence tiresome. This state of affairs was pleasing to him.”⁵⁸⁸

The three works of Ibn al-‘Arabī, which mention al-Ḥinnāwī and contain the phrase on the invisible presence of the people of self-blame, were written between years 1200s and 1230s. Most, if not all, of these works were present in the library of al-Qūnawī that he inherited from the master.⁵⁸⁹ Whether taken from Ibn al-‘Arabī via al-Qūnawī or not, the very fact that Ṭūsī did not translate the quotation but kept the original Arabic in *Origin and Destination* indicates his familiarity with the Sufi literature that contained such elements of self-blame. The same observation can be made on popular Sufi sayings that Ṭūsī directly quotes in the book. A key principle of Sufi epistemology, “information cannot be like witnessing,”⁵⁹⁰ and similar dictums “die before you die!”⁵⁹¹ or “certainties are moments”⁵⁹² are directly quoted in Arabic probably from Sufi sources with which the young Ṭūsī was evidently conversant. Moreover, the prophetic reports that Ṭūsī cites circulated among both Sunnī and Shī‘ī Sufis, such as in the *Ta’wīlāt* of ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d.1330) attributed to Ibn al-‘Arabī,⁵⁹³ and in the works of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111),⁵⁹⁴ al-Āmulī (d.1385),⁵⁹⁵ Rajab Bursī

⁵⁸⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabī 1971, p.116.

⁵⁸⁹ Austin in Ibn al-‘Arabī 1971, p.19. The books in al-Qūnawī’s library, on the other hand, might have different prospects after his death in 1274, if his last will was followed:

My books on philosophy [*ḥikamī*] should be sold and the proceeds given as alms. The rest of the books - the medical works, works on jurisprudence, Qur’ānic commentaries, collections of prophetic traditions, etc. - should be made into an endowment. My own writings [*taṣānīf*] should be taken to ‘Afīf al-Dīn [al-Tilimsānī (d.1291)] so that they can be a remembrance from me to him; and he should be enjoined not to be niggardly in giving them to those in whom he sees the qualifications to profit from them. (Qūnawī in Chittick 1978.)

⁵⁹⁰ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.47; Ibn ‘Ajībāh 1985, p.161; Ibn al-Munavvar 1313/1934, p.241.

⁵⁹¹ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.56.

⁵⁹² Ṭūsī 2010b, p.60.

⁵⁹³ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.68.

⁵⁹⁴ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.55.

⁵⁹⁵ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.72.

(d.1411),⁵⁹⁶ al-Suyūṭī (d.1505),⁵⁹⁷ al-Narāqī (d.1794),⁵⁹⁸ and Ibn ‘Ajībah (d.1809).⁵⁹⁹

An unmistakable Sufi tone inundates *the Origin and Destination*. “All is just He” [*hamā ūst*] claims Ṭūsī boldly at the beginning of *Origin and Destination*,⁶⁰⁰ like Ibn Abī al-Khayr (d.1049),⁶⁰¹ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d.1126), ‘Aṭṭār (d.ca.1229),⁶⁰² Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī (d.1289)⁶⁰³ and many other Sufis of the time.⁶⁰⁴ Strikingly, Ibn Abī al-Khayr’s mention of the same phrase “all is just He” appears in the very anecdote where the shaykh (i) adopts the perspective of apophatic apotheosis, (ii) describes and explicitly praises the path of self-blame, (iii) underscores that information [*khabar*] has no epistemological power in the visionary quest of self-purification, (iv) and addresses the insufficiency of language and discourse in the territories of witnessing. In the same anecdote he even mentions the report “information cannot be like witnessing” in Persian that Ṭūsī cites in Arabic.⁶⁰⁵ In

⁵⁹⁶ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.87.

⁵⁹⁷ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.85.

⁵⁹⁸ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.57.

⁵⁹⁹ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.47. Cf. Ibn ‘Ajībah 1985, p.161.

⁶⁰⁰ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.47.

⁶⁰¹ Ibn al-Munavvar 1313/1934, p.241.

⁶⁰² ‘Aṭṭār [undated] #60-65.

⁶⁰³ ‘Irāqī 1982, #4, p.79.

⁶⁰⁴ See Chittick 1994.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibn al-Munavvar 1313/1934, p.241. Nicholson rendered the passage as well:

God opens to him the gate of love [*maḥabbat*], and here too egoism shows itself for a time and he is exposed to blame [*malāmat*], which means that in his love of God he meets fearlessly whatever may befall him and recks not of reproach; but still he thinks “I love” and finds no rest until he perceives that it is God who loves him and keeps him in the state of loving, and that this is the result of divine love and grace, not of his own endeavor. Then God opens to him the gate of unity [*tavḥīd*] and causes him to know that all action depends on God Almighty. Hereupon he perceives that all is He, and all is by Him, and all is His; that He has laid this self-conceit upon His creatures in order to prove them, and that He in His omnipotence ordains that they shall hold this false belief, because omnipotence is His attribute, so that when they regard His attributes they shall know that He is the Lord. What formerly was hearsay now becomes known to him intuitively as he contemplates the works of God. Then he entirely recognizes that he has not the right to say “I” or “mine.” At this stage he beholds his helplessness; desires fall away from him and he becomes free and calm. He wishes that which God wishes: his own wishes are gone, he is

light of these significant parallels it is more than tempting to conclude that the young Ṭūsī was familiar with the hagiography of Ibn Abī al-Khayr or another Sufi work that adopted the path of self-blame.

Hence Ṭūsī's early eschatological work written in the Ismā'īlī stronghold in Qūhistān closely associates itself within Sufi themes, terms, and networks. Ṭūsī's knowledge of Sufism manifested in his later works such as his correspondence with al-Qūnawī or Kīshī (d.1295), or his Sufi monograph the *Attributes of the Illustrious* is more than a late interest or political calculation. But unlike al-Qūnawī, who explicitly aims to reconcile Sufism and Philosophy,⁶⁰⁶ Ṭūsī does not have a reconciliatory Ismā'īlī agenda. Instead, Sufism and Ismā'īlism are in an uneasy tension in Ṭūsī's early writings, and he does not undertake to harmonize the two. The conflict between the *Origin and Destination* written in Qūhistān during 1224-1235, and a letter on divine union that he wrote around 1240 in Alamūt depicts this tension vividly. While *Origin and Destination* opened with the popular Persian Sufi phrase "all is just He," his letter to Khwāja Muḥammad Bāsa'īd [fl.ca.13th CE] as an Ismā'īlī master strongly condemns this phrase. Bāsa'īd's letter grumbles about a group of fellow Ismā'īlīs who uttered the phrase "all is just He," and asks Ṭūsī whether it is appropriate or not. Furious at hearing such a report, Ṭūsī's harsh response allows for violent punishment of these fools. "Real cohesion [*payvastan*] and unification [*ittihād*] with the real light of the world of religion" is attained only through proper submission to the imāms. Accordingly, God is known through following His vicegerents via proper instruction. Only the uneducated, Riff-Raff Ismā'īlīs [*ghulāt-a ḥashvī*] would utter such a claim, which is nothing but an expression of disbelief and polytheism [*kufra va shirk*].⁶⁰⁷

emancipated from his wants, and has gained peace and joy in both worlds. First, action is necessary, then knowledge, in order that thou mayst know that thou knowest naught and art no one. This is not easy to know. It is a thing that cannot be rightly learned by instruction, nor sewn on with needle nor tied on with thread. It is the gift of God." The heart's vision is what matters, not the tongue's speech. (Ibn Abī al-Khayr in Nicholson 1921, p.52.)

The next sentence of Ibn Abī al-Khayr is "*hamā ūst*," which Nicholson does not add to his selection.

⁶⁰⁶ While Ṭūsī aims a reconciliation neither between Sufism and Philosophy, nor between Sufism and Ismā'īlism, al-Qūnawī's explicit aim in his correspondence with Ṭūsī is a synthesis between Philosophy and Sufism. For al-Qūnawī's project of harmonization, see Chittick 1981.

⁶⁰⁷ Ṭūsī 2005, pp.213-219 (Persian text); pp.172-176 (English translation).

How to reconcile, if one should, the Ismā'īlī Ṭūsī of Qūhistān who praises the Darvīshes and *avliyā'*, employs Sufi terms and themes, and declares that “all is just He,” with the Ismā'īlī Ṭūsī of Alamūt who fiercely condemns the same utterance? Ṭūsī's only major treatise specifically devoted to Sufism and one of his latest theological works, the *Attributes of the Illustrious* is of particular importance in this ambivalent context. The work embodies not only a peculiar employment of Ismā'īlī apophysis within a Sufi context, but also sheds light on the convergence of Ismā'īlism and Sufism in Ṭūsī's corpus without a theoretical effort to harmonize the two traditions.

Attributes of the Illustrious: the Case of Sufi-Ismā'īlī Apophaticism of an “Imāmī” Polymath

Ṭūsī's *Attributes of the Illustrious* was written towards the end of his life, after his apparent conversion from Ismā'īlism to Imāmiyyah. The work describes the Sufi path in six chapters, which, in turn, are composed of six stations. The fifth chapter concerns the states of the most distinguished wayfarers who have attained union [*ahl-a vuṣūl*]. It contains the stages of *complete trust to God* [*tavakkul*], *resignation* [*riḏā*], *submission* [*taslīm*], *unification* [*tavḥīd*], *conjunction* [*ittihād*], and *union* [*vaḥdat*]. The sixth and last chapter is an exception as it is merely on annihilation [*fanā'*].

Since the ninth century onwards Sufis have defined such paths of spiritual progress. Ṭūsī's list of stages, however, has no precedent in the Sufi literature.⁶⁰⁸ Especially *submission* did not surface in any of the thirteenth century or earlier Sufi manuals. It was the presence of this term, which had evident significance in Ismā'īlism, that made Ṭūsī's Sufi path somewhat unprecedented.⁶⁰⁹ More interestingly, the same order, with a slight difference, appears in Ṭūsī's earlier, “Ismā'īlī” eschatology, *Origin and Destination*. Here Ṭūsī explains that the return to divine oneness requires first the annihilation of the volition which lifts one to the rank of *resignation*. Then, with the annihilation of one's power, one attains

⁶⁰⁸ *Complete trust to God* and *resignation* are depicted as two consecutive Sufi stages in the descriptions of al-Sarrāj and al-Kalābādhī (al-Sarrāj 1914, pp.51-54 (Arabic text); al-Kalābādhī 1993, #44-45, pp.118-121. For the English translations see al-Sarrāj 1914 #26-27, pp.15-16 (English text); al-Kalābādhī 1935 #44-45, pp.92-94). The Qur'ānic verses cited by al-Sarrāj and Ṭūsī in the sections on *complete trust to God* and *resignation* are identical. While we can surmise that Ṭūsī had access to al-Sarrāj's well-known work, both al-Sarrāj and al-Kalābādhī have other stages and stations that are very different from that of Ṭūsī.

⁶⁰⁹ Nor does it look like Ibn Sīnā's “Stations of the Mystics.” Cf. Ibn Sīnā and Ṭūsī 1994, Vol.4, pp.76-95.

the stage of *complete trust*. In the next step, one's knowledge must be annihilated in God's knowledge, which brings the stage of *submission*. Finally, "one's existence must be annihilated in God's existence, to the extent that one should become nothing on their own. This is the rank of the people of unity [*maqām-i ahl-i vaḥdat*]." ⁶¹⁰ In other words, the places of the stages of *resignation* and *complete trust* are reversed in *Attributes of the Illustrious* and *Origin and Destination*, while other stages and themes are identical. Even the Qur'ānic verses that Ṭūsī cites for the stages of *resignation*, *complete trust*, and *submission* are the same. ⁶¹¹

Why are *resignation* and *complete trust* reversed in the "Ismā'īlī" eschatology and the "Sufi" manual? Ṭūsī's brief exposition of the Sufi path in his letter to al-Qūnawī is an outstanding piece as it removes the mystery. Here, Ṭūsī has another, however brief, account of the Sufi path. Accordingly, *resignation* and *complete trust* constitute a binary; they represent one single station, and Ṭūsī nowhere employs them separately. ⁶¹² When one transcends "the station of *resignation* and *complete trust*," one attains *union*, which is beyond *unification* as well as *conjunction*. This depiction in the letter is in perfect harmony with the account in *Attributes of the Illustrious* and *Origin and Destination*. Hence we have three texts that strongly cohere in their description of the spiritual path. Moreover, Ṭūsī calls these most distinguished travelers both "those who have attained absolute union" [*ahl al-vaḥdat al-muṭlaqah*] and "the people of union" [*ahl-a vuṣūl*]⁶¹²—both of the designations appear in *Attributes of the Illustrious* and *Origin and Destination* respectively.

The unique "Sufi path" of Ṭūsī's *Attributes of the Illustrious* and the *Letters* is paved by an Ismā'īlī approach to spiritual progression. However, not only the path of spiritual progress is in line with his Ismā'īlī writings. All features of Ismā'īlī apophaticism are also present in the Sufi garment. Striking parallels can be found even in rhetorical gestures—such as the opening of the book, or the devotional expressions. *Attributes of the Illustrious* opens in an eye-catchingly Ismā'īlī apophatic manner, very similar to the works of al-Sijistānī and Kirmānī. In this fundamentally apophatic opening, Ṭūsī cancels both positive and negative discourse on God:

⁶¹⁰ Ṭūsī 2010b, p.82.

⁶¹¹ Q.9:72, Q.65:3 and Q.4:65 for *resignation*, *complete trust*, and *submission* respectively.

⁶¹² Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī 1995, p.91.

Incomparable thanks to God, because no intellect has the power to access His truth, and no thought or knowledge can comprehend the fullness of His gnosis. Every expression that aims at His description and every utterance that verbalizes his identity is perceived only via the blemish of similarity [*tashbīh*] if it is affirmative; its perception is not freed from the scourge of ineffectualism [*taʿtīl*] if it is not affirmative.⁶¹³

The more we proceed, the more Ṭūsī's apophatic theology with its double negation reveals itself in the Sufi terminology. Step four of the Sufi path, *unification*, brings the seeker to the realization that the attribute "Being" should be negated from creation because only God deserves it:

[*Tavhīd* is] to cut off oneself from the vision of plurality and to consider everything One, and to see all One. Once the seeker unifies in the depth of her soul all in Oneness, she moves from the station of "He is One and there is none who shares with Him in *divinity*" to the station of "He is One and there is none who shares with Him in *Being*."⁶¹⁴

Unification thus separates God's Being from creation, insofar as only God is the Real Being. The limits of this act of negation, however, become clear once the seeker progresses on the Sufi path, and achieves *conjunction*. "'Unification' is to make one, while 'conjunction' is to become One. ... In *unification* there is a blemish of limitedness that does not exist in *conjunction*."⁶¹⁵ More clearly, *unification* is the realization of the seeker that God is the only real Being. This is very much like the necessary existent [*wājib al-wujūd*] of the Philosophers, which is the only Real Being and the source from which all beings emanate. The station of *conjunction* is the realization of this positive, causal ground of Being, and negating it in favor of the non-discursive, ineffable, visionary testimony of God's oneness: "[*conjunction*] is to see that all is He, without limiting Him by saying that 'everything other than Him exists through Him, so all are One'."⁶¹⁶

Step five, *conjunction*, negates from God the attribute of Being, along with ontic, causal relationality. Still, says Ṭūsī, "*conjunction* means to become One, but it has

⁶¹³ Ṭūsī 1369/1990, p.3.

⁶¹⁴ Ṭūsī 1369/1990, p.93.

⁶¹⁵ Ṭūsī 1369/1990, p.95; my emphasis.

⁶¹⁶ Ṭūsī 1369/1990, p.95.

the smell of plurality.”⁶¹⁷ The very discursive act of negating God’s Being along everything else needs to be negated with a second move in order to indicate pure oneness. This is the station of *divine union* [*vaḥdah*] where discourse, with its endless binaries, cancels itself:

rest and motion, contemplation and remembrance, journey and wayfaring, desire, desirer and desired, deficiency and perfection are all non-existent in oneness. “*When discourse arrives at God, rein back!*”⁶¹⁸

The sixth “step,” *union*, is the performative negation that cuts all discursive fields in order to indicate divine oneness. This was the end of their journeys, and the self-negation of the discourse, for the most advanced Sufis. Indeed, the Ismā’īlī path described in Ṭūsī’s *Solidarity and Dissociation* [*Tavallā va Tabarrā*] ends exactly at this point, where it fundamentally overlaps with the *Attributes of the Illustrious*. The treatise is written for the novice Ismā’īlī seekers of *union* [*ṭālib-i vaḥdat*], and similarly it depicts the station of *union* as the stage where discourse cancels itself, after having removed its ground, both positive and negative. In the realm of *union*, accordingly,

there is neither knowing nor known, neither lover nor beloved. All will be God and God alone. ... [T]his is a rank that no creature can describe. That which can be described in words cannot be free from denial [*kufr*] and ascribing partners to God [*shirk*].⁶¹⁹

The station of *union* corresponds to the numeric oneness of the Divine Word in the apophatic tradition that Ṭūsī inherited. This numeric oneness can be indicated only with the self-canceling discursive gesture. The absolute oneness of God, which is beyond the numerical oneness, cannot be indicated anyway, but it still needs to be addressed. Hence unlike *Solidarity and Dissociation*, *The Attributes of the Illustrious* adds a sixth chapter. This chapter “explains” this non-journey of unknowing this beyond of the beyond-intellect. Ṭūsī associates this “non-journey” with non-discursive negation, by calling it “*annihilation*” [*fanā’*]. This is very much in opposition to the well-known Sufi format, which neither depicts *annihilation* as the final culmination of the path, nor employs the term without its generally superior counterpart of “*subsistence*” [*baqā’*], or “*annihilation of annihilation*.” For Ṭūsī, however, there is no (and no no) subsistence, life, being or any other positive ground anymore, as this would

⁶¹⁷ Ṭūsī 1369/1990, p.96; my emphasis.

⁶¹⁸ Ṭūsī 1369/1990, p.96; my emphasis.

⁶¹⁹ Ṭūsī 2010c, p.32.

violate oneness. This “station” is called “*annihilation*” not because there is something that has, or can be annihilated, but only because it is a common, negative linguistic signal to oneness. “[Sufis] call it *annihilation* [*fanā*’], because the return of creation is by *annihilation*, as its origin was from non-existence [*‘adam*].”⁶²⁰ There is no way from the numeric oneness to the absolute oneness; there is only *annihilation* that is *neither a negation nor a confirmation, nor their negations*:

In oneness, there is no wayfarer and wayfaring, journey and aim, desire, desirer and desired: “everything perishes except His face” [Q.28:88]. Also there is no affirmation of this discourse, and it cannot be uttered; and there is no negation of this discourse, and it cannot be uttered. *Affirmation and negation are binaries, and duality is the source of multiplicity. There is no affirmation or negation there. Negation of the negation, or affirmation of the affirmation also is not there. Negation of the affirmation, or affirmation of the negation also is not there.*⁶²¹

Ṭūsī’s apophatic theology presents irreducible Sufi themes perfectly blend with the heritage of Sijistānī, Kirmānī and other Ismā’īlīs. The negation of all attributes and even of Being is mixed with a rational, non-mystical self-negation of discourse that leads to the unknowability of the trans-transcendent God beyond oneness. His account of the apophatic Sufi-Ismā’īlī theology in the *Attributes of the Illustrious* displays two key interrelated phenomena: the theological and thematic porosity of Sufism and Ismā’īlism in thirteenth century Iran, as well as the continuity of the Ismā’īlī apophatic tradition, in different forms, after the Mongol invasions.

The porosity of negative theology should not be mistaken for harmonization in the case of Ṭūsī, because he neither considers himself a Sufi in any sense, nor aims to integrate Sufism and Ismā’īlism. *The Attributes of the Illustrious* is not a Sufi-Ismā’īlī (or Ismā’īlī-Sufi) treatise that wants to harmonize the two. Instead, it is Ṭūsī’s deeply empathetic but also “Ismā’īlized” depiction of pious Sufism to the powerful Īlkhānid vizier Shams al-Dīn (d.1284)’s ill-fated son Bahā’ al-Dīn (d.1279), who was already an admirer of Sufi saints [*muḥibb al-avliyā*’] according to Ṭūsī himself.⁶²² The theological divergence becomes clear at the very

⁶²⁰ Ṭūsī 1369/1990, p.101.

⁶²¹ Ṭūsī 1369/1990, p.101; my emphasis.

⁶²² Ṭūsī 1369/1990, p.4.

beginning of the treatise, when Ṭūsī is describing the prerequisites of the wayfaring for the novice in the very first station of the first chapter. This is “faith” [*īmān*], and it requires the affirmation of the certain knowledge [*‘ilm qaṭ’ī*] of God’s eight essential attributes.⁶²³ This Ash’arite stance was of course not acceptable to Ṭūsī as we know from his other writings, but it was an accurate description of a widespread Sufi creed of the time. Even though Ṭūsī adds Ismā’īlī apophatic themes to his treatise on Sufism, he appears as more of an outsider describing a form of Sufism that would be later, or was already being incorporated within Ismā’īlī apophaticism. Reading his *Attributes of the Illustrious* in the light of his *oeuvre* -especially *Letters* and *Origin and Destination*- indicates a very different trope than bringing Sufism and Ismā’īlism together. Instead, in Ṭūsī’s *oeuvre* they are *already blend together*, which provides important insights into later Ismā’īlism.

Another possible contemporary of Ṭūsī to blend Ismā’īlī apophaticism and Sufism is Ibn al-‘Arabī. As recent studies indicate, Ibn al-‘Arabī was influenced by Ismā’īlism in various ways, including the cosmological position of the Divine Word, the significance and functions of letters, and the doctrine of the “perfect human.”⁶²⁴ But such continuities extend to his ideas on the divine essence and divine attributes as well. For example, Ibn al-‘Arabī claims that we can only ascribe negative attributes to God, as His positive attributes are not accessible to us. We can say what the divine essence is not, but not what it is.⁶²⁵ He writes,

we have no knowledge of God except through attributes of incomparability or attributes of acts. He who supposes that he has knowledge of positive attributes of the Self [*ṣifah nafsiyyah thubūtiyyah*] has supposed wrongly. For such an attribute would define [*ḥadd*] Him, but His essence has no definition. This is a door locked to engendered existence [*kawn*], a door that cannot be opened. It belongs only to the Real.⁶²⁶

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s negativist approach to the categorization of the divine attributes invites us to uncover further negative theological convergences between Ismā’īlism and Ibn al-‘Arabī’s theology. Yet, based on the inaccessibility of the divine essence, Ibn al-‘Arabī produces creative paradoxes that follow a different apophatic path in negating theological discourse on the divine essence. For

⁶²³ Ṭūsī 1369/1990, p.9.

⁶²⁴ See Ebstein 2014.

⁶²⁵ Chittick 1989, p.59.

⁶²⁶ Ibn al-‘Arabī in Chittick 1989, p.58.

example, he does not follow the Ismā'īlī asymmetrical preference of the negative language over positive one. Instead, he argues that the negative language employed in reference to God “returns to non-existence and negativity [*al-nafy*], and negativity cannot be an attribute of the essence.”⁶²⁷ On the other hand, the positive language returns to us, because we only affirm that which we consider worth counting a divine attribute. “Therefore,” continues Ibn al-‘Arabī, “this reflective thinker, wavering between affirmation and negation, has gained nothing of knowledge of God.”⁶²⁸ His symmetrical approach to language, and the resulting paradoxical apophaticism of the divine essence is innovative enough to break with the apophatic strategies of the Ismā'īlīs, and to shift to another apophatic theological tradition wherein it established a long career to date. While there are intellectual continuities in the Ismā'īlī and Akbarī heritages, they have established apophatic strategies in different structures. Awḥad al-Dīn Balyānī (d.ca.1284), an apparently Akbarī visionary Sufi provides a fascinating case study illustrating this difference. Al-Balyānī employs dizzying paradoxes that paralyze the reader, and gives the initial impression that he followed Ibn al-‘Arabī’s apophatic path of paradox. However, a closer reading of Balyānī will display the surprising presence of Ismā'īlī apophatic strategies in his work instead of those of Ibn al-‘Arabī.

Kāzarūnī Sufism in Southern Iran

The earliest work attributed to Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240) to be translated into English (pbl.1901), Italian (pbl.1907), and French (pbl.1911) –his *Treatise of Divine Unicity*– played an influential role in Western depictions of Sufis, and Akbarians more specifically.⁶²⁹ However it has been known for more than three decades that its original writer was a Persian Sufi of Shīrāz, Awḥad al-Dīn Balyānī (d.ca.1284), whose name appears in the initiatic lineage of the Kāzarūniyyah founded by the celibate Sufi Abū Ishāq Kāzarūnī (d.1035).⁶³⁰ Having spent his live in the triangle of Balyān, Shīrāz and Kāzarūn, Balyānī does not seem to have left Fars. His father Ḍiyā’ al-Dīn Mas’ūd (d.1257) was the previous *shaykh* of the Kāzarūniyyah and his first teacher. His two other teachers were Abū Bakr Hamadānī (fl.13th CE), who was excessively ascetic, and Najīb al-Dīn ‘Alī Buzghush (d.1279), who was a reputable Suhrawardī master of teaching [*shaykh al-ta’līm*]. None of them inclined towards speculative Sufism, less so to writing on it.

⁶²⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabī in Chittick 1989, p.60; my emphasis

⁶²⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabī in Chittick 1989, p.60.

⁶²⁹ Morris 2001; also see Shams and Negahban 2013.

⁶³⁰ Ohlander 2008, p.78.

Hence, Balyānī's treatise fits neither with his Kāzarūnī - Suhrawardī context, wherein Sufism is mainly about good practice encompassing social activism, charity, and a strongly ascetic pedagogy, nor with his life narrative as a cloak-investing perfect spiritual master of teaching who was inclined to spiritual retreat.⁶³¹ How Balyānī adopted an apophatic theology with the double negation in Ismā'īlī-style, and how this approach of an authoritative Sufi master of an influential Sufi order remained so unique and isolated are mysteries yet to be solved.

In Ṭūsī's Ismā'īlī schema of Sufism, *unification* was followed by *conjunction*, which negated all positive grounds for discourse. Following this was the final "stage" of *union*, where discourse, both positive and negative, was negated. Balyānī's treatise seems to follow a parallel path even if it is far from being systematized in the way that Ṭūsī presented it. In the classical Ismā'īlī apophatic spirit, *the Treatise of Divine Unicity* opens with a dazzling list of continuously negated attributes—a process which, as Balyānī declares, protects from anthropomorphism:

Praise be to God before whose oneness there was not a before, unless the before were He, and after whose singleness there is not an after, except the after be He. He is, and there is with Him no after nor before, nor above nor below, nor far nor near, nor union nor division, nor how nor where nor when, nor times nor moment nor age, nor being nor place. And He is now as He was. He is the one without oneness, and the single without singleness. He is not composed of name and named, for His name is He and His named is He. So there is no name other than He, nor named. And so He is the name and the named. He is the first without firstness, and the Last without lastness. He is the outward without outwardness, and the Inward without inwardness. I mean that He is the very existence of the first and the very existence of the last, and the very existence of the outward and the very existence of the Inward. So that there is no first nor last, nor outward nor inward, except Him, without these becoming Him or His becoming them. Understand, therefore, in order that thou mayest not fall into the error of the Incarnationists [*al-Ḥulūliyyah*].⁶³²

⁶³¹ Shams and Negahban 2013.

⁶³² Balyānī 1976, p.3.

The world, which came to existence via the Divine Word, is nothing but God's manifestation in reality in Balyānī's cosmology. Every manifestation is also a veil, which needs to be removed. It is negation that performs this unveiling. The most immediate locus to begin this apophatic journey is one's self. That the One is the real source of being leads to the realization that you are not what is beside God [*māsiwā'*],⁶³³ but Him, without your becoming Him or His becoming you.⁶³⁴ Hence, the gnosis of oneself displays "that thy existence is neither existent nor non-existent, and that thou art not, wast not, and never wilt be."⁶³⁵ This is the meaning of *unification* [*tawḥīd*]. Balyānī explains this realization of the true Being in a stupefying manner:

Know that thy existence is not thy existence nor other than thy existence. For thou art not existent nor non-existent, nor other than existent nor other than non-existent. Thy existence and thy non-existence are His existence, and yet without there being any existence or non-existence, because thy existence and thy non-existence are actually His existence.⁶³⁶

The *unification* of all in God, who is the only true Being, however, assumes a positive ground that is negated. The self-annihilation required for *unification* "presupposes an affirmation of existence, and whoever posits an existence beside Him makes a partner to Him."⁶³⁷ Beyond *unification*, there is *conjunction*—the realization that the multiplicity presumed for *unification* does not exist. There is a *conjunction* without *conjunction* [*waṣl bilā waṣl*], and nearness without nearness, and farness without farness.⁶³⁸ *Conjunction* is the realization that the multiplicity presumed for *unification* does not exist. The self-annihilation required for *unification* is negated, because there is no independent self as such. Annihilation is annihilated; negation is negated in the step of *conjunction*, else it would be polytheism [*shirk*].⁶³⁹ No discursive access remains to oneness with this realization that there is nothing to negate. Balyānī, echoing al-Sijistānī and Ṭūsī, emphasizes that his double negation is different from the "annihilation of annihilation" of other Sufis that cannot negate the positivity of

⁶³³ Balyānī 1976, p.8.

⁶³⁴ Balyānī 1976, p.9.

⁶³⁵ Balyānī 1976, p.12.

⁶³⁶ Balyānī 1976, pp.14-15.

⁶³⁷ Balyānī 1976, pp.16-17.

⁶³⁸ Balyānī 1976, p.15.

⁶³⁹ Balyānī 1976, p.18

the self. Indeed, the “annihilation of annihilation” that Balyānī criticized can be found in the teachings of well-known Kubrāwī, Naqshbandī, Shādhilī, Suhrawardī and Qādirī Sufi masters. The term had considerable appeal among Sufis from at least the ninth century and the teachings of al-Biṣṭāmī (d.848).⁶⁴⁰ “Annihilation of annihilation” appeared in prominent Sufi texts including al-Junayd (d.910)’s *Letters*,⁶⁴¹ al-Sarrāj (d.977)’s *Book of Sparkling Lights*,⁶⁴² al-Hujvīrī (d.1077)’s *Unveiling*,⁶⁴³ Abū Yūsuf al-Hamadānī (d.1140)’s *Rank of Life* [*Rutbat al-ḥayāt*],⁶⁴⁴ Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d.1191)’s *Call of the Sīmurgh*,⁶⁴⁵ Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.ca.1229)’s *Conference*,⁶⁴⁶ Najm al-Dīn Rāzī Dāya (d.1256)’s *Path of God’s Bondsmen*,⁶⁴⁷ ‘Azīz Nasafī (d.ca.1299)’s *Book of Descent*,⁶⁴⁸ Sayyid ‘Alī al-Hamadānī (d.1385)’s *Unveiling of the Realities*,⁶⁴⁹ Muḥammad Pārsā (d.1420)’s *Treatise of the Holy*,⁶⁵⁰ Abū al-Mawāhib al-Shādhilī (d.1477)’s *Articles of the Maxims of Illumination*,⁶⁵¹ Jāmī (d.1492)’s *Gleams*,⁶⁵² Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d.1505)’s *Affirmation of the Sublime Truth*,⁶⁵³ ‘Ā’ishah al-Bā’ūniyyah (d.1517)’s *Principles of Sufism*,⁶⁵⁴ al-Kirimī (d.1757)’s *Proof of the Gnostics* [*Burhān al-*

⁶⁴⁰ al-Biṣṭāmī in al-Sarrāj, Ch.126, pp.388-389 (Arabic text), p.103 (English summary). Also see Sells 1996, pp.222-224.

⁶⁴¹ al-Junayd 2003, p.36. For an English translation, see al-Junayd in Sells 1996, p.254, 263. Also see Abdu-r-Rabb 1967, pp.51-58; Wilcox 2011, pp.105-106.

⁶⁴² al-Sarrāj 1914, Ch.126, pp.388-389 (Arabic text), p.103 (English summary).

⁶⁴³ Hujvīrī 1926, p.317. For English translations, see al-Hujvīrī 2001, p.338; al-Hujvīrī 1911, p.246.

⁶⁴⁴ Yūsuf al-Hamadānī 2000, p.67.

⁶⁴⁵ Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī 1935, p.26 (Persian text), pp.36-37 (English translation).

⁶⁴⁶ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #4282.

⁶⁴⁷ Dāya Rāzī 1958, #17, p.169. For an English translation, see Dāya Rāzī 1982, p.302.

⁶⁴⁸ See Ridgeon 2014, p.139.

⁶⁴⁹ Hanif 2000, pp.344-345.

⁶⁵⁰ Muḥammad Pārsā 1975, p.40, 67.

⁶⁵¹ Abū al-Mawāhib al-Shādhilī 1938, p.72.

⁶⁵² E.g. Jāmī 1906, #9, p.25. Liu Chih (d.ca.1730) translated the account on the annihilation of annihilation in Jāmī’s *Gleams* into Chinese. (For the translation, see Sachiko Murata 2000, #9, p.148.)

⁶⁵³ al-Suyūṭī narrates the phrase from the Suhrawardī Sufi, Quṭb al-Dīn al-Qaṣṭallānī (d.1287). (al-Suyūṭī 1934, p.41.)

⁶⁵⁴ ‘Ā’ishah quotes the name “Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Dīnawarī” on the “annihilation of annihilation” via remembrance [*dhikr*], “when the one remembering disappears in the remembrance from the remembrance and is immersed in the One remembered without returning to the stage of remembrance.” (Bā’ūniyyah 2014, pp.84-85.) This person should be identical with Abū al-‘Abbās

‘*Ārifīn*],⁶⁵⁵ Shaykh Ghālib (d.1799)’s Ottoman Turkish *Dīvān*,⁶⁵⁶ and many others to date.⁶⁵⁷

Balyānī’s sharp critique of “annihilation of annihilation,” a popular theme among various Sufi groups including the followers of Ibn al-‘Arabī resonates perfectly with the Ismā‘īlī apophatic strategy that we know since Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī.⁶⁵⁸

Balyānī writes:

Most of “those who know” (who think that they know themselves and know their Lord, and that they are free from the delusion of existence) say that the Path is not to be traversed except by annihilation, and the annihilation of annihilation [*fanā’ al-fanā’*]. ... They point at one time to the negation of being, that is, the annihilation of being; and at another to the annihilation of that annihilation; and at another to effacement [*maḥw*], and at another to cessation [*istilām*]. And all these explanations are

al-Dīnawārī (d.952), who reportedly said that “the ultimate recollection is when the one who recollects [God] forgets his recollection in the process of recollection.” (al-Qushayrī 2007, p.71.)

⁶⁵⁵ al-Kirimī 1998, p.70, 81.

⁶⁵⁶ “Gören sergeştelikde girdab-ı dest zann eyler; fena-ender-fenayım her ne varım varsa sendendir.”

“He who sees me crazy with love would suppose I was a whirlwind of the desert

I am the annihilation within annihilation, whatever I have, it is because of you”
(Shaykh Ghālib in Andrews et.al. 2006, p.149.)

Shaykh Ghālib’s *fanā’ dar fanā’*, with its explicit reference to the moth of separation annihilated in the brightness of the candle of union, is a clear literary allusion [*talmīḥ*] to Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār.

⁶⁵⁷ Al-Qushayrī’s *Epistle* does not employ the term. Yet it contains “the annihilation of the vision of one’s own annihilation,” as the last and highest level of annihilation, where the wayfarer loses the vision of everything but God, including her own ego. (Cf. al-Qushayrī 1409/1989, p.150. For an English translation, see al-Qushayrī 2007, p.91.) Evidently, it was easy to convert al-Qushayrī’s statement into “the annihilation of annihilation.”

⁶⁵⁸ Avens attributes the “annihilation of annihilation” to Ibn al-‘Arabī as well, without citing any reference. I could not find the expression in any of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings. (Cf. Avens 1986, p.8.) The phrase appears in the *Mirror of the Gnostics* [*Mi’rāt al-‘Ārifīn*] attributed to Ibn al-‘Arabī, but this is not an authentic work. On the other hand, the fact that many followers of Ibn al-‘Arabī employ the term displays another instance in which al-Balyānī differs from Akbarī Sufism.

E. Wolfson also attributes the “annihilation of annihilation” to Ibn al-‘Arabī, based on the mistaken assumption that the writer of the *Treatise of Divine Unicity* was him, instead of al-Balyānī. Wolfson also supposes that the *Treatise of Divine Unicity* promotes the “annihilation of annihilation,” which it in fact rather denounces. (Cf. E. Wolfson 2005, p.232.)

unadulterated polytheism. For whoever allows that there is anything beside Him, and that afterwards negates it, or allows the annihilation of that annihilation, he affirms the existence of something that is beside Him.⁶⁵⁹

In other words, Balyānī's second negation in the step of *conjunction* follows Sijistānī's "not (H is not A)," which negates all positive discursive ground unlike "H is not not A," which still cannot do away with "H is." *Conjunction* is the realization that there is nothing to be negated.⁶⁶⁰ With this second movement, both positive and negative possibilities for discourse on divine essence are performatively canceled. That divine essence transcends discursivity is performed by Balyānī's self-canceling discourse.

The divine oneness indicated via the self-cancellation of the discursive field, however, is only a relative, numeric one, which corresponds to the divine word in the Ismā'īlī cosmology. Similarly, Balyānī reasons that absolute oneness is even beyond that. He performs this trans-transcendence in his "explanation" of the final "step:" oneness [*waḥdah*]. His references to *waḥdah* are constantly contextualized within the incapacity [*ʿajz*] of vision: "none sees Him other than He, and none perceives Him other than He. His veil is His oneness; nothing veils

⁶⁵⁹ Balyānī 1976, p.18.

⁶⁶⁰ Contemporary scholars Nasr, and Ḥā'irī Yazdī re-define the term "annihilation of annihilation," and employ it constructively in their works. Ḥā'irī Yazdī argues that "annihilation of annihilation" means

...double annihilation [which] implies the completely positive state of unitary consciousness, called in Sufi terminology, *baqā'* [subsistence], meaning the unity of continuity with the One. Just as double negation logically implies affirmation, so also double annihilation arrives existentially at complete unity with the reality of the Principle. This is what the self is in itself, which is its ever-presence in God and God's ever-presence in the self. *This is the meaning of unitary consciousness.* (Ḥā'irī Yazdī 1992, p.158; original emphasis.)

For Ḥā'irī Yazdī, "annihilation of annihilation" indicates this proof of divine subsistence as it "results in unity with the absolute truth of Being." (Ḥā'irī Yazdī 1992, p.3.) For Nasr also "annihilation of annihilation" is the other name of the divine positivity, i.e., *baqā'* [subsistence]. (Nasr 2007, p.135.) Hence both of them follow 'Aṭṭār, Jāmī and other Sufis in their understanding of "annihilation of annihilation." Indeed, it is exactly this version of "double negation" that the Sufi master Balyānī in line with Ismā'īlī apophaticism sharply criticizes. Unlike Ḥā'irī Yazdī and Nasr's version of double negation that produces an affirmation, the two negations in Ismā'īlī apophaticism operate in different levels in order to undermine this very positive ground.

Both Nasr and Ḥā'irī Yazdī seem to work within the paradigm of Corbin's interpretation of the "annihilation of annihilation" as a positive state of consciousness. Cf. Corbin 1994, pp.103-120.

other than He.”⁶⁶¹ His oneness, which cannot be comprehended, is a veil, and God’s singularity [*fardiyyah*] lies even beyond it, but also non-separate from it. “His veil is His oneness, and His singleness is not other than it.”⁶⁶² Oneness and singularity, i.e., the numeric and absolute oneness beyond it, cannot be separated. The oneness approximated, but not comprehended by double negation is the one-many of numeric oneness. Pure singularity, i.e., the absolute oneness, is even beyond. Numeric one is a veil of the absolute one. “He is exterior [*zāhir*] in His oneness and interior [*bāṭin*] in His singularity.”⁶⁶³ God’s beyond-beyond apophatic oneness, even in the visionary perspective of Balyānī, can only be unknown. Dramatically, this un-knowledge of God is certain, because it is attained from the knowledge of one’s self in a double negation.⁶⁶⁴

Balyānī’s account has clear structural overlaps with the apophatic theology of the Ismā’īlī tradition. Additionally, both their points of critique and their defensive explanations tally. Just to give an example, the parallel between Ṭūsī’s and Balyānī’s critiques of the “onto-theological” transcendence of God expounded by the Philosophers is noteworthy. For Ṭūsī, the Sufi stage of *conjunction* was “to see that all is He, without limiting Him by saying that ‘everything other than Him exists through Him, so all are One’.”⁶⁶⁵ Hence Ṭūsī’s apophatic Sufism criticizes the causal divine transcendence, a doctrine primarily held by the Philosophers. In the same context of visionary *union* with the Beloved, “without far without near,” Balyānī makes the same critique of this philosophical necessary existent: “if someone says, ‘the eyes do not perceive Him, only because they are created [*muḥdath*], and what is created does not perceive what is the source [*qadīm*],’ he does not yet know himself.”⁶⁶⁶

If the apophatic theology of *the Treatise of Divine Unicity* evidently follows the double negation in the Ismā’īlī line, it is even more distant from that of Ibn al-‘Arabī. Balyānī’s apophatic theology sharply diverges from the Akbarī apophaticism with which he has long been associated. Paradoxes play a major role in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s perspective on the divine essence as well, but Balyānī’s

⁶⁶¹ Balyānī 1976, p.4.

⁶⁶² Balyānī 1976, p.9.

⁶⁶³ Balyānī 1976, p.11.

⁶⁶⁴ Balyānī 1976, p.25.

⁶⁶⁵ Ṭūsī 1369/1990, p.95.

⁶⁶⁶ Balyānī 1976, p.24-25.

paradoxes operate in a fundamentally different manner than those of Ibn al-‘Arabī.

The Dimension of Apophatic Theology in Later Sufi and Ismā‘īlī Connections

Looking at the relationship between Sufism and Ismā‘īlism after the thirteenth century from the angle of apophaticism highlights a coalescence of themes, practices and institutions, instead of a one way relationship of “influence.” These overlaps are particularly visible among Ismā‘īlīs who stayed in Persia and began living outside of their traditional closed communities, instead of migrating to Badakhshān in Central Asia, or the Indian subcontinent after the Mongol invasions. Nizārī Qūhistānī (d.1321)’s Persian poetry, for example, indicates not only his affiliation with Sufi institutions and his adoption of Sufi themes, but it also has Ismā‘īlī dimensions, some of which relate to apophaticism.⁶⁶⁷ Such apophaticism was still prominent among later Ismā‘īlīs, Sufi or not, as demonstrated in the writings of Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn (fl.14th CE)—perhaps the most prolific of the Ismā‘īlī authors in the Subcontinent at his time. He writes:

Friend! The religious scriptures and books cannot fathom this, for
there is
Neither day there, nor night, neither sun, nor shade.

Friend! My lord is not such that he can be spoken of. He is to be
seen—for
He is indescribable, and nameless.

Friend! How sweet is that lord, indescribable, nameless. Says Pīr
Ṣadr
Al-Dīn, truly, with my own eyes, I have seen him!⁶⁶⁸

By the mid-fifteenth century, when Nizārī Ismā‘īlī imāms emerged in the guise of Sufi masters [*pīrs*], Ismā‘īlī and Sufi themes cannot be disentangled within some strands in Ismā‘īlī apophaticism. Ismā‘īlī imām ‘Abd al-Salām (d.ca.1493) explains the spiritual recognition of the imāmate through an apophatic poem that has clear Sufi dimensions. Still it adopts some long-standing strategies of Ismā‘īlī apophaticism:

⁶⁶⁷ Lewisohn 2003, p.238. For more information on Qūhistānī and Sufism, see Virani 2007, pp.66-70.

⁶⁶⁸ Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn in Virani 2007, p.181.

Whither can you behold me in this dusty realm, with these eyes?
For I am in a place yet placeless, beyond place and habitation. ...
Count me not to be this, consider me not that; for in the world of
ineffability, I am beyond body, even soul. Neither am I existent,
nor non-existent, neither perceptible, nor comprehensible to the
mind; neither ineffable, nor effable, neither in a place, nor
placeless.⁶⁶⁹

Even the penname of Imām ‘Abd al-Salām was “Darvīsh.” Within a universalistic spirit of Persian poetry, a message of moral ecumenism coalesces with an apophaticism that is both Ismā‘īlī and Sufi at the same time.⁶⁷⁰ Divested from its cosmology and its initiatory preference for negation over affirmations and divine incomparability over divine imminence, the double negation of Ismā‘īlism, however, appears to have transformed directly into X-not-X statements, i.e., paradoxes, which are expressed with an intensified experiential dimension in line with Sufi epistemology.

The early thirteenth century might have provided the Ismā‘īlī ground for such a deep interpenetration by not only defining a Sufi-Ismā‘īlī apophatic theological path, but also by performing, disseminating, or even institutionalizing it. On the other hand, except the works of Ṭūsī and Balyānī that complicate the picture, we do not have reliable earlier evidence of a conscious Ismā‘īlī Sufism that preserves this peculiar form of apophaticism. The theological ideas of Ṭūsī’s early Ismā‘īlī gnostic master Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāsib are yet to be uncovered. Kamāl al-Dīn’s master, Bābā Afzāl al-dīn Kāshānī (d.1213) is of special importance at this point. Bābā Afzāl, as his sobriquet might suggest, was apparently not just a philosopher and poet, but also a practicing Sufi.⁶⁷¹ His works do not give us hints of his following the double negation in the Ismā‘īlī line. On the other hand, the only precedents for the work *Jāmi’ al-ḥikmah* attributed to Kāshānī are distinctly Ismā‘īlī—Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s *Vajh-i dīn*⁶⁷² and the Persian abridgement of the *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity (fl.10th CE) known as *Mujmal al-ḥikmat*.⁶⁷³ It is

⁶⁶⁹ Imām ‘Abd al-Salām in Virani 2007, p.176.

⁶⁷⁰ Lewisohn 2003, pp.246-247.

⁶⁷¹ Nasr reminds that the title “Bābā” was given only to the outstanding masters of *taṣawwuf* at that time. See Nasr 1984, p.251.

⁶⁷² Garakani and Negahban 2013.

⁶⁷³ Chittick 2001, pp.26-27.

Al-Ḥāmidī cites the *Epistles* in the context of divine unity, but attributes it to the eighth Ismā‘īlī imām Wafī Aḥmad (d.ca.828). Such attributions suggested that the *Epistles* secretly disseminated

this work attributed to Kāshānī that negates “Being” from God, in order to indicate His transcendence beyond causality.⁶⁷⁴ The issues discussed in the treatise are also key themes in the Ismāʿīlī repertoire. But the fact that other writings of Bābā Afzāl do not cohere with this treatise makes the ascription doubtful. For Ṭūsī himself, Bābā Afzāl was a philosopher who excelled in logic, unlike Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Ḥāsib (d.1242), a master of esotericism. In the *Collection of Mysteries [Jāmīʿ al-Asrār]*, Ḥaydar Āmulī mentions of Bābā Afzāl as one of greatest of those who, “having deepened philosophy and the official exoteric sciences, returns to the way of men of God.”⁶⁷⁵ In the same line with Ṭūsī and Āmulī, Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d.1311) and later, Mullā Sadrā (d.1640) described him as a philosopher *par excellence* who mastered logic.⁶⁷⁶ His known theological writings are distinctly philosophical, the negative path of which fundamentally differs from the double negation of Ismāʿīlīs.

Ṭūsī’s unique versatility blends Ismāʿīlī apophaticism with Sufi themes and terms, in apparently Ismāʿīlī writings. But this is not a one way relationship. A distinct Sufi flavor is obvious in some of his Ismāʿīlī works, the *Origin and Destination* being the most obvious, while his apparently Sufi work *Attributes of the Illustrious* follows a unique Ismāʿīlī path, and his letter to the Sufi master al-Qūnawī covertly praises the Ismāʿīlī imām of the time. Like many Ismāʿīlī Sufis to emerge in the following centuries, Ṭūsī does not propose any harmonization between the two—Ismāʿīlism is already intertwined with a peculiar form of Sufism. With its path of self-blame and apophatic human perfection, this interpretation of Sufism is distinctly a *Malāmatī* one. Ṭūsī is consistently opposed to extreme ascetism and especially to the antinomian, itinerant Darvishes. Not only his early work on philosophical ethics or his later Ismāʿīlī writings, but also

during the reign of the ‘Abbāsīd caliph al-Maʿmūn (r.813–833). (See el-Bizri in Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ 2009, p.x.) In al-Ḥāmidī’s narration, the *Epistles* said the following in terms of the divine attributes:

One must glorify [*tanzīh*] the Originator from that which reason and soul describe, insofar as they are originated and created. ... Demonstrably, reason and soul cannot comprehend His attributes. ... His hiddenness is unlike veilings; His manifestation is unlike the manifestations of His creatures; He is veiled with His light, as His manifestations and splendor is with His light. ... Eyes are blocked from His vision, and thoughts are perplexed seeking reality of His attributes. (Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī 1971, p.12.)

⁶⁷⁴ Garakani and Negahban 2013.

⁶⁷⁵ Vasiltssov 2004, p.7.

⁶⁷⁶ See Vasiltssov 2004, p.7.

his role in the execution of the Qalandars as the advisor of Hūlāgū express this dislike clearly. Textual evidence rather suggests conversance and strong parallels with Ibn Abī al-Khayr and, however stereotypical it may sound, Ibn al-‘Arabī in the interpretation of Sufism that Ṭūsī adopts.

Such organic interpenetrations among Sufis and Ismā‘īlīs of the thirteenth century in terms of negative theology of the divine essence are not surprising. Rather, Ṭūsī and Balyānī are symptomatic of the intellectual exchanges among Ismā‘īlīs and Sufis without a conscious process of integration. Indeed, the Ismā‘īlī tradition has claimed many Sufi masters of the century. Nizārīs of Central Asia consider ‘Azīz Nasafī as their co-religionist.⁶⁷⁷ On the other hand, the legendary accounts of Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad (d.ca.1310), the son and designated successor of the last ruler of Alamūt, Rukn al-Dīn Khurshah (d.1257) has been identified with the famous Sufi master of Rūmī (d.1273), Shams Tabrīzī (d.1248) within the Ismā‘īlī tradition.⁶⁷⁸ Among such claimed Sufi-cum-Ismā‘īlī identities of the time, two prominent Persian Sufis Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.ca.1229) and Maḥmūd al-Shabistarī (d.1320) are worth mentioning. Shabistarī’s famous *maṣnavī* titled *Rose-Garden of Mystery [Gulshan-i Rāz]* shows familiarity with certain Ismā‘īlī doctrines, and actually became one of the most popular texts among Persian Ismā‘īlīs. We know that Nizārī Qūhistānī (d.1321)’s Sufi master, Amīn al-Dīn Balyānī of Tabrīz was also the master of Maḥmūd Shabistarī.⁶⁷⁹ Indeed, the Ismā‘īlīs of Persia and Central Asia generally consider *Rose-Garden of Mystery* as belonging to their own literature.⁶⁸⁰ On the other hand, ‘Aṭṭār’s interpretation of the relationship between soul and body in the afterlife seems to be peculiar among Sufis, and Landolt argued that it is closely connected with

⁶⁷⁷ “Nasafī never identifies himself directly as a Sufi but clearly sympathises with those he usually calls *ahl-i vaḥdat* [‘monists’]; and the expression *ahl-i vaḥdat* is found in the Ismā‘īlī works of Naṣīr-al-Dīn Ṭūsī in the first place.” (Landolt 2002.) More significantly, in *The Book of Descent*, he differentiates the “Sufis” from the *ahl-i vaḥdat*, and deliberately hides Nasafī’s own affiliation: “now I do not reveal my own opinions, so they cannot accuse me of infidelity. I relate and I say, ‘The *ahl-i vaḥdat* say this and the Sufis say that’.” (‘Azīz Nasafī in Ridgeon 2014, p.141.)

⁶⁷⁸ Daftary 2005, pp.185-187.

⁶⁷⁹ Al-Qūhistānī’s Sufi master Amīn al-Dīn of Tabrīz should not be confused with the Kāzarūnī Sufi Amīn al-Dīn al-Balyānī (d.1344) of Shīrāz, whose *Dīvān* has been recently published. I am thankful to Leonard Lewisohn for guiding me to the relevant source. See Khurāsānī 1379/2000.

⁶⁸⁰ Daftary 2005, pp.186-187.

the eschatological position declared in the Ismā'īlī sources of the time.⁶⁸¹ It is also very likely that his *Book of Secrets* [*Asrār-nama*] employed the term “the cycle of Adam.”⁶⁸² The term appears in the Imāmī sources such as the *Mother of the Book* [*Umm al-Kitāb*] (wr.late 8th CE),⁶⁸³ which was preserved among the Nizārī Ismā'īlīs in its Persian version, or directly in Ismā'īlī theological texts such as Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī's *Unveiling of the Hidden* [*Kashf al-Maḥjūb*].⁶⁸⁴ Based on these convergences, Landolt goes so far as to read 'Aṭṭār's *Conference of the Birds* as well as the *Book of Secrets* in the light of Ismā'īlī eschatology. What Landolt neglects is the presence of this term in the writings of 'Aṭṭār's Kubrāwī master, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī (d.1219).⁶⁸⁵ In theological terms, 'Aṭṭār is strikingly consistent with the Kubrāwī Sufis of the time, instead of Ismā'īlism.

While such convergences in diverse fields are likely or possible, it is safe to claim that apophaticism is not one of them. None of these Sufis provide us any evidence for adopting the apophaticism of the divine essence developed by Ismā'īlī intellectuals. Instead, we observe a gradual move from the peculiar Ismā'īlī cosmology and double negation to paradoxes of the divine essence from the thirteenth century onwards. Such a divergence from earlier Ismā'īlī apophaticism actually predates the Mongol invasions. From the beginning of the thirteenth century, key dimensions of earlier Ismā'īlī apophaticism gradually cede their place to more conventional theological positions, and particularly to paradoxes that were intensively employed by Sufis. The *Crown of Creeds* compiled by the Yemenī *dā'ī* Ibn al-Wālid (d.1215), the clear manifesto of Ismā'īlī apophaticism provides insights into this gradual move. The negation of the term “thing” [*shay'*], which was invariably a core apophatic theological topic for all Ismā'īlīs, does not actually appear in the *Crown of Creeds*. The absence of such a fundamental topic is quite surprising considering the abundance of negations that inundate the text—thousands, not hundreds, of negations! Ismā'īlī negation of “*shay'*” was an insistent yet radical gesture towards divine unknowability, and undermined any linguistic possibility of addressing God. The *Crown of Creeds* is rather silent on such a strong Ismā'īlī negative theological position on the divine

⁶⁸¹ See Landolt 2006. On the other hand, in his letter to Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī, a certain scholar named Aḥmad reports the eschatological position of “a group” [*qawmun*], which is strikingly similar to 'Aṭṭār's. Cf. Aḥmad in Walbridge 1992, p.203 (English text); p.237 (Arabic text).

⁶⁸² See Landolt 2006.

⁶⁸³ Anonymous, *Umm al-Kitāb* 2008, pp.29-30.

⁶⁸⁴ Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī 2008, p.122.

⁶⁸⁵ Meier 1999, p.278.

essence. Rather, it adopts more popular, hence less radical positions on the term, as “He is Endless, and no thing was with Him [*lam yazal wa lā shay’ ma’hu*].”⁶⁸⁶ Similarly, the Universal (or Primal) Intellect is also described here as the “First Thing” [*al-shay’ al-awwal*].⁶⁸⁷ Ibn al-Wālid also penned a work titled the *Falsification of the Vain* [*Ḍamīgh al-Bāṭil*]—a rebuttal of al-Ghazālī’s attack on Ismā’īlism. Such polemics evidently had an impact on Ibn al-Wālid’s Ismā’īlī theology. The theological changes that we observe in the *Crown of Creeds* are visible also in al-Shahrastānī’s *Keys to Arcana* [*Mafātiḥ al-Asrār*], which also attributes thingness [*shay’iyyah*] to God.⁶⁸⁸ The twelfth century witnesses important shifts within Ismā’īlī apophaticism, even before the Mongol conquests of the Ismā’īlī strongholds in Iran.

On the other hand, apophatic theological thematical convergences among Sufis and Ismā’īlīs can be traced farther back to earlier centuries. An intriguing example comes from the early Sufi of Baghdād, al-Shiblī (d.946). Sufi historians Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d.977),⁶⁸⁹ al-Sīrjānī (d.1077), al-Qushayrī (d.1072),⁶⁹⁰ Abū al-Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d.1077)⁶⁹¹ and later, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī (d.1131)⁶⁹² and ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī (d.1334)⁶⁹³ among many others narrate al-Shiblī’s famous “explication” of divine unity. In al-Sīrjānī’s narration, al-Shiblī “described” divine unity as follows:

Woe! The one who explains divine unity with words is a heretic; who indicates it is a dualist; who speaks about it is ignorant; who remains silent about it an ignoramus; who thinks that he has attained it has rather missed it; whatever your fantasy discerns as the most truthful meanings related to Him, indeed, have nothing

⁶⁸⁶ Ibn al-Wālid 1403/1982, Ch.11, p.26. Also see Ibn al-Wālid 1403/1982, Ch.18, pp.38-39.

According to Ibn Tūmart (d.1130), “God was, and no thing was with Him” was actually a prophetic tradition, hence the safest position one could adopt on the application of *shay’* to God. (Ibn Tūmart 1993, p.17.) Cf. al-Bayhaqī 1358/1939, pp.20-21, 112.

⁶⁸⁷ It is “not from a thing, not through a thing, not in a thing, not for a thing, and not with a thing—He is the First Thing.” (Ibn al-Wālid 1403/1982, Ch.22, pp.44-45.)

⁶⁸⁸ al-Shahrastānī 2009, p.144 (English translation), p.82 (Arabic text).

⁶⁸⁹ al-Sarrāj 1914, p.30 (Arabic text).

⁶⁹⁰ al-Qushayrī 1409/1989, p.496. For an English translation, see al-Qushayrī 2007, p.310.

⁶⁹¹ Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī 2013a, p.18 (Arabic text).

⁶⁹² ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī 1962, p.332. Also cited in Ernst 1985, p.65.

⁶⁹³ ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, p.26.

to do with Him, and return to you, as they are created and originated.⁶⁹⁴

These Sufi reports on al-Shiblī are identical with Yemenī Ismāʿīlī theologian al-Ḥāmidī (d.1162)ʼs later report on ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d.661)ʼs response to Kumayl Ibn Ziyād (d.707)ʼs inquiry on the divine unity.⁶⁹⁵ Ismāʿīlī sources, including the influential *Paradise of Submission [Ravza-yi Taslīm]* commissioned by Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d.1274) also narrate the report, without citing any name.⁶⁹⁶ Later, the prominent Imāmī scholar Fayd al-Kāshānī (d.1681) ascribed the saying to the fifth Shīʿite Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d.ca.733).⁶⁹⁷ Such apophatic traditions complied under Ismāʿīlī rule also proliferated among Sufis. In his Qurʾānic commentary, which was attributed to Ibn al-ʿArabī until recently, the Imāmī Akbarī Sufi ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d.ca.1330) cites the ʿAlīd tradition that “the perfection of sincerity to Him lies in the negating of attributes from Him.”⁶⁹⁸ Another example for such parallel traditions and anecdotes in terms of divine unknowability can be found in the *Crown of Creeds* as well. The Ismāʿīlī creed gestures towards the principle “only God knows God,” which was defended by a plethora of prominent Sufis like al-Kharrāz (d.899), Yūsuf ibn Ḥusayn al-Rāzī (d.916), al-Junayd, Dhū al-Nūn,⁶⁹⁹ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111), Ibn al-ʿArabī, Najm al-Dīn Rāzī Dāya, Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī, Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, ʿAzīz Nasafī,⁷⁰⁰ and ʿIzz al-Dīn Kāshānī.⁷⁰¹

It can be surmised that at least since the twelfth century onwards the negative theological themes and traditions on the divine essence circulating among Sufis and Ismāʿīlīs had important overlaps. Not only an emphasis on divine unknowability, but also an otherwise rarely found, simultaneous rejection of divine incomparability [*tanzīh*] and divine imminence [*tashbīh*], and an inclination towards paradoxes can be found among the earliest Ismāʿīlī as well as Sufi sources. After the thirteenth century, the more Ismāʿīlī apophaticism was divested of its radical negativity, distinct cosmology and the sequential negations

⁶⁹⁴ al-Sīrjānī 2012, p.52 (Arabic text).

⁶⁹⁵ Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī 1971, p.10.

⁶⁹⁶ Ṭūsī 2005, #33, p.27 (Persian text), p.28 (English translation).

⁶⁹⁷ Badakhchani in Ṭūsī 2005, fn.19, pp.250-251.

⁶⁹⁸ ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī in Hamza, Rizvi and F. Mayer 2008, p.550.

⁶⁹⁹ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 1999, pp.33-34.

⁷⁰⁰ See e.g. ʿAzīz Nasafī in Ridgeon 2014, pp.135-136.

⁷⁰¹ See Abrahamov 2014, p.63. Lāhijī in Corbin 1994, p.118. Cf. Ibn al-Wālid 1403/1982, Ch.18, p.30; ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, p.32.

that at least initially prefer divine incomparability to divine imminence, the more it approached the regular paradoxes of divine essence which find divine imminence and divine incomparability equally insufficient.

C. Summary

The apophatic theology of God's nature developed by Ismā'īlī thinkers since the early tenth century has distinct cosmological markers and a logical structure. (i) It puts the divine essence beyond the Divine Word, which lies beyond the Universal Intellect. Creation emerges from the Divine Word's conjunction with the Universal Intellect, which compromises its oneness, and makes it knowable only as the one-many, and unknowable in its relative oneness. (ii) The relative oneness of the Divine Word can be approximated only by two negations, the first of which negates the positive ground and relationality, and the second cancels all discursivity in order to indicate this relative oneness. This *via negativa* of the divine attributes indicates their self-cancellation. This self-negation of the attributes should not be confused with that of the Philosophers and early Mu'tazilites, who conjured the divine attributes as negations. Ismā'īlī scholars criticized the negativist reading of the divine attributes, calling it "hidden anthropomorphism." (iii) The absolute oneness of God is unknowable, beyond the impenetratable oneness of the Divine Word. These features recall the insufficiency of generic concepts such as "Neoplatonism" and "negative theology" in understanding Ismā'īlī apophaticism in context and over time.

Pre-modern Ismā'īlī apophaticism has a unique combination of double negations, the unknowability of God, and an intellectual, non-mystical self-cancellation of theological discourse. This apophatic theology expanded widely from Andalus to Central Asia in the tenth century, and made its mark as witnessed by the longstanding depictions of Ismā'īlīs as "the negators." In thirteenth century Sufism, however, this powerful form of apophaticism did not play a major role outside the Ismā'īlī context. Nor the mystics who had close relations with specific Ismā'īlī networks such as 'Azīz Nasafī (d.ca.1300) and Bābā Afzāl (d.1213) seem to have adopted it. On the other hand, the scanty examples of Ṭūsī and Balyānī indicate that it was Iran and Central Asia where Ismā'īlī double negation was preserved, and put into creative interactions with Sufism in the thirteen century. The post-Alamūt coalescence of Ismā'īlism and Sufism in these territories strongly corroborates this premise.

CHAPTER 5. NECESSARILY DISSIMILAR: PHILOSOPHICAL APOPHATICISM AND SUFISM

In the two centuries from al-Kindī (d.873) to Ibn Sīnā (d.1037), Philosophers adopted a coherent family of apophatic theological positions on the divine essence and its accessibility. The key aspects of this philosophical apophaticism were (i) a negative theology of divine attributes, (ii) the unknowability of the divine essence, closely connected with an Aristotelian version of the Neoplatonic distinction between discursive thought [*dianoia*] and non-discursive intellection [*noēsis*], (iii) the necessary dissimilarity [*mukhālafah*] of God as the First Cause of everything else, and (iv) a philosophical hermeneutics that protects divine oneness and dissimilarity. Most of these aspects were established in conversation with the Muʿtazilites. As early as al-Kindī, Philosophers adopted such a philosophical apophaticism, which later would take various forms, while preserving a family resemblance.

With a few notable exceptions that we will explore, Sufis of the thirteenth century did not adopt this form of apophaticism mainly because a negativist approach to the divine attributes did not proliferate among them. Still, the philosophical apophaticism of al-Qūnawī, Ibn Sabʿīn and the early Kabbalist Azriel of Gerona indicate the intellectual porosities not only between Sufism, mysticism and philosophy, but also between religious traditions in the thirteenth century. As philosophical ideas transcended disciplinary and religious borders, the philosophical apophaticism associated with it also found expressions across traditions. The employment of a negative language around the declaration of faith, “there is no god but God” by two Kubrāwī Sufis of the thirteenth century is of particular importance as it demonstrates two key aspects of Sufi variations on philosophical apophaticism. First, in order to sustain divine unknowability, Sufis negated not only discourse on the divine essence, but also unveiling and vision—the superior epistemological sources in Sufism. Secondly, the negative theology of divine attributes in philosophical apophaticism transformed into a negative theology of human attributes in the hands of these Sufis.

A. The Philosophical Background of Apophasis via Causality

Al-Kindī and the Beginnings: the End-less

Along with the Ismāʿīlīs, the depiction of the Philosophers as defenders of an unknowable God, to whom nothing can be ascribed, was a popular theme in theological discussions in the medieval period. Indeed, many scholars believed that the famous negative theology of the Muʿtazilites on God’s attributes was in

fact borrowed from the Philosophers. The Sufi Philosopher Quṭb al-Dīn al-Aharī (d.1260) argued that the Mu'tazilites misunderstood the Greek philosophers' subtle distinction between non-existence and nothingness, and ended up negating [*nafy*] the existence of matter, which he finds despicable. The Mu'tazilites are just "poor Philosophers," and ungrateful "thieves" [*sarrāq al-hukamā'*] who stole wisdom from the ancient Philosophers that they did not appreciate or even understand at all according to al-Aharī.⁷⁰²

On the other hand, Muslim doxographers including al-Ash'arī (d.936) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210)⁷⁰³ thought that the Mu'tazilites were influenced not only by the ancient Philosophers, but also by the Arabic Philosophers of the Islamic era. More importantly, more than being mere thieves distorting the legacy of the Philosophers, the Mu'tazilites were in general faithful to their spirit in negating the divine attributes. In his section on the Mu'tazilites, al-Ash'arī observes:

those who negated the attributes of the Lord said: "God, glorious is His praise and holiest are His names, has no attributes, no knowledge, no power, no life, no hearing, no vision, no glory, no majesty, no magnificence, no greatness;" and so on they said about the various attributes of God -the Glorious, the Majestic-with which He is described. *This is a word that they [Mu'tazilites] have borrowed from their brethren, the would-be-Philosophers [ikhwānihim min al-mutafalsafah],* who supposed that the All-Knowing End-less Creator was not All-Knowing, not All-Powerful, not All-Living, not All-Hearing, not All-Seeing, not Eternal. They interpreted this, and said: "we say: '[God is] *but the End-less Itself*,'" [*Aynun Lam Yazal*] and they did not add anything to this.⁷⁰⁴

Al-Ash'arī further explains that the Mu'tazilites negating [*nafy*] the Qur'ānic attributes of God were only following the spirit [*ma'nā*] of what the Philosophers did overtly.⁷⁰⁵ Scattered reports from al-Ash'arī on the Philosophers display a consistently apophatic theology of divine names that firmly negates all possible

⁷⁰² al-Aharī 1358/1979, p.105.

⁷⁰³ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī 1978, p.188.

Dhahaba Ḍirār min al-mutakallimīn wa al-Ghazālī min al-muta'akhhirīn ilā innā lā na'rīf ḥaqīqat dhāt Allāh wa huwa qawl al-ḥukamā', wa dhahaba jumhūr al-mutakallimīn minnā wa min al-Mu'tazilah ilā innahā ma'lūmah.

⁷⁰⁴ al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.2, #235, pp.156; emphasis mine.

⁷⁰⁵ al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.2, #235, pp.156-157.

ascriptions, including Eternity [*Qidam*],⁷⁰⁶ from God. All of these negations serve to indicate God's utter transcendence as opposed to His similarity to creation. As in the previous report, it is the term "End-less" [*Lam Yazal*] that designates this negative essence:

they differed in the expression "God is All-Knowing, All-Living, All-Powerful, All-Hearing, All-Seeing." ... It is narrated from one of the Philosophers that there is no partnership [*shirk*] between the Originator and others in these names. The Originator is not named "All-Knowing," and not to be called "All-Powerful," "All-Living," "All-Hearing," "All-Seeing." He said: "He is but the End-less."⁷⁰⁷

Only "End-less," a negative designation, is employed by the Philosophers, because no name can apply to God, as all names in our language, even the most qualified ones, entail comparability and sharing, which violate God's incomparable, transcendent oneness. Al-Nazzām (d.846) and later Ibn Kullāb (d.855) and Abu 'Alī al-Jubbā'i (d.916) employed the phrase *lam yazal* as an adverb in discussing divine attributes, as in "God is *ceaselessly* Knowing," "God is *ceaselessly* All-Hearing," and "God is *ceaselessly* Eternal."⁷⁰⁸ But some Mu'tazilites of the time followed the philosophical path and employed *Lam Yazal* as a proper noun—a negative designation of God.⁷⁰⁹ 'Abbād ibn Sulaymān (d.864) of Baṣra, for example, explicitly criticized the appeal to *Lam Yazal* in contexts other than a proper noun. He said: "The All-Hearing is Endless, and (His) Hearing is Endless." He said: 'I don't say 'the All-Hearing does not cease,' or 'He is ceaselessly All-Hearing'."⁷¹⁰ Along with 'Abbād, other Mu'tazilites Hishām al-Fuwaṭī (d.825) and Abū Zufar (fl.ea.9th CE) negated various attributes,

⁷⁰⁶ al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.2, p.180, #240; al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.1., pp.237-238.

⁷⁰⁷ al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.1, p.240; emphasis mine.

⁷⁰⁸ Wisnovsky 2003, pp.229-232.

⁷⁰⁹ Technically, *lam yazal* is operating in as an "incomplete verb" [*fi'l nāqish*], or an "adverbial verb" [*fi'l 'ibārah*] in the first grammatical structure, i.e., in "He is ceaselessly All-Knowing" [*Huwa lam yazal 'Alimun*]. In the latter grammatical structure, *Lam Yazal* is operating as a "complete verb" [*fi'l tāam*]⁷¹⁰—a "Vollverb" as Van Ess recognizes, i.e., "He is Endless" [*Huwa Lam Yazal*]. (See Van Ess 1997, p.20, fn.5.)

Here I am simplifying the advanced discussions on Arabic grammar in Frank's analysis of the emergence of "*lam yazal*" as a formal term in Muslim theology. (See Frank 2005.)

⁷¹⁰ 'Abbad in al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.1, p.233; my emphasis. "وكان يقول: السميع لم يزل، وسميع لم يزل، قال ولا." "أقول: لم يزل السميع، ولا أقول لم يزل سميعاً."

interpreting them as God's End-lessness.⁷¹¹ The nominal appeal to *Lam Yazal* was indeed initially awkward from a grammatical perspective, but it spread in Muslim theological discourse, increasingly and widely appealed in diverse apophatic and kataphatic contexts. The traditionist 'Abd Allāh al-Dārimī (d.865), the jurist Ibn Khuzaymah al-Nisābūrī (d.923), and the Sufi Bāyazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d.848) employed *Lam Yazal* in nominal form in their theological expositions, even if their approaches to the divine attributes and the divine essence differed.⁷¹² Al-Ash'arī himself frequently appealed to *Lam Yazal* as a proper name to designate God [*"Allāhu Lam Yazal"*] throughout his doxography.

The negativist approach to the divine attributes ascribed by doxographers to "Philosophers" finds full expression in al-Kindī (d.873)'s corpus, along with an apophaticism on the divine essence. In the categorization of different kinds of knowledge, al-Kindī puts "First Philosophy" on the top, which is the "knowledge of the First Truth [*'ilm al-Ḥaqq al-Awwal*] Who is the cause [*'illah*] of all truth."⁷¹³ On the other hand, the passages actually addressing the First Truth, or the First Cause are extremely limited in his *On First Philosophy*, and they are in the form of a sequence of negations. *On First Philosophy* discusses extensively the general principles of causation and being. Through its *silence* the work is "telling us that all we can know about the first Truth, i.e., God, is that our knowledge of all else is not applicable to Him; or, more positively put, He is what the world is not."⁷¹⁴ This negativity is expressed in al-Kindī's work via "*Lam Yazal*"—a complete semantic entity that designates God. Only God is *Lam Yazal*, because "that which is not *Lam Yazal* is created."⁷¹⁵ Al-Kindī's argument for the alterations and created nature of heavenly spheres relies on a similar syllogism in which only God is by definition *Lam Yazal*.⁷¹⁶ On the other hand, al-Kindī's standard designation of God is the negative name "the Eternal" [*al-Azālī*], which is cognate and semantically identical with the ascription God "the End-less" [*Lam Yazal*] reported by al-Ash'arī.⁷¹⁷ Indeed, very much like the appeal to *Lam Yazal* as a

⁷¹¹ al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.1, p.218. (هشام) وقال قائلون: البارئ لا في مكان، بل هو على ما لم يزل عليه، وهو قول (هشام) Also see al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.1, p.240; al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.2, #240, p.180.

⁷¹² See Frank 2005. Also see Sarrāj 1914, p.29 (Arabic text).

⁷¹³ al-Kindī 1974, p.56; al-Kindī 1978, p.30.

⁷¹⁴ Ivry in al-Kindī 1974, p.17.

⁷¹⁵ See Frank 2005, p.262.

⁷¹⁶ See Frank 2005, p.260.

⁷¹⁷ Yaman 2011, p.232.

separate semantic entity to designate God, the adjective “*azalī*” was formed which could also be used substantively.”⁷¹⁸ Such substantive appeal to *Lam Yazal* and *Azalī*, grammatically awkward as they were, spread from the ninth century onwards in Muslim theological discourses.⁷¹⁹

Al-Kindī’s one-page description of the “Eternal” [*al-Azalī*] contains 34 “no-s” [*lā*] and a few other Arabic negations.⁷²⁰ Simply put, God’s being the cause [*‘illah*] of creation makes Him uncaused, ineffable, unknowable, and utterly transcendent. He is the source of all multiplicity; and He is beyond the multiplicity and unity that belongs to creation. As the True One, He cannot be spoken of in the way creation is spoken of. “God, ‘the true One,’ is completely transcendent, in the precise sense that nothing can be said of Him.”⁷²¹ Al-Kindī writes that

⁷¹⁸ Frank 2005, p.261.

⁷¹⁹ Also see al-Bāqillānī 1987, p.36.

⁷²⁰

The eternal is that which must never have been a nonexistent being, the eternal having no existential “before” to its being; the eternal’s subsistence is not due to another; the eternal has no cause; the eternal has neither subject nor predicate, nor agent nor reason, i.e., that for the sake of which it is—for there are no causes other than the ones which have been previously stated. The eternal has no genus, for if it has a genus, then it is species, a species being composed of its genus, which is common to it and to others, and of a specific difference which does not exist in others. It (sc. species), moreover, has a subject, viz., the genus which receives its form and the form of others; and a predicate, viz., the form particular to it and not to others. It (sc. the eternal) therefore has a subject and predicate. It has, however, already been explained that the eternal has neither subject nor predicate, and this (contradiction) is an impossible absurdity; the eternal then, has no genus. The eternal does not perish, perishing being but the changing of the predicate, not of the primary substratum; as for the primary substratum, which is being, it does not change, for the perishing of a perishable object does not involve the being of its being. Now every change is into its nearest contrary only, i.e., that which is with it in one genus, as heat which changes with cold—for we don’t consider opposition like that of heat with aridity, or with sweetness or with length, or anything like that—and related contraries comprise one genus. A perishable object therefore has a genus, and if the eternal is corruptible, it has a genus. However, it has no genus, this is an impossible contradiction, and therefore it is impossible for the eternal to perish. Motion is change, and the eternal does not move, for it neither changes nor removes from deficiency to perfection. (al-Kindī 1974, p.67; al-Kindī 1978, pp.25-27.)

⁷²¹ Adamson 2003, p.49.

the True One is not one of the intelligible things, and is neither matter, genus, species, individual, specific difference, property, common accident, motion, soul, intellect, whole, part, all or some. It is also not one in relation to anything else, but is an absolute one, neither augmentable, composed (nor) multiple. Nor is it one of the sort which we mentioned in which kinds (of one) exist, (of) all the kinds of one which we mentioned, and that which is attached to their names is not attached to it. ... The True One, therefore, has neither matter, form, quantity, quality, or relation, is not described by any of the remaining intelligible things, and has neither genus, specific difference, individual, property, common accident nor movement; and it is not described by any of the things which are denied to be one in truth. It is, accordingly, pure and simple unity, i.e., (having) nothing other than unity, while every other one is multiple.⁷²²

Al-Kindī's philosophical apophaticism is paradoxically a form of God's proof. The ultimate cause of creation should be beyond all multiplicity and unity that exists therein. Human categories cannot be applied to their apophatic source.⁷²³ As the unique source, God is the "True One" [*wāḥid bi-l-ḥaqīqah*], while unity exists in creation only metaphorically [*bil-majāz*].⁷²⁴ The distinction is not quantitative but categorical, as the absolute One cannot be comprehended by expanding or narrowing a genus in human thought.⁷²⁵ Divine oneness thus cannot be apprehended. Not only the unity we perceive in the world, but even the intellectual principle of it, i.e., the numerical one, cannot be applied to God. The numerical one, al-Kindī explains, is not a number, but the matter [*hyle*] of the world, and in this sense, it is the one-many, which cannot be used to designate the absolute one.⁷²⁶

Al-Kindī's apophaticism on God's nature displays a fundamental ambivalence. On the one hand, God is fully removed from the realm of creation, utterly

⁷²² al-Kindī 1974, p.112; al-Kindī 1978, p.104. See Yaman 2011, pp.230-231.

⁷²³ "The cause of unity in unified things is accordingly the True One, the First, and everything which receives unity is caused, every one other than the One in truth being one metaphorically and not in truth." (al-Kindī 1974, p.113; al-Kindī 1978, p.105.)

⁷²⁴ al-Kindī 1974, p.95; al-Kindī 1978, p.83. Also see Netton 1989, p.49.

⁷²⁵ al-Kindī 1974, p.97; al-Kindī 1978, p.87.

⁷²⁶ al-Kindī 1974, p.98; al-Kindī 1978, p.87-88.

unknowable, transcendent, and dissimilar. On the other hand, one can discursively prove that God is the ultimate, real agent of creation.⁷²⁷ In other words, al-Kindī's proof of God is a negative one based on dissimilarity [*mukhālafah*].⁷²⁸ His account of the divine essence "pictures a *connection* that articulates a *distinction*."⁷²⁹ God's being the unique source of creation simultaneously removes Him beyond all, and engenders al-Kindī's apophaticism. This is a relationship that refuses all relationality vis-à-vis God. Every attribute should be negated, because He is the source of our language, world, and all that exists and does not exist. All attributes of creation, i.e., the caused world, should be negated from the cause, insofar as the cause precedes all and differs necessarily. His *Epistle to 'Alī ibn Jahm on the Unity of God* confirms this apophatic causality, which we find in his *On First Philosophy*:

So He is not many but One, without multiplicity. May He be praised and elevated high above the qualities which the heretics attribute to Him. He does not resemble His creation for multiplicity exists in all creation but absolutely no in Him. For He is the Creator [*Mubdi'*] and they are the created.⁷³⁰

Al-Kindī is clear about this difference: he repeats in various contexts that "something is necessarily generated from its contrary. ... [E]verything that is generated is generated from 'not-it' [*lā huwa*]."⁷³¹ His philosophical apophatic

⁷²⁷ A brief proof can be found in his short treatise titled *The Agent in the Proper Sense, Being First and Perfect, and the Agent in the Metaphorical Sense, Being Imperfect* [*Al-fā'il al-Ḥaqq al-awwal al-tāmm wa al-fā'il al-nāqış alladhī huwa bi-al-majāz*]. See Druart 2005, p.331.

⁷²⁸

Al-Kindī's proof in establishing the existence of God premises the absolute difference between God and every other kind of thing. God is the Eternal, whose non-existence is inconceivable; there is no "before" to His existence, nor a cause for it, nor a reason [*sabab*] for the sake of which His existence is. In sum, His existence is outside all mental categories, that is, subject, predicate, genus, species, body, form, time, space, and the like. The Eternal does not perish [*lā yufsid*] or move because perishing and motion occur in changing things, He is perfect necessarily, and He is pure and simple unity. (Yaman 2011, p.231.)

⁷²⁹ God's being the unique origin of everything else is a form of connecting Him to the world that disconnects Him from it. This simultaneous "distinction" and "connection," in Burrell's terms, is a key aspect of philosophical apophaticism we identify in thinkers of different religious traditions, Ibn Sīnā, Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas being the most shining examples. (See Burrell 1986, pp.1-32.)

⁷³⁰ al-Kindī in Netton 1989, p.48.

⁷³¹ al-Kindī in Adamson 2003, p.60.

causality relies on this key approach to *God as the negation of creation* that will have long term repercussions among Philosophers.

The convergences are clear between al-Kindī and the Muʿtazilites in terms of this negative theology of the divine attributes. The negative proof for God's necessary existence as the inherently dissimilar cause of creation, a major argument that philosophers and later theologians intensively applied, was developed by the Muʿtazilites. Moreover, the reflection of the necessary dissimilarity of God on the inapplicability of divine attributes, including oneness, circulated among Muʿtazilites as well.⁷³² Hence it is not surprising to find that al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm's exposition of the divine oneness is quite similar to al-Kindī's apophatic approach:

He is One with whom there is not a second. He has no like in attribute, in essence, in saying, in action, or in any of the senses. He has no like in attribute or in the sense of eminence and superiority. This sense of eminence will never disappear from God in any way, for there is nothing like Him and He is unlike anything. If it were possible for God to have a like in any sense and this likeness were eminence, it would be possible for God to be like another in every sense and this would be eminence for Him. God is very much exalted above it. ... *The word "one" can be truly predicated only of God.* ... He is one in *His* sense, which does not resemble the senses by which a human being is described.⁷³³

This causal form of apophatic theology was not uninformed by Plotinus. Indeed, parts of *the Enneads* were translated into Arabic, and adapted to its vocabulary by al-Kindī's circle, and under his very editorship.⁷³⁴ The original work was thought to be penned by Aristotle instead of Plotinus, thus its Arabic adaptation was titled the *Theology of Aristotle*, to which al-Kindī also wrote an introduction. Al-Kindī's major philosophical work, *On First Philosophy*, followed Plotinus' *via negativa* in placing God beyond discourse, but unlike Plotinus, al-Kindī did not

⁷³² Abrahamov in al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1996, p.14; my emphasis.

⁷³³ al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1996, pp.87-97; my emphasis.

A comparison with Marion reveals a striking parallel between al-Qāsim: "God cannot be named starting from any language other than [God's], not as a referent among others; but [as] an absolute referent, He holds language to the interiority of the distance of Goodness." (Marion in T. Jones 2011, p.18.)

⁷³⁴ Adamson 2000, p.256.

turn to kataphatic statements on the True One, even if they are metaphorical. Al-Kindī did not go to the eminent, qualified names, or to the glorification of the One even with a metaphorical language.

Plotinus moves very easily from negative to positive assertions regarding the nature and actions of the One; even if such positive statements are not meant, ostensibly, to be taken literally. Al-Kindī, however, makes very few such positive assertions, and those only of a general sort. He seems to wish to remain within that sphere of philosophy which “is concerned only with that of which inquiry can be made ... universal delimited things the true nature of which knowledge can comprehend perfectly.”⁷³⁵

More importantly, al-Kindī resists Plotinus’ move to a non-discursive connection with the divine. The Neoplatonic tradition, perhaps diverging from the doctrines of Plotinus, supplied its apophatic theology with an epistemology based on a non-discursive, but noetic, mystical unity.⁷³⁶ Al-Kindī not only negates discursive proofs of the divine essence, but he also does not explicitly welcome or suggest any non-discursive access to God, including mysticism. God becomes utterly apophatic, inaccessible, and the unknowable ultimate cause and agent.⁷³⁷

The tension in early Arabic Philosophy between presenting discursive proof for God as the ultimate source of existence and claiming that His essence is beyond knowledge, i.e., the Kindīan dilemma, will persist in the later philosophical tradition, as we will see below. By the thirteenth century, the negative relation between God and creation will constitute a well-established philosophico-theological theme. Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328)’s cynical report on the logicians of the time, including the famous Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Malik al-Khūnajī (d.1248), illustrates the philosophical dilemma of the negative proof. Ibn Taymīyyah narrates:

Just before he [al-Khūnajī] died he said: *“I die having known nothing except that the possible requires [yaftaqir] an agent.”* Then he added: *“‘requirement’ [iftiqār] is a negative attribute,*

⁷³⁵ Ivry in al-Kindī 1974, p.42, fn.31.

⁷³⁶ Ivry in al-Kindī 1974, p.13, p.41, fn.20.

⁷³⁷ Ivry, writing his introduction in 1974 finds this negative theological position “self-defeating.” (Ivry in al-Kindī 1974, p.15) This negative connotation perfectly fits to the scholarly context that I elaborated in the last chapter.

thus I die knowing nothing.” We have been told the same about another of their prominent scholars.⁷³⁸

The Kindīan Dilemma in Tenth Century Philosophy

Al-Kindī’s dilemma between presenting discursive proof for God and claiming that His essence is beyond knowledge, according to the Khurāsānian Philosopher al-‘Āmirī (d.992), goes back as far as Pythagoras (d.496 BCE) and Empedocles (d.430 BCE). Accordingly, Empedocles claimed that God can be designated by the attributes of “knowledge,” “generosity,” “will” and “power,” but this is not to say that these designations have particular meanings different from each other. Instead, these designations do not affirm different meanings because God is uniquely One [*aḥadan wāḥidan*]. His Being bears no similarity [*tashbīh*] to that of creation; the latter is possible being [*wujūd al-imkānī*], while the former is Essentially Necessary Being [*dhātihi wājib al-wujūd*]. The unity [*waḥdāniyyah*] of creation is dissimilar to the absolute unity of its source, the One.⁷³⁹ Therefore, reports al-‘Āmirī, Empedocles argued that God can be designated with qualified attributes *eminently* [*via eminentiae*], but these attributes were not his essence. What can be said of God’s essence is that He is essentially Real and essentially Wise [*Ḥaqq bi-dhātihi wa Ḥakīm bi-dhātihi*], which respectively indicate His Necessary Being [*wājib al-wujūd*] and His being the source of everything else.⁷⁴⁰ According to al-‘Āmirī, Pythagoras and Socrates (d.399 BCE) debated on further reducing the divine essence. They agreed with Empedocles that God is uniquely One, thus various designations cannot have different meanings. On the other hand, Pythagoras argued that “the Wise” is a sufficient essential name, because God as the intentional, wise source of creation already entails His Necessary Being. Socrates, however, went in the opposite direction: God’s essential name is “Necessary Being,” and his being the intentional, wise source of all possible beings can be derived from it.⁷⁴¹ For al-‘Āmirī, it is the great master, Aristotle (d.322 BCE), who settles the debate by reconciling both views, going back to Empedocles. Aristotle claimed that God’s Necessary Being and His being the ultimate cause of creation cannot be separated, because they are different expressions of the same reality: the absolute One is Necessary Being, i.e., the cause of all possibilities, from which He categorically differs.⁷⁴² Divine attributes,

⁷³⁸ Ibn Taymīyyah 1993, p.42; my emphasis. Also see *ibid.* pp.132-133.

⁷³⁹ al-‘Āmirī 1988, p.79.

⁷⁴⁰ al-‘Āmirī 1988, p.81.

⁷⁴¹ al-‘Āmirī 1988, p.81.

⁷⁴² al-‘Āmirī 1988, p.87.

however diverse they are, do not cause any plurality in the divine essence, because they unite in a single meaning, which is the negation of creation. No similarity can be constructed on any basis whatsoever between the caused, possible beings, and their cause, the absolute One, Necessary Being.

Traces of al-Kindī's apophatic theology can be found in the thought of al-Fārābī (d.950), who is closer to Plotinus in attributing qualified names to God. His work *On the One and Unity* [*Kitāb al-Wāḥid wa al-Waḥdah*] is particularly reminiscent of al-Kindī's approach to divine oneness in *On First Philosophy* because of the *absence* of God in it. Al-Fārābī acknowledges that "one" is a homonymous term, which can indicate different things: it might be employed for things that are of a shared type, or have a shared accident.⁷⁴³ Or "one" can indicate the number of its object.⁷⁴⁴ Third, by "one" we can mean something that is divisible.⁷⁴⁵ Or something can be called "one" by its differentiation from other things.⁷⁴⁶ Carefully and extensively discussing the possible ways in which "one" can be said, al-Fārābī simply excludes its application to the divine essence. Every sense of "one" is analyzed except as a name or attribute of God: how "one" applies to God is not within the field of discursive analysis. The silence of *On the One and Unity* about how oneness relates to God follows al-Kindī's apophaticism, in stark contrast to the Ash'arite theologians such as al-Bayhaqī (d.1066), who were eager to ascribe oneness to God in rather all conceivable ways.⁷⁴⁷

The "One" of *The Perfect State* also manifests the Kindīan dilemma in al-Fārābī's thought. The One is the necessarily dissimilar source of creation through a Neoplatonic process of emanation. Al-Fārābī's God is also the absolute One, the source to which the attributes apply only polysemously [*musta'ār*]. This is not to say that the qualified attributes cannot apply to Him; on the contrary, all attributes can be applied to Him *eminently*. Hence God is a mixture of a Perfect Being, which is necessarily dissimilar from beings substantially,⁷⁴⁸ and an apophatic One from all respects that merits the designation "the One" more than anything.⁷⁴⁹ It has no beginning, need for anything, no cause, form, contrary,

⁷⁴³ al-Fārābī 1989, pp.36-41.

⁷⁴⁴ al-Fārābī 1989, pp.41-44.

⁷⁴⁵ al-Fārābī 1989, pp.44-51.

⁷⁴⁶ al-Fārābī 1989, pp.51-57.

⁷⁴⁷ See e.g. al-Bayhaqī 1358/1939, pp.23-24.

⁷⁴⁸ al-Fārābī 1998, p.57.

⁷⁴⁹ al-Fārābī 1998, pp.68-69.

partner in anything, where-ness, substratum, genus, or magnitude; no purpose or aim can be attributed to its existence, and it is neither matter, nor divisible.⁷⁵⁰ These negations simultaneously mean that He is the Pure, Active Intellect [*'aql bi-l-fi'l*] from which intellects emanate and attain forms [*ṣūrah*] in the lower levels of existence. Hence, as in the case of al-ʿĀmirī, the attributes apply to Him via a hermeneutics that underscores the divine oneness, and indicates negation from creation. As the dissimilar, unknowable, negative cause of all, God is *True Being*, Love, Intellect, Wisdom, and Living, Glorious, Beautiful, and so on. These attributes apply to God *via eminentiae*, but how they relate to God's essence is not known except as negations of what we can know. In other words, unknowing is first and foremost a property of the *via eminentiae*, instead of the *via negativa*, among the early Muslim representatives of the Arabic philosophical tradition.

On the one hand, al-Fārābī claims that the One is indescribable and unknowable, on the other, he gives demonstrations for its being the perfect source of creation. Knowledge in general is possible: in *What Ought to Precede the Study of Philosophy* al-Fārābī calls the followers of Pyrrho [Furūn] (d.270 BCE), who negated the possibility of knowledge altogether, “the Deniers” [*'inādiyyah*].⁷⁵¹ Genuine knowledge of the absolute One is not possible, but His proof is: al-Fārābī shows that we can discursively demonstrate that God is the absolute One, from which existence emanates. God as the Actual Intellect can be perfectly and completely represented in the human mind, but our minds are weak as they are embodied, and intermixed with matter [*maddah*]. Al-Fārābī notes that a complete separation from matter would bring perfect mental apprehension of the First,⁷⁵² but he shares al-Kindī's Aristotelian pessimism towards the possibility of ever completely separating the soul from the body. Hence we can neither fully understand [*fahm*] nor genuinely comprehend [*idrāk*] Him, and are left with employing analogies [*qiyās*] from ourselves and from creation.⁷⁵³

⁷⁵⁰ al-Fārābī 1998, pp.57-69.

⁷⁵¹ Fakhry 2004, p.21.

As an interesting note, al-Hujvīrī mentions of a group of skeptical Sophists [*Sūfista'ıyyān*] who introduced themselves as Sufis. For the Persian text see Hujvīrī 1926, p.16. (For English translations, see Hujvīrī 1911, p.15; Hujvīrī 2001, p.84.)

⁷⁵² al-Fārābī 1998, pp.83.

⁷⁵³ al-Fārābī 1998, pp.85.

A prominent response to the divine unknowability in philosophical apophaticism is the focus on analogical reasoning [*qiyās*] through creation (hence, divine actions). In following this path, Philosophers like al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Maimonides are closer to the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fl.5th CE) than that of Gregory of Nyssa (d.395), who forbids

Ibn Sīnā (d.1037)'s apophatic approach to the divine essence and attributes fits well into this philosophical context in 'Iraq. Ibn Sīnā adopts a negative theology of divine attributes most succinctly presented in his *Celestial Epistle* [*al-Risālah al-'Arshiyyah*]. The *Celestial Epistle* focuses on three key philosophical-theological problems: (i) the proof of the Necessary Existent [*ithbāt wājib al-wujūd*], (ii) divine uniqueness [*waḥdāniyyah*], (iii) the negation of all forms of causality [*nafy al-'ilal*] from God. After negating the four classical Aristotelian forms of causality from God, Ibn Sīnā adds a section on the divine attributes. Here Ibn Sīnā presents a negative theology of divine attributes in the Mu'tazilite fashion by considering the essential attributes as negations, and all relational attributes as divine actions.⁷⁵⁴ Divine names address the divine essence as long

analogical reasoning. "For Gregor, incomprehensibility forbids any analogy or created representation of divinity as idolatrous." (T. Jones 2011, pp.51-52.) Similarly, al-Māturīdī (d.944) accused the Mu'tazilite master al-Ka'bī (d.931) of comparing God with created entities as the latter employed analogical reasoning to understand the vision of God. (For the details, see Rudolph 2015. p.293.)

The Zāhirite School also fiercely rejected the appeal to analogical reasoning in terms of the divine essence as it undermined divine incomparability. The Zāhirite jurist Ibn Ḥazm (d.1064) recommended Aristotelian works as "sound, useful books guiding towards monotheism [*tawḥīd*]," and claimed that they are essential in arriving at correct deductions, formulating the right definitions, and executing other logical operations. Yet he criticized the Ash'arite theologians, who appealed to logical operations, analogical reasoning in particular, in describing the divine attributes. Ibn Ḥazm accused them of rendering God comparable in appealing to analogical reasoning:

God is far beyond created things and beyond similarity with them! Even those who recognize analogy, yield to it only in such cases in which a deduction is to be drawn from the analogy of two similar things. But no one permits the comparison of two diametrically opposed things which are similar in no point. (Ibn Ḥazm in Goldziher 2008, pp.145-146.)

Ismā'īlīs were critical to the use of *qiyās* on the divine essence or attributes, rejecting it together with *istiḥsān* [juristic preference]. Cf. Ibn al-Wālid 1403/1982, p.40.

The Shāfi'ī scholar Abū al-Qāsim al-Taymī (d.1140), among others, follows the famous traditionalist principle "God's unity should not be dealt with through analogy" [*laysa al-tawḥīd bi-l-qiyās*]. See Abrahamov 1998, p.25.

For the critique of *qiyās* on the divine essence by Muslim mystics, see Ibn Barrajān 2015, #150, p.167; Ibn al-'Arabī in Elmore 1995, p.147, 158-159. Also see Ibn Tūmart 1993, p.16, 20; Ibn Tūmart 1997, pp.215-216.

⁷⁵⁴ The sixth chapter of the *Incoherence* devoted to the divine attributes argues that Philosophers in general agreed on a negative theology of divine attributes, but it explicitly mentions of only Ibn Sīnā throughout the chapter.

as they are negations. Once they contain a positive relation, they become non-essential attributes that express divine actions instead of the essence. This is also the case even for “the Necessary Existent,” apparently the essential name of God: it is a negation as much as it addresses the divine essence, and a positive relation as much as it indicates God’s being the cause of all. Hence even “the Necessary Existent” is not a purely essential name, but a combination of a negation and an affirmation. The essence itself is utterly apophatic:

We have proven that He is the Necessary Existent, unique from all possible aspects, and unsullied [*munazzah*] by any causality [*‘ilal*]; that He does not have any cause [*sabab*] in any respect. It is also proven that His attributes are not added to His ipseity. ... His attributes operate (i) as negations [*salb*], (ii) as relations [*iḍāfah*], (iii) as a composition of negation and relation. ... Thus their plurality does not violate His oneness or contradict His Necessary Existence. Negative attributes mean negations, such as “Eternity” [*Qidam*], which negates non-existence. Or they mean the negation of causality [*nafy al-sababiyyah*] or the negation of precedence [*nafy al-awwal ‘anhu thāniyan*] to Him. “One,” for example, is a general expression for His indivisibility in any possible way—be it discursively or practically. Or when we say “Necessary Existent” this means that He is there without any cause, while He is the cause of everything; so it is a conjunction [*jam*] of a negation and relation. As for relational attributes, they are such as His being “Creator,” “Producer,” “Shape-Giver”—His all attributes of action [*ṣifāt al-af‘āl*].⁷⁵⁵

The famous eighth book of Ibn Sīnā’s *Metaphysics of Healing* supports this negative theology of divine attributes with an apophatic divine essence. The first three chapters serve to discursively demonstrate the existence of the First Cause [*al-‘illah al-ūlā*], “showing that what is absolutely a First Cause is a cause for the

“The philosophers have agreed, just as the Mu‘tazilah have agreed, on the impossibility of affirming knowledge, power, and will for the First Principle. They claimed that all these names have come about through the religious law and that it is permissible to use them verbally [*luḡhatan*], but that, as has been previously explained, they reduce [referentially] to one essence. ... They all agreed on the negation of the attributes [*nafy al-ṣifāt*].” (Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2000, p.96; with my slight changes.)

⁷⁵⁵ Ibn Sīnā 1935, p.247.

rest of the causes.”⁷⁵⁶ The only essential attribute of God is His Necessary Being, which means that He is the ultimate cause of all beings. The First Principle is the Necessary Being,⁷⁵⁷ and has no quiddity other than His very existence.⁷⁵⁸ No applicable quiddity except being the ultimate cause means no possibility of description:

There is no quiddity for the Necessary Existent other than its being the Necessary Existent. ... Everything that has a quiddity other than existence is caused. ... The First, hence, has *no quiddity*. Those things possessing quiddities have existence emanating upon them from Him. *He is pure existence with the condition of negating privation and [negating] all other description of Him [salb al-‘adam wa sā’ir awṣāf]*.⁷⁵⁹

Ibn Sīnā does not see a contradiction between demonstrating that God is the First Cause as the unique Necessary Being, and arguing that God is essentially undefinable. It can be discursively proven that God is essentially One, the Necessary Being, and the cause of creation. But this is a “negative proof” as the divine essence is proven through a long list of negations, which place God beyond any discursive spaces. Once God’s essential, ineffable oneness without a quiddity is established, negations follow each other:

He is not predicated of anything that has addition. Everything other than Him has addition. The First also has no genus. This is because the First has no quiddity. That which has no quiddity has no genus, since genus is spoken of in answer to the question, “what is it.” ... For this reason, the First has no differentia. Since He has neither genus nor differentia, He has no definition. There is no demonstration of Him, since there is no cause of Him. For this reason there is no “why” regarding Him, and you shall know that there is no “why-ness” for His act.⁷⁶⁰

Ibn Sīnā gives a succinct conclusion at the end of the chapter on divine essence. What takes center stage is an apophatic theology with an ineffable God beyond all discursive spaces, His necessary dissimilarity to all, and a negative theology of divine attributes with a Mu‘tazilite differentiation of the essential, negative names from the relational names of action. He writes:

⁷⁵⁶ Ibn Sīnā 2005, p.270.

⁷⁵⁷ Ibn Sīnā 2005, p.273.

⁷⁵⁸ Ibn Sīnā 2005, p.274.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibn Sīnā 2005, p.276; with my minor modification; emphasis mine.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibn Sīnā 2005, p.277.

[S]ince He is devoid of all matter and its adherents, and of corruption—both being a condition of that which falls under contrariety—the First has no contrary. It has become clear, then, *that the First has no genus, no quiddity, no quality, no quantity, no “where,” no “when,” no equal, no partner, and no contrary—may He be exalted and magnified—[and] that He has no definition and [there is] no demonstration for Him. Rather, He is the demonstration of all things. ... He is only described by means of negating all similarities of Him [salb al-mushābahāt] and affirming to Him all relations [ijāb al-iḍāfāt].* For all things are from Him, and He shares *nothing in common* with what [proceeds] from Him. He is the principle of all things, and He is not any of the things that are posterior to Him.⁷⁶¹

God’s attributes are essentially negative, because the very proof of His essence is a negation of all positive and negative relations. In the next chapters of the *Metaphysics of Healing*, following al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā claims that we can still employ an affirmative language, not in the sense of essential attributes of God, but *eminently*, as the logical conclusion of His being the source of creation. “He is *Perfect-above-perfection [tām bi-l-fawq al-tām]*; Good, Bestower [of existence] on everything after Him; Truth and Pure Intellect.”⁷⁶² These attributes do not cause any plurality in the essence, because they are not essential to God. Only His Necessary Being, which is tantamount to His being the ultimate cause of creation, is essential to God. Nothing else is essential; hence attributes can be employed positively or negatively as long as they apply metaphorically⁷⁶³ or indicate this negative proof. “God is a substance” can be said in the sense of God’s necessary existence with the negation of God being a subject. “God is One” means negating all quantitative and categorical divisions as well as any companionship.⁷⁶⁴ “‘The one’ is only in Him in a negative manner.”⁷⁶⁵ As al-

⁷⁶¹ Ibn Sīnā 2005, pp.282-283.

⁷⁶² Ibn Sīnā 2005, p. 283; with my modification.

⁷⁶³ For example, in his exegesis of the famous “light verse” (Q.24:35), Ibn Sīnā argues that the term “light” is employed equivocally, and applies to God eminently. (Ibn Sīnā in Renard 2014, pp.32-34.) This allegorical reading of the divine name “Light” is in stark opposition with the Ishrāqī philosophical approach.

⁷⁶⁴ Ibn Sīnā 2005, p.296.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibn Sīnā 2005, p.299; with my minor modification.

Fārābī⁷⁶⁶ earlier and Maimonides⁷⁶⁷ later among Philosophers also argued, God can be called “intellect” [*‘aql*], “that which comprehends” [*‘āqil*] and “that which is comprehended” [*ma‘qūl*], but this means negating “the possibility of mixing with matter and its attachments,” as long as He is their ultimate cause.⁷⁶⁸ Similarly, as Ibn Sīnā explains in *The Celestial Epistle*, God’s Necessary Existence proves that He is also essentially “All-Knowing” [*‘Alīm*] and “Intellecting” [*‘Āqil*], but these names are negations that are reducible to each other and thus do not violate divine oneness. He writes:

He is All-Knowing, Knowledge, and that which is Known, without these attributes causing any plurality. There is no difference between “All-Knowing” and “Intellecting” because *they are both expressing an absolute negation from materiality [salb al-maddah muṭlaqan]*.⁷⁶⁹

In brief, various attributes can be employed, but they do not have different meanings. Instead, they either express divine actions distinct from the divine essence, or negative attributes all reducible to God’s apophatic essence, i.e., His being the cause of creation, and paradoxically, His removal from the discursive space and His absolute dissimilarity from what can be known.

Discursive Thought and Non-Discursive Intellection

According to al-‘Āmirī, the tradition that the Arabic Philosophers followed had a fifteen hundred years long genealogy. The prevalent philosophical idea of the necessary dissimilarity between the ultimate cause and the caused, and hence, the unknowability of the ultimate creator by creation was not new. However sustained the philosophical apophatic tradition was, its removal of all divine attributes and reduction of the meaning of all qualifications of God into an apophatic causality [*‘illah*] was contested. Al-‘Āmirī himself complains that the “bellicose theologians” [*al-jadaliyyīn*] accused the Philosophers of ineffectualising [*ta‘ṭīl*] God by negating every quality from Him, and thus, of falling into heresy [*ilhād*].⁷⁷⁰ Such a criticism arguably misses the key point as it reduces the Philosophers to simple negators, which could be disproven quite easily. The Ḥanafī theologian of Samarqand, al-Māturīdī (d.944) civilly testified

⁷⁶⁶ See al-Fārābī 1998, Ch.1.

⁷⁶⁷ Maimonides 2008, 1.68. Also see E. R. Wolfson 2008, p.423.

⁷⁶⁸ Ibn Sīnā 2005, p.296.

⁷⁶⁹ Ibn Sīnā 1935, p.247; my emphasis.

⁷⁷⁰ al-‘Āmirī 1988, pp.77-79.

that “in their negation [*nafy*] of the divine names and attributes, the Philosophers do not claim ineffectualism.”⁷⁷¹

There were, however, more challenging and informed critiques that were aware of the paradox of the Philosophers in discursively demonstrating that God is the ultimate source, and still claiming that His essence is beyond knowledge and dissimilar. Ibn Ḥazm (d.1064), for example, argues perceptively that the Philosopher al-Kindī was contradicting himself by proposing a full-fledged negative theology, yet describing God as the cause of all [*'illah*].⁷⁷² Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111)'s *Incoherence of the Philosophers* also condemns the negative theology of divine attributes employed by the Philosophers, as they remove the meanings of all attributes, and unify [*tawḥīd*] them in one single meaning—God as the only Necessary Being, hence the cause [*'illah*] of everything else.⁷⁷³ Al-Ghazālī finds this approach self-contradictory, and devotes an entire part of the *Incoherence* to the negative theology of divine attributes in Ibn Sīnā.⁷⁷⁴ More fundamentally, al-Ghazālī also questions the equivalence of the absolute, apophatic One with the Necessary Being. If the One is one, then no relation can be attached to it. Al-Ghazālī argues:

How can the necessity of existence be identical with existence, when the necessity of existence can be denied and existence affirmed? The true one [*al-wāḥid al-Ḥaqq*] in every respect is the one not subject to [simultaneous] affirmation and negation, since it cannot be said of it that it exists and does not exist and that it is necessary of existence and not necessary of existence.⁷⁷⁵

The apophatic One *per se* can neither be the ultimate cause of creation, nor the Necessary Being from which existence emanates. Philosophers' efforts to prove God's being the cause of creation and their simultaneous adherence to the absolute One are hence incoherent for al-Ghazālī.

Later, al-Shahrastānī (d.1153) directs the same critique to Ibn Sīnā from a different perspective than al-Ghazālī. In line with his commitment to Ismā'īlī

⁷⁷¹ al-Māturīdī 2003, pp.91-92.

⁷⁷² Adamson 2003, p.76.

⁷⁷³ In the conclusion of the *Incoherence* al-Ghazālī repeats that the Philosophers get close to the Mu'tazilite School in their unification [*tawḥīd*] of the divine attributes. (Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2000, p.226.)

⁷⁷⁴ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2000, Ch.6, pp.96-109.

⁷⁷⁵ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2000, Ch.3.3, p.69.

apophaticism, al-Shahrastānī claims that Being [*wujūd*] cannot be attributed to God. Accordingly, Ibn Sīnā falls into partnership of the divine by making Being God's essential attribute, and thus violating apophatic unity.⁷⁷⁶ Second, al-Shahrastānī is aware of the paradox inherent in the philosophical negative proof of God. He asks: is God the origin of creation, which indicates a relation, or ultimately self-contained and transcendent—a negation of all relations?

His [Ibn Sīnā's] statement "He is the origin of every existence, so He intellects from Himself that for which He is an origin," and his statement "He intellects Himself by Himself insofar as it is considered for Him that He has an abstract identity"—and he has glossed intellection in one passage as origination, which is a positive entity, and he has glossed intellection in another passage as abstraction, which is a negative entity. This is a dumbfounding incoherence.⁷⁷⁷

Indeed, al-Fārābī's tension between the God of the qualified attributes and the apophatic One is also pivotal to Ibn Sīnā's depiction of God. For him, God as the Necessary Existent is the cause [*'illah*] of all existents. God's being the ultimate cause means that all forms of causality should be negated [*nafy*] from Him. "The Necessary Being is not similar [*tashbīh*] to anything in any respect, because the being of everything else is different from their essences."⁷⁷⁸ God has many positive and negative attributes, but at the end, all attributes are actually privations.⁷⁷⁹ Hence Ibn Sīnā discursively demonstrates that God is the Necessary Being and the cause of creation; but the proof itself works through negating all

⁷⁷⁶ For his critique within the context of the unity of the Necessary of Existence, see e.g. al-Shahrastānī 2001, p.46. When dealing with Ibn Sīnā's approach to the existence of the Necessary of Existence, al-Shahrastānī similarly claims that if God is purely Necessary of Existence, then it cannot be demonstrated. (al-Shahrastānī 2001, p.35.) El-Bizri also observes that al-Shahrastānī's critique of Ibn Sīnā's metaphysics is based on the latter's tempering with divine unknowability:

Shahrastānī critically interrogated Avicenna's metaphysical conception of *wājib al-wujūd* (Necessary Being), on the grounds that it entailed a compromising of the observance of absolute divine transcendence [*tanzīh*]. Shahrastānī affirmed the reality of the divine attributes without directly applying them to the divine essence, which he believed was absolutely unknowable and indefinable. (El-Bizri 2008, p.134.)

For an analysis of al-Shahrastānī's critique, see Steigerwald 2006, p.266.

⁷⁷⁷ al-Shahrastānī 2001, p.62.

⁷⁷⁸ Ibn Sīnā 1935, p.244.

⁷⁷⁹ Netton 1989, p.154.

relations from God, and making him unknowable. Al-Shahrastānī's critique is perceptive.

Per al-Shahrastānī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1209)'s *Book of Teachings* [*Kitāb al-Ma'ālim*] directly criticizes the dilemma of the negative proof that lay at the heart of philosophical apophaticism. Al-Rāzī criticizes the concept of the Necessary Existence advocated by Ibn Sīnā. Accordingly, Necessary Existence simultaneously indicated a divine truth inaccessible to creation, and the cause of creation necessarily dissimilar to it. The second statement, for al-Rāzī, embodies a "negative limitation" [*qayd salbī*], which makes the divine ipseity rather knowable, and contradicts Ibn Sīnā's position on divine unknowability. Divine unknowability and a causal relationship based on necessary dissimilarity do not work together, and instead create contradiction.⁷⁸⁰ In his supercommentary to al-Rāzī, Najm al-Dīn Dabīrān al-Kātībī (d.1277) defends Ibn Sīnā and divine unknowability on the basis of the homonymous [*mushtarak*] employment of the term "existence."⁷⁸¹

If one is absolutely one, then how can it be anything but one, be it an agent, or creator? Ibn Rushd (d.1198)'s *Incoherence of the Incoherence* surprisingly agrees with this reasoning in al-Ghazālī's critique of the apophatic one. For Ibn Rushd, the problem emerges because of the unfortunate principle that "*but one emanates from the absolutely one:*"

The ... reason why it is impossible for the Philosophers to admit according to their principle that the world is the act of God is because of a condition which is common to the agent and the act, namely, their assertion that out of the one only one can proceed. Now *the First Principle is one in every way*, and the world is composed of different constituents. Therefore according to their principle it cannot be imagined that the world is the act of God.⁷⁸²

Ibn Rushd notes that "this principle has only been put forward by the later philosophers of Islām."⁷⁸³ He does not really give a good defense here—so Ibn Rushd's solution is to distance Peripatetic Philosophy from this defective idea,

⁷⁸⁰ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in Najm al-Dīn al-Kātībī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Ibn Kammūna 2007, pp.54-55.

⁷⁸¹ Najm al-Dīn al-Kātībī in Najm al-Dīn al-Kātībī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Ibn Kammūna 2007, p.55.

⁷⁸² Ibn Rushd 1954, Ch.3, p.104; with my minor modifications; my emphasis.

⁷⁸³ Ibn Rushd 1954, Ch.3, p.104.

putting the blame on the usual suspect, Ibn Sīnā (d.1037). According to Ibn Rushd, it was Anaxagoras and Plato, who dealt with this question, and assumed that only one proceeds from the one.⁷⁸⁴ Aristotle's system solved this difficulty as its First Monad is partly the cause of unity, and partly the cause of plurality. Aristotle was so unique that later philosophers, including Muslim Philosophers like Ibn Sīnā, did not understand him, and thus distorted his system.⁷⁸⁵

Ibn Sīnā's tireless commentator Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d.1274), at least in his Ismā'īlī creed *Paradise of Submission [Ravza-yi Taslīm]*, joins Ibn Rushd in distancing himself from the problematic principle that *but one emanates from the absolutely one*. Ibn Rushd's shelter was Aristotle. For Ṭūsī it is Ismā'īlism—a philosophically rigorous sanctuary more apophatic than that of the Neoplatonism of the late antiquity. Ṭūsī absolves God of being the creator of the universe: it is not God, but His command from which the Universal Soul, and then the entire creation, receives its existence through the First Intellect. In other words, God's apophatic oneness has nothing sayable or knowable to it at all. But the divine command is one-many, which solves the logical difficulties that arise from the Neoplatonic principle that out of one only one can issue.⁷⁸⁶

Directly or not, all critiques of the negative proof for divine oneness eventually targeted Ibn Sīnā. As an indirect explanation of this apparent self-contradiction, Ibn Sīnā points to the elusive difference between our discursive conception of God's oneness, and God's essential oneness itself. Accordingly, all positive and negative attributes of the divine union, in the end, boil down to

nothing but (1) union, where "union" is an idea in the intelligence rather than in the essence, or (2) negation [*nafy*] and denial. *In so doing they do not imply the existence of many characteristics, but rather an omission of many characteristics.*⁷⁸⁷

Ibn Sīnā, hence, makes a distinction between essential divine unity, and human thought and discourse about it. On the basis of this distinction the apophaticism

⁷⁸⁴ Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d.1191)'s Ishrāqī School followed this principle that only one emanates from one. See e.g. Quṭb al-dīn al-Shīrāzī 2005, pp.305-307. Al-Suhrawardī himself is critical of the negative theology of divine attributes expounded by the Peripatetic Philosophers. (See Quṭb al-dīn al-Shīrāzī 2005, pp.346-349.) For Ibn Barraĵān's critique of the principle, see Ibn Barraĵān in Casewit 2014, p.466.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibn Rushd 1954, Ch3, pp.108-109.

⁷⁸⁶ See Ṭūsī 2005, #30-36, pp.27-29 (English translation), pp.25-29 (Persian text).

⁷⁸⁷ Netton 1989, p.154; original emphasis.

and kataphaticism of the Philosophers operate in fact in two different spaces, if analyzed more closely, especially within the context of Neoplatonism. As Plotinus famously argued:

One must not suppose that the gods or the exceedingly blessed spectators in the higher world contemplate propositions, but all the forms we speak about are beautiful images in that world, of the kind that someone imagined to exist in the soul of the wise man, images not painted but real.⁷⁸⁸

The Enneads made a distinction between *dianoia* and *noēsis*, i.e., discursive thought and intellection.⁷⁸⁹ Not only al-Kindī's circle, but also Ibn Sīnā knew the work well, through the Neoplatonic masterpiece, *the Theology of Aristotle*. He even wrote a commentary on it entitled *the Impartial Judgment [al-Inṣāf]*. Ibn Sīnā generally follows *The Theology of Aristotle* in employing the Arabic term "*fikr*" for discursive thought, as a rough analogue to *dianoia*. *Fikr* involves the process of dividing up [*tafṣīl*] concepts or intelligible forms that are simple, to be unified [*tartīb*] in the intellect.⁷⁹⁰ Theoretical reasoning belongs to the rational soul, and entails a process of "division and combination," or "analysis and synthesis" [*al-taḥlīl wa al-tarkīb*].⁷⁹¹ The non-discursive knowledge, on the other hand, is "simple," and does not require the passage of time as it grasps the thing in its complexity all at once rather than in stages. The key point is that the non-discursive, simple knowledge is not necessarily mystical, but expressed syllogistically for Ibn Sīnā:

[T]he difference between intellection and the deficient knowledge of soul is *not* that the soul's knowledge is syllogistic and intellect's knowledge is non-syllogistic. Instead, the difference is that the intellect grasps all the middle terms and the resulting conclusions ... necessarily and always, and all at once. The soul, by contrast, grasps them only potentially and so must discover them separately.⁷⁹²

⁷⁸⁸ Plotinus 2014, Vol.5.8.5, pp.254-255.

⁷⁸⁹ The distinction has been intensively discussed by Sorabji, Lloyd and others. See Alfino 1988.

⁷⁹⁰ See e.g. Ibn Sīnā 2005, p.291.

⁷⁹¹ "Let us take for example the intelligible form 'man.' The soul knows this form only after it has gone through a process of seeing what is common to all men [*tartīb*], as well as what it is that distinguishes man from other species, such as horse [*tafṣīl*]." (Adamson 2004, p.90).

⁷⁹² Adamson 2004, p.105.

To capture the immediacy of the knowledge attained by non-discursive intellection, Ibn Sīnā employs the term “vision” [*mushāhadah*]⁷⁹³—a key term in Neoplatonism as well as Sufism. The term primarily denotes the immediate, non-discursive, but also syllogistic and intellectual union instead of an ineffable, mystical experience. “Vision” is indeed a reference to the state of prophecy not only for Ibn Sīnā, but also Ibn Miskawayh (d.1030) among his contemporaries. As Arkoun notes, “vision” denotes an intellectual state wherein, very much like in sleep, “one sees, hears, visions and knows while the senses are inactive because of sleep.”⁷⁹³ This intellectual state of immediate, non-discursive knowledge is open to anybody according to Ibn Sīnā.⁷⁹⁴ Theological discourse can prove God, but it cannot reach the divine essence. God as the Active Intellect, which Plotinus called “the second god,” on the other hand, can be accessed through the realization of the human intellect, its perfection as an intellect through assimilation to and contact with the Active Intellect. It is through such contact, as we have seen, that we know the forms of things, i.e., know things as they really are, as God knows them; and it is through such assimilation that we know God. For God is the cynosure of the Active Intellect.⁷⁹⁵

Human ability “to know things as they really are, as God knows them” means to comprehend them non-discursively, but also syllogistically. The apophatic One is beyond all forms of knowledge, while God as the Active Intellect, can be known via the connection [*ittiṣāf*] between “intellect” “that which comprehends” and “that which is comprehended.”⁷⁹⁶ This unity is exactly the property of non-discursive thought in Plotinus, who clearly says that it should be called “connection” rather than “thinking.”⁷⁹⁷

The elusive distinction between discursive thought and non-discursive intellection, a key and nuanced borrowing of Philosophers from Neoplatonism, has three key consequences for philosophical apophaticism. First, God’s simple and direct knowledge of things is independent from relations with the particulars.

⁷⁹³ Arkoun in Marcotte 1992, p.89.

⁷⁹⁴ Besides, Ibn Sīnā’s employment of “vision” within the context of love [*īshq*] for God suggests that mystical experience can also be a non-discursive, direct access to the divine essence. (See Adamson 2004, pp.110-111.)

⁷⁹⁵ Goodman 1992, p.164.

⁷⁹⁶ “This type of thinking involves no distinction between the thinker or the thinking on one side and the object of his thinking or the thought on the other side.” (Lloyd 1969-1970, p.263.)

⁷⁹⁷ Lloyd 1969-1970, p.268.

His knowledge, following *the Theology of Aristotle* at this point, can be called “ignorance,” where “knowledge” means *dianoia*—the fruit of the discursive process of division and combination. God knows Himself, God knows universals, and God knows particulars, but it is not permitted to say that “He apprehends [*idrāk*] them” from this perspective.⁷⁹⁸ In other words, “to call intellection ‘knowledge’ in this lower sense would be to damn intellect with faint praise.”⁷⁹⁹ Together with Ibn Sīnā’s sharp distinction between sensation and intellection,⁸⁰⁰ neglect for this distinction will provoke the theologians’ criticisms of Philosophers and their supposed denial of God’s knowledge of the particulars.⁸⁰¹

Second, Ibn Sīnā does not follow Plotinus in separating the soul from the body and attaining the non-discursive knowledge of higher intellects.⁸⁰² In terms of the relationship between the body and the soul, the Arabic version of Plotinus’ *Enneads*, the *Theology of Aristotle* is more Aristotelian than the *Enneads* itself.⁸⁰³ In the same vein, Ibn Sīnā is closer to Aristotelianism in that the human intellect is inseparably embodied in this world, thus even non-discursive rational knowledge can be expressed syllogistically for him.⁸⁰⁴ Ibn Sīnā does not accept a

⁷⁹⁸ Ibn Sīnā 2005, p.283.

⁷⁹⁹ Adamson 2004, p.101.

⁸⁰⁰ Adamson 2005, pp.254-268.

⁸⁰¹ E.g. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2000, Ch.11, pp.125-130.

⁸⁰²

Often I have woken up out of the body to my self and have entered into myself, going out from all other things; I have seen a beauty wonderfully great and felt assurance that then most of all I belonged to the better part; I have actually lived the best life and come to identity with the divine; and set firm in it I have come to that supreme actuality, setting myself above all else in the realm of Intellect. Then after that rest in the divine, when I have come down from Intellect to discursive reasoning, I am puzzled how I ever came down, and how my soul has come to be in the body when it is what it has shown itself to be by itself, even when it is in the body. (Plotinus 2014, Vol.4.8.1, pp.396-397.)

⁸⁰³ See Adamson 2000, Ch.3, pp.87-138.

⁸⁰⁴ According to Ibn Sīnā, “human rational soul comes into existence with the birth of the body which it governs and uses.” (Wisnovsky 2005, p.93.) Also in the *Healing* he argues:

one must know our state as long as we remain in the body. For, when there is realized for our intellectual faculty its perfection in actuality, it does not find in terms of enjoyment what is [fully] due to the thing in itself. This is because of the impediment of the body. If we were to set ourselves aside from the body, then, by our contemplating our essence ... then we would find, in terms of enjoyment and splendor, that which is infinite. (Ibn Sīnā 2005, p.298.)

non-syllogistic knowledge of God, and in that way he diverges from the Neoplatonic mystical tradition.⁸⁰⁵

Finally, the discursive proofs for God's being the Necessary Existence, absolute One, or the cause of creation, do not in fact access God's essence, because they are already mediated by the temporal processes of the embodied, rational soul. Not only Ibn Sīnā's followers from diverse, and rival, backgrounds, but even his opponents confirm that the discursive proofs of Philosophers for God's Necessary Existence do not violate divine unknowability. Ibn Taymīyyah's general observation on the nature of logical proofs and logicians' own perspective on its limits is perceptive:

As for the Necessary Existent, blessed and exalted may He be, the syllogism does not prove what is characteristic of Him; rather, it proves a universal matter common to Him as well as to others. *According to the logicians, what is proven by categorical syllogism is nothing but a universal, common matter having no bearing upon the Necessary Existent, the Lord of beings, may He be glorified and exalted. Therefore, their demonstration does not lead them to any knowledge of a matter which must be constant—whether it belongs to the Necessary Existent or to possible beings.*⁸⁰⁶

Ibn Sīnā's *Glosses [Ta'liqāt]*, "a *reportatio* of Ibn Sīnā's comments and clarifications" compiled by his pupil Bāhmanyār ibn al-Marzubān (d.1066) presents probably the best summary of Ibn Sīnā's position on divine unknowability, and the inapplicability of any attributes, including "existence," due to His necessary dissimilarity. He writes:

We do not know the true nature of the First. All we know of Him is that He must either be necessarily existent or not. This, however, is not His true essence but simply one of His concomitants, and by

⁸⁰⁵ Adamson 2004, pp.109-111.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibn Taymīyyah 1993, p.71; my emphasis.

Arguably Ibn Taymīyyah's description is a great summary of the role of demonstrative syllogism among the Philosophers even beyond the Islamicate world. Such syllogisms, according to Thomas Aquinas, whose negative theological position closely aligns itself with Ibn Sīnā and Maimonides, only loosely indicates divine unity, "having no bearing upon the Necessary Existent," to borrow Ibn Taymīyyah's words. For Thomas Aquinas a syllogistic proof of God "does no more than indicate that the conclusion is not utterly irrational. *The syllogism here clarifies and to some extent makes intelligible, teases out the implicit, and really nothing more.*" (See Janz 1998, pp.12-13; my emphasis.)

means of it we come to know some of His other concomitants, such as unity and the other attributes.

In fact, the closest we can come to grasping His true nature is by thinking of Him as the Existent per se; or in other words, that which exists solely by virtue of itself. By describing Him thus, however, *we are, all told, merely referring to something the true nature of which eludes us. The fact is that His true essence cannot be the same as existence [nafs al-wujūd],* nor can it be a quiddity properly so-called, since existence is extrinsic to quiddities as such, whereas He is intrinsically the very cause of existence. ... His essence should be regarded as *above existence [fawq al-wujūd],* such that the latter would be merely one of its concomitants.⁸⁰⁷

In other words, discursive processes prove God to only be that which eludes proof. Hence the distinction between discursive thought and non-discursive intellection partially explains the Kindīan dilemma of negative proof for the unknowable divine essence. In addition to his immediate students like Bāhmanyār, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, from whom the two competing commentary traditions on Ibn Sīnā developed, critics like Ibn Taymīyyah and Sufis like Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī,⁸⁰⁸ among others⁸⁰⁹ agree on this point.

⁸⁰⁷ Ibn Sīnā in Todd 2014, pp.212-213; my emphases.

⁸⁰⁸ See Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī in Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī and Ṣadr al-dīn al-Qūnawī 1995, pp.51-54; also Todd 2014, pp.212-213.

⁸⁰⁹ al-Qāḍī al-Bayḍāwī (d.ca.1286)'s *Rising Lights [Ṭawālī' al-Anwār]*, for example, gives a beautiful summary of divine unknowability among Philosophers, and their critique of the theologians. The critique of the theologians depicted by al-Qāḍī is perceptive, as they highlight the limitation put on the divine essence by the philosophical assumption that it is necessarily dissimilar:

Third Section: On the Knowability of His Ipseity

According to the doctrine of the Philosophers, the human capacity cannot attain the knowledge of His ipseity, the Immaculate. For, His ipseity cannot be described precisely, and does not accept any definition as it is not composite. ... The theologians opposed them, and refused their limitation [*ḥaṣr*] which requires that His Immaculate Truth is the abstracted existence [*al-wujūd al-mujarrad*]. The theologians claim that it is knowable [*ma'lūm*]. (al-Bayḍāwī 2014, pp.168-169.)

***A Brief Survey of Philosophical Apophaticism in the Eleventh and Twelfth
Centuries: al-Tawḥīdī's Circle in Baghdād***

The Aristotelian adaptation of the Neoplatonic distinction between discursive and immediate, non-discursive thought became a key but elusive aspect of Philosophers' approach to God, necessary existence, and divine oneness. The distinction allowed them, on the one hand, discursive proof that God is essentially the absolute One, and the source of all existence as the Necessary Being. On the other, they could evoke God's unknowability, unlike the Mu'tazilites and other theologians, who did not make such a distinction. Thus, Adamson's analysis of Ibn Sīnā can be expanded to cover other Philosophers in Kindī's line, who even preceded Ibn Sīnā. Al-Kindī himself was conversant with the Neoplatonic distinction between *dianoia* and *noiesis*, and he describes "thought" [*fikr*] as a "function of soul that falls short of pure intellection."⁸¹⁰ Ibn Miskawayh's *On the Soul and Intellect* also makes the evident distinction between human intellects and simple, pure intelligence.⁸¹¹ The distinction was far from obvious, and the inconsistent application of *'aql* and *fikr* by the Philosophers partially explains the accusations they encountered.

Still, between al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā, we clearly observe that Philosophers employed the distinction, in the service of apophaticism. Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī (d.ca.985), for example, follows the same distinction, even if he is quite pessimistic about the project of harmonizing philosophy with religion. His student Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d.1023)'s *Book of Delightful and Intimate Conversations* [*Kitāb al-imtā' wa al-mu'ānasah*] records a debate between the shopkeeper al-Jarīrī and Abū Sulaymān al-Maqdisī (d.985), a leading name of the Brethren of Purity [*Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*]. The debate serves for al-Sijistānī to claim that both philosophy and religion are true in their ways, and that they should not be confused with each other.⁸¹² Meanwhile, al-Sijistānī adopts the philosophical

Al-Qāḍī al-Bayḍāwī's *Rising Lights* [*Ṭawālīf al-Anwār*], which attracted several commentaries, immensely benefits from the *Prolegomena to Kalām* of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī in terms of its structure, content and terminology, but does not mention of the *Prolegomena* or of its writer.

⁸¹⁰ Adamson 2007, p.141. As Adamson notes, "al-Kindī seems to be following the Arabic Plotinus texts, which also use *fikr* for discursive thought that is inferior to intellection—what Plotinus himself called *dianoia*. But the evidence of *On Sleep and Dream* suggests that al-Kindī is aware of a more elaborate theory of the 'internal senses'." (Adamson 2007, p.142.)

⁸¹¹ Marcotte 1992, pp.100-101.

⁸¹² For an English translation of the section on the encounter, see Griffel and Hachmeier 2010-2011.

distinction between discursive and non-discursive thought, i.e., between *fikr* and *'aql*, which serves to discursively prove God's existence and oneness, and also to negate all discursive access to God's essence. In a night session on divine unity [*tawhīd*], al-Sijistānī claimed as follows:

Whoever points to the divine essence solely via *the simple, pure intellect* [*'aql*], without the dissemblance of a name [*tawriyah bi-ism*] or the opaqueness of a symbol, purified and sanctified, they are recognizing divine unity [*Ḥaqq al-tawhīd*] to the utmost human capacity. Thus they have affirmed [*ithbāt*] the divine essence [*inniyyah*] and negated spatiality [*ayniyyah*] and howness [*kayfiyyah*], and *transcended all thought* [*fikr*] and discursivity [*rawiyyah*].⁸¹³

The divine essence eludes all discursive spaces, but its non-discursive, simple vision is syllogistically possible, as it is received intellectually by the intellect. On the other hand, al-Sijistānī makes it clear that only the prophets can achieve this level. Al-Sijistānī sharply rejects the proposal for a hierarchy of prophetic and philosophical forms of certain knowledge. Only prophets can acquire certain [*qaṭ'ī*] knowledge and achieve such simple, non-discursive, immediate access, even if it is directed towards the Active Intellect and not to the divine essence itself. Compared to philosophical intellection, Philosophers “engage in reasoned inquiries with their different intellects,” and they can never attain the certainty that revelation brings.⁸¹⁴ “Reason is a gift from God,” submits al-Sijistānī, but it does not have the *immediacy* and *simplicity* of revelation.⁸¹⁵ Thus God's necessary existence and unity can be discursively proven, while the discursive access to his essence as well as the applicability of all attributes are simultaneously negated on the basis of the limitations of discursive thought. The theological discourse on God's essence negates itself at all discursive and non-discursive levels in favor of an apophatic divine essence. In al-Sijistānī's words:

One should add a related warning for a technical confusion between Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī (fl.late 10th CE), a leading member of the *Brethren of Purity*, and Abū Sulaymān al-Maḡdīsī al-Manṭiqī (d.985), an opponent of the former and a teacher of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawhīdī (d.1023). Netton mistakes the two in his entry in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. See Netton 1998, p.557.

⁸¹³ Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī in *al-Tawhīdī* 1992, #63, p.259; my emphases.

⁸¹⁴ Griffel and Hachmeier 2010-2011, p.241.

⁸¹⁵ Griffel and Hachmeier 2010-2011, p.240; my emphases.

blessed is the one who says: “if you want to describe [*waṣf*] it [i.e., the divine unity], it will be completely destroyed. If you try to deny [*juḥūd*] it, it will become most clear and manifest!”⁸¹⁶

Al-Sijistānī follows al-Kindī and Ibn Sīnā in negating the applicability of attributes to God in favor of His absolute dissimilarity, hence, transcendence. Language can be employed either metaphorically, or as a negation. In an illustrative example, al-Tawḥīdī in private respectfully criticizes the kataphatic language that his master al-Sijistānī employed earlier in a heated session on astrology [*‘ilm al-nujūm*]. Al-Sijistānī responds that divine transcendence

annuls [*yamḥaq*], removes, rejects, and negates all of them. However, when addressing Him, pointing to Him, naming his lordship [*rubūbiyyah*], or explaining His godhead [*ilāhiyyah*], there is no escape from these words. ... But these words are employed metaphorically, protecting the divine oneness and forbidding knowledge [*musta‘āran, fī ḥimā al-tawḥīd wa ḥaram al-ma‘rifah*].⁸¹⁷

On other occasions as well, al-Sijistānī makes it clear that the qualified attributes apply to God only metaphorically, on the basis of customs or linguistic conventions, but in reality, these attributes only mean to negate God’s similarity or relationality with creation. For example, we customarily say that “God is agent,” which in fact has the negative meaning of being “not acted upon” [*lā munfa‘ā*].⁸¹⁸ God’s unity and existence are discursively proven, while the discursive or non-discursive accessibility of the divine essence is negated together with the applicability of the divine names and attributes.

Originally from a small town in Hamadān, Abū al-Fatḥ al-Nūshajānī⁸¹⁹ (fl. late 10th-ea. 11th CE) from Abū Ḥayyān’s circle was a known Philosopher of the time, at least in Baghdād.⁸²⁰ Like other Philosophers, he explicitly makes the distinction between discursive thought and non-discursive intellection. Accordingly, the

⁸¹⁶ Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī in al-Tawḥīdī 1992, #63, p.259.

⁸¹⁷ al-Tawḥīdī 1992, #2, p.137.

⁸¹⁸ See al-Tawḥīdī 1992, #10, pp.149-151.

⁸¹⁹ “Nūshajān” should be a town around the hill of Nūsh-i Jān close to Hamadān. See Stronach et.al. 1998.

⁸²⁰ In his debate with Abū Sulaymān al-Maqdisī of the *Brethren of Purity*, al-Jarīrī cites al-Nūshajānī among the interconfessional group of Philosophers. See al-Jarīrī in Griffel and Hachmeier 2010-2011, pp.244-245.

divine essence is beyond the discursive field, because it is beyond simplicity, thus, inaccessible through the processes of analysis and synthesis that discourse undergoes. Recalling the distinction between *dianoia* and *noēsis* in *the Theology of Aristotle*, he argues that “the Originator is the Real and the First, and the source of everything. They emanate from Him, and proliferate from Him, not through *discursive determination, which is formed by division and combination [faṣḥan wa waṣḥan]*.”⁸²¹ The reason of God’s transcendence of the discursive space is that He is “the First Agent [*al-Fā’il al-Awwal*], the cause [*‘illah*] of everything visible, existing, intellected, and perceived. His actions have no target, no purpose, no aim, no choice, no thought, no orientation, no decision, no interest, no direction, no experimentation, and no effort.”⁸²² All of these negations serve to indicate that the cause of all discursive spaces is necessarily beyond those spaces. All of these attributes are anthropomorphic concepts, and they indicate a deficiency from which He is far removed. In other words, positive attributes can operate only as similes [*mithl*],⁸²³ while their real meaning is decidedly apophatic. In al-Nūshajānī’s words:

all forms, definitions in the language, and relations are negated from the realm of the divine. However, they are symbols that stimulate the soul, and words that approximate to Truth. They all transport their audience to what is beyond them [*mā warā’*]. The more complete and beautiful these symbols, and the more powerful and clear the words, the more subtle the stimulation.”⁸²⁴

In brief, Philosophers in Abū Ḥayyān’s circle make a sharp distinction between divine revelation and philosophical reasoning. The former is not discursive, in the sense that it is directly and simply manifesting the divine will. It does not go through division or combination—a binary process that determines human thought. Reasoning cannot access the divine essence, while revelation—the way in which intellect unites non-discursively with the divine essence as the Active Intellect—is itself inaccessible. The discourse on divine essence negates itself as God remains essentially unknowable.

⁸²¹ al-Tawḥīdī 1992, #36, p.196; my emphasis.

⁸²² al-Tawḥīdī 1992, #29, p.183.

⁸²³ al-Tawḥīdī 1992, #29, p.184.

⁸²⁴ al-Tawḥīdī 1992, #36, p.196; my emphasis.

Summary: the Characteristics of Philosophical Apophaticism

Throughout the two centuries from al-Kindī to Ibn Sīnā, Philosophers in 'Iraq and Iran adopted a variety of theological positions on the divine essence and its accessibility. The family resemblances, referential continuities, and networks among these positions makes it possible to talk about a tradition of "philosophical apophaticism" on the divine essence. Philosophers since al-Kindī onwards developed a peculiar apophatic theology of the divine nature, i.e., a theological discourse that negates itself by employing the very tools of the discourse, and ends up with a self-contained, unknowable God. The characteristics of this negative theology of the divine essence can be outlined as follows:

(i) God is necessarily dissimilar [*mukhālif*] to creation, insofar as the First Cause [*'illah*] is dissimilar to the caused. God is essentially beyond discursive possibilities because of this decisive distinction between the cause and the caused, or the creator and the created.

(ii) Due to the necessary distinction between God and anything that humans can know or imagine, Philosophers are strong defenders of God's dissimilarity and transcendence [*tanzīh*], and bitter opponents of God's comparability [*tashbīh*] to creation. In line with this emphasis on divine transcendence, Philosophers follow a negative theology of the divine attributes. As God is dissimilar to creation, all attributes of creation should be negated from God, in the sense that they should be interpreted as negations, or metaphors.

(iii) A philosophical hermeneutics that, in Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī (d.ca.985)'s words, "protects the divine oneness" is central to this theological approach. Not only Qur'ānic verses and prophetic reports [*ḥadīths*] with corporeal implications, but all attributes undergo a hermeneutical process lest they violate the absolute oneness and the necessary dissimilarity of the divine. This hermeneutics can contain (a) an active interpretation [*ta'wīl*] of the sacred sources, especially when they appear to address God anthropomorphically, (b) following *via eminentiae*, by distinguishing how an attribute appears present in creation, and how it truly applies to God, and (c) claiming homonymy, arguing that terms are employed homonymously when applied to God and creation.

(iv) The indivisible unity of God cannot be accessed discursively, but non-discursive paths, both mystical and philosophical, are also closed in the apophatic versions. Philosophers present discursive arguments to prove that God is the absolute one and the Necessary Being, from which creation emanates. Theological discourse on God's essence negates itself: theology leads to the

demonstrative realization that God is, but through a negative proof.⁸²⁵ God's essence remains unknowable to theological discourse and non-discourse. Positive theological discourse on the divine essence cancels itself, realizing the unknowability and inaccessibility of its proven subject, and hence, its own incapacity.

B. Sufis and the Philosophical Apophaticism of Divine Essence in the Thirteenth Century

Philosophical Apophaticism and Sufism in al-Andalus

From Ibn Masarraḥ to Ibn Sabʿīn

The key aspects of the philosophical apophatic tradition were (i) a negative theology of divine attributes, (ii) the unknowability and inaccessibility of the divine essence, (iii) the necessary dissimilarity of God as the First Cause of everything, and (iv) a philosophical hermeneutics that “protects” the divine oneness and dissimilarity. These aspects had already been set by al-Kindī within a Muʿtazilite context, later to take different forms among Philosophers, while preserving a family resemblance. Still, it is not only Philosophers who followed this form of apophaticism even in its early stage. The enigmatic, ascetic mystic and intellectual of Cordova, Ibn Masarraḥ (d.931) adopted it as well.

Ibn Masarraḥ explains divine unknowability through the symbolism of letters. The divine essence is veiled behind the name “God,” in the same way that in the the first letter of the alphabet and of the name “God” [*Allāh*], “A” [*alif*] is hidden by the long, wall-like letter “L” [*lām*], from which it stands decidedly disjointed, unlike most Arabic letters.⁸²⁶ Hence all divine attributes operate as veils separating God from creation, with the very name “God” acting as “the first veil”

⁸²⁵ In Iqbal (d.1938)'s not very friendly words, the argument of Philosophers “really tries to reach the infinite by merely negating the finite.” (Iqbal 2013, p.23.)

⁸²⁶

The *alif* points to the essence of Allāh, may He be exalted, since it is [written] separately without being attached [to other letters]. This is the primeval, eternal name which cannot be interpreted by anything more than “He.” And given that the *lām* is the only letter that accompanies the *alif* and is attached to it, it indicates the first veil and the concealed hiddenness. This is the name by which Allāh has named Himself. (Ibn Masarraḥ in Ebstein 2014, p.86.)

Later Ibn al-ʿArabī praises Dawid [Dāwūd] on the basis of the letters used writing his name all of which are uniquely disjointed. His name contains none of jointed letters [*ḥurūf al-ittiṣāl*]. See e.g. Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946, p.161.

for Ibn Masarraḥ.⁸²⁷ His *Epistle of Contemplation* is even more direct in terms of the divine unknowability:

[S]ince the Lofty and Great One transcends direct contact with the limited, it also transcends resemblance to the limited and similitude with it. Therefore it is necessary that His encompassing should be above all encompassing, and His loftiness above all loftiness. He thus goes beyond the boundaries of imaginings, for the imaginings are the intellects, which resemble things that take the image of the models. The intellects are limited; the limited cannot contain or encompass whatever is above it, what does not correspond to it, what is loftier than it, or what contains it. ... This implies necessarily that the Lofty One has no similitude; He has no end; He has no beginning; He has no parts; and He has no limit, nor does [any of it] enter into His oneness and greatness. The Supreme King transcends the entire species and is above it, except by means of the proofs which give indication of Him and the traces which He imprinted in His creation, bearing witness to His lordship.⁸²⁸

Moreover, the unknowability of the divine ipseity in Ibn Masarraḥ follows the paradox of philosophical apophaticism: negation of all imaginable attributes and God's dissimilarity are logical results of His being the creator.

He has no partner, nothing is like His likeness [Q.42:11]. He is greater than all things and He is the one who encompasses everything. The regions of the earth do not contain nor encompass Him. *Eyes do not perceive Him* (Q.6:103), for He has neither end nor beginning. He is the first, prior to everything that has limit and end. Everything but Him is created, restricted and hence disjoint.⁸²⁹

Ibn Masarraḥ's unknowability of the divine essence seems to be supported by a negative theology of divine attributes. The intellectual historian al-Qifṭī (d.1249) defines Ibn Masarraḥ as an "Esoterist" [*Bāṭinī*], and mentions of him as a follower of Empedocles. For al-Qifṭī, Empedocles was famous for being "the first

⁸²⁷ Ebstein 2014, p.87.

⁸²⁸ Ibn Masarraḥ in Stroumsa and Sviri 2009, p.223. For the Arabic text itself, see Ibn Masarraḥ in Morris 1973, p.256.

⁸²⁹ Ibn Masarraḥ in Stroumsa and Sviri 2009, p.224. For the Arabic text itself, see Ibn Masarraḥ in Morris 1973, pp.257-258.

to argue for the unity [*jam*] of the attributes of God. All of them address one reality. The attributes of ‘knowledge,’ ‘benevolence,’ and ‘power,’ do not carry meanings specific to these different names. Instead, they are of one reality.”⁸³⁰ According to al-Qiftī, the Mu‘tazilites, as well as the proto-Sufi theologian al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d.728) followed this negative theology of divine attributes. In his Persian biography of sages, the Ishrāqī philosopher and historian Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī (d.1288) embeds a similar account of Ibn Masarraḥ in a section on Empedocles. Al-Shahrazūrī depicts Empedocles in distinctly Sufi terms, and ascribes him a negative theology of divine attributes as well as the necessary dissimilarity [*mukhālafah*] of God:

[Empedocles] was in general a great man, of high distinguished standing, dedicated to self-divinization and frugality, who despised the world and turned to the hereafter. He excelled in the knowledge of the soul and immaterial entities, their natures and order. I saw one of his books on philosophy, which reveals his mystical inclination, his powerful character and his pre-eminence in the metaphysical science and its wisdom. *He was the first to preach the unity of the notions of God’s attributes, and the fact that they all denote the same thing, rather than distinct notions pertaining to each of the different attributes.* For, He is truly the One in whom there is no plurality whatsoever, *contrary to all other existing entities* [*ba khilāf-a mavjūdāt-a dīgar*]. For, the higher unities are susceptible of plurality, either in their parts, their connotations or their analogues. By contrast, the essence of God Almighty is entirely free of all this.⁸³¹

Hence a negative theology of divine attributes and an unknowable God, who is necessarily dissimilar to everything, was evidently associated with Ibn Masarraḥ. His extant writings support this philosophical apophaticism with a hermeneutics that protects the absolute oneness from any positive attribute. He argues that

⁸³⁰ al-Qiftī 1903, p.16.

⁸³¹ Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī [undated], pp.72-73; my emphasis.

Majid Fakhry’s recent translation contains some mistakes, and it is too liberal to use without modifications. First, Fakhry employs terms that do not have a counterpart in the original Persian text. His employment of the term “Sufi,” for example, is misleading. Second, and more importantly, the translation mistakes Empedocles with Ibn Masarraḥ. The section mentioning of Empedocles becomes an account on Ibn Masarraḥ in his rendering. (Cf. Shams al-Dīn al-Shahrazūrī 2012, pp.63-64.)

the Qur'ānic verse that addresses "the throne of God," for example, should be interpreted as the prime matter from which the universe is created.⁸³²

Ibn Masarraḥ, a mystic and ascetic intellectual who used to retreat to the mountains with his companions, presents an early mystical adoption of philosophical apophaticism. As early as the Andalusian historian and a pupil of Ibn Ḥazm (d.1064), al-Ḥumaydī (d.1095) associated Ibn Masarraḥ with Sufism, and the association proliferated in the following centuries.⁸³³ Recent studies have underlined the probable influence of Ismā'īlism on Ibn Masarraḥ, and questioned whether Ibn Masarraḥ can be properly called a "Sufi" or not. His letter mysticism, for example, seems more directly related with Ismā'īlism, even if it evidently associates itself with the Baṣran Sufi master Sahl al-Tustarī (d.896).⁸³⁴

It is difficult to apply the term "Sufi" to Ibn Masarraḥ, but later Andalusian Sufism adopted his views, including aspects of philosophical apophaticism. The Andalusian Sufi master Ibn Mar'ah (d.1214), a master of Ibn Sab'īn (d.1269) and a commentator on Ibn al-'Arīf (d.1141), preserves a section from Ibn Masarraḥ's lost book on divine attributes, *the Certain Profession of the Divine Oneness [Tawḥīd al-Muqīnīn]*. The passage expresses a philosophical negative theology of divine attributes. Accordingly, the divine attributes are infinite, but they have a unity in meaning, which does not violate the ineffable divine oneness.⁸³⁵ The Sufi master Ibn al-'Arabī not only praises Ibn Mar'ah in different occasions, as "one of the greatest members of the [Sufi] path in terms of knowledge, spiritual state [*ḥāl*] and visionary power [*kashf*]"⁸³⁶ in his *Meccan Openings*, but also adopts similar theological positions on diverse topics including the hermeneutics of the "throne verse." Indeed, the context in which Ibn al-'Arabī cites Ibn Masarraḥ is quite apophatic. In this section, devoted to "knowledge of the station of the transcendence of God's unity" [*ma'rifat manzil tanzīhiyyah al-tawḥīd*], Ibn al-'Arabī makes the philosophical argument that God's transcendence entails His exemption from all possible human definitions, attributions, and traits, including His very unity. Hence, "we can say nothing about the word 'unity' when applied to God." God is made free of any description through the word "unity;" in other

⁸³² Abrahamov 2014, p.101.

⁸³³ Morris 1973, p.22.

⁸³⁴ Ebstein 2014, pp.89-90.

⁸³⁵ Morris 1973, p.23.

⁸³⁶ Ibn al-'Arabī 2004, #13.

words, “oneness” cannot qualify God if God is to be One. Divine unity is like a house that has no door, says Ibn al-‘Arabī; no one can enter this house, but some can merely peek inside via divine unveiling.⁸³⁷

Ibn Masarraḥ’s relationship with the Sufis of his time was not always friendly. Still, from the late eleventh century onwards, we witness a continuous mystical tradition of study of Ibn Masarraḥ’s work in Andalusia. Sufism, once institutionalized in Andalusia in the twelfth century, would reclaim this heritage. More importantly, philosophical apophaticism is a key component of this re-interpreted Sufi heritage. On the other hand, the main avenue by which philosophical apophaticism was transmitted to thirteenth century Sufism was an internal transformation of philosophy itself in Andalusia.

Twelfth Century: From Philosophy to Sufism

Ibn Bājjah (d.1139)’s approach to the divine essence is close to that of Ibn Sīnā and al-Fārābī even if he is self-consciously more Aristotelian than his predecessors. Ibn Bājjah argues that knowledge is a relation [*niṣbah*] that correlates (i) to the quiddity [*mā huwā*], (ii) to the particular essential qualities [*‘ilm lawāḥiqah al-dhātiyyah al-khāṣṣah*], (iii) or to the general essential qualities [*‘ilm lawāḥiqah al-dhātiyyah al-‘āmmah*] of its object. The last one can be called “knowledge” only metaphorically, while knowledge of the quiddity, or the essence, deserves the priority. In each of these cases, notes Ibn Bājjah, knowledge can be perfected only by attaining that which the definition of its object indicates.⁸³⁸ You should know the requirements of the definition of something to know what it is. The definition, on the other hand, can be attained in three ways:

as explained in the *Posterior Analytics* there are three methods for the derivation of a definition: (i) the method of *division*, (ii) the method of *composition*, and (iii) the method in which *syllogism* is employed.⁸³⁹

Discursive thinking, with the *division* and *composition* it entails, cannot access divine oneness according to Ibn Bājjah. Absolute oneness cannot be defined, or known, by these processes. Instead of discourse, it is non-discursive intellection that unites the elect few to God the Active Intellect, “the second god, who is thought-thinking-itself.” The highest knowledge that human intellect can attain,

⁸³⁷ Abrahamov 2014, p.100.

⁸³⁸ Ibn Bājjah 1961, p.19. For the original Arabic see Ibn Bājjah [undated], pp.30-31.

⁸³⁹ Ibn Bājjah 1961, pp.22-23. For the original Arabic see Ibn Bājjah [undated], p.36.

and even embody, is the Active Intellect, “represented not indeed as God, the One, the First Mover, or any aspect of Deity, but as an emanation of Deity, ranking immediately below the Separate Intelligences which move the spheres. These higher forms are entirely beyond the comprehension of man in the sublunary sphere.”⁸⁴⁰ This non-discursive knowledge of the Active Intellect is attained by Philosophers, prophets and the elect.⁸⁴¹ “[It] belongs to the category of particular spiritual forms, which do not pass through the common sense, but are received directly from the Active Intellect.”⁸⁴²

The fact that non-discursive knowledge is received by “an infusion of a light which God casts into the heart of His elect” brings to the fore the issues of mysticism and Sufism that Ibn Bājjah discusses in various works.⁸⁴³ Similar to the case in Ibn Sīnā, non-discursive intellection is still syllogistic, and not “mystical” in Neoplatonic terms, insofar as Ibn Bājjah does not believe that body and soul can be separated before death. Nor does non-discursivity confirm a Sufi visionary union. Rather, Ibn Bājjah is critical of Sufi claims for a non-discursive, non-syllogistic, mystical union with God. His challenge towards Sufism shows his familiarity with Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111)’s famous biography *Deliverance from Error [al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl]*:

[Sufis] used to say in their prayers “May God unite you and assign your unity” because, by falling short of the pure spiritual forms, they consider the previous spiritual forms instead of the pure one. ... Al-Ghazālī says that he has attained high spiritual experience and that he has witnessed the spiritual substances. ... That is why the Sufis claim that attainment of the ultimate happiness may occur without learning, but rather through devotion and dedication of one self to the continual remembrance of God. ... All this is a matter of opinion. The effect of what the Sufis thought is unnatural phenomena. The end which they thought to be the ultimate end, if it were to be a true one and an end for the solitary man, then it should be obtained essentially and not accidentally, but it is in fact obtained accidentally (here) and not

⁸⁴⁰ Dunlop 2012.

⁸⁴¹ Ibn Bājjah in Ziyadah 1968, pp.74-75.

⁸⁴² Montada 2005, p.163.

⁸⁴³ For a positive reference to Sufis, see Ibn Bājjah 2007, p.278.

essentially. This means that the most honorable part of man is an appendage which has no role to play.⁸⁴⁴

Ibn Bājjah is claiming that Sufis mistake the particular spiritual visions and forms that they acquire via Sufi practices for the universal forms that one can acquire only via pure intellection.⁸⁴⁵ They confuse non-discursive *intellection* with their own non-discursive *reflection*, wherein sense perception, imagination and memory, hence discursivity, are still active.⁸⁴⁶ Therefore, Sufis can attain unity only accidentally, for instance, and without really understanding its real noetic quality. Moreover, as opposed to their conviction otherwise, the unity that Sufis can attain is in fact not with God, but with the Active Intellect beyond which the human intellect cannot go.

Non-discursive intellection is freed from conceptual intermediaries, and unites with the Active Intellect, unlike discursive thought. Ibn Bājjah employs Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* to describe this epistemological difference, and to underline the negative theology of divine attributes and the philosophical hermeneutics related to it. Accordingly, discursive knowledge "sees the intelligible but through an intermediary, just as the sun appears in the water." Non-discursive intellection is the highest rank:

[intellection] is the rank of the happy *who see the thing in itself*. ... The [discursive] theorists step outside of the cave and so see light separated from colors and see all the colors according to their true nature. There is no equivalent in [the example of] seeing for the happy, since *they themselves become the thing*.⁸⁴⁷

Here Ibn Bājjah adds a higher level to Plato's famous vindication of philosophical discursive thought. Plato's philosopher attained the knowledge of the Active Intellect discursively, after leaving the cave. For the elect, adds Ibn Bājjah, an immediate, non-discursive conception of the Active Intellect is possible. This pure intellection of the Active Intellect means *becoming* it. The intellect [*'aql*],

⁸⁴⁴ Ibn Bājjah in Ziyadah 1968, pp.79-80; with my minor modification.

⁸⁴⁵ Ibn Bājjah 2007, p.282.

As for the Sufis, their experiences belong to the level of the particular spiritual forms, where common sense, imagination and memory are active. But they mistake them for universal spiritual forms, and wrongly believe that the coincidence of the three faculties is the source of supreme happiness. (Montada 2005, p.163.)

⁸⁴⁶ My reading is closer to Ziyadah and others, and differs from that of Fakhry. Cf. Fakhry 2004, p.273.

⁸⁴⁷ Ibn Bājjah 2007, p.279.

that which comprehends [*ʿāqil*] and that which is comprehended [*maʿqūl*] are one and the same; there is no potentiality in God as other Philosophers such as al-Fārābī⁸⁴⁸ and Maimonides⁸⁴⁹ often claim.⁸⁵⁰

In addition to the unknowability of the Neoplatonic One beyond intellect and necessarily dissimilar to creation, Ibn Bājjah adopts a negative theology of divine attributes as well. However qualified they are, attributes cannot be applied to the absolute One literally. Accordingly, this was a point of contradiction in Plato, later corrected by Aristotle:

We say concerning the incorporeal form of man, [or fire], for instance, that they are a form of man or a form of fire, but we do not say that they are a realm. Likewise, we say of our intelligible that whatever it is in is fire, but we do not say about the intelligible that it *is* fire; if it were fire, then it would burn. Socrates says about the Form that he posits that it *is* the Good and it *is* the Beautiful and that the human *is* the Idea of Human. [Consequently], the absurdities that Aristotle mentioned in his *Metaphysics* do follow [from Plato’s account of Form].⁸⁵¹

For Ibn Bājjah it is not appropriate to employ the attributes (or forms) “the Good,” “the Beautiful” etc., because of the logical inconsistencies that violate divine oneness as Aristotle points out. Ibn Bājjah’s narrative is thus parallel to that of al-ʿĀmirī, whose Aristotle solved the problem of the theological divergence between Pythagoras and Socrates by showing that these attributes do not have distinct meanings when applied to the One Necessary Being. Ibn Bājjah claims to advocate exactly this—“a single thing remaining, neither passing away nor corrupting.”⁸⁵² This approach had a distinct negative theology of divine attributes that aimed to protect the divine oneness. Ibn Khāqān (d.1134)’s denunciation of Ibn Bājjah for stripping God of His attributes [*taʿṭīl*],⁸⁵³ however nurtured by political motives that the historian Ibn Khallikān (d.1282)

⁸⁴⁸ See al-Fārābī 1998, Ch.1.

⁸⁴⁹ Maimonides 2008, 1.68. Also see E. R. Wolfson 2008, p.423.

⁸⁵⁰ “Those, such as Aristotle and the rest of the happy, are numerically one, and there is no distinction between them in any way, except for the difference that I shall use as an example.” (Ibn Bājjah 2007, p.281.)

⁸⁵¹ Ibn Bājjah 2007, p.280.

⁸⁵² Ibn Bājjah 2007, p.280.

⁸⁵³ Montada 2005, p.156.

mentions,⁸⁵⁴ seems to point to this central negative theological aspect in Ibn Bājjah's thought on divine essence and attributes.

Ibn Bājjah's critique of the Sufis, including the prominent Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, indicates that at least a strand of Sufism could be seen to violate the incomprehensibility, unknowability and inaccessibility of God, mistakenly assuming that their non-discursive mysticism was able to connect them with God Himself. Ibn Sīnā's non-discursive but intellectual union with the Active Intellect was easy to transform into a non-discursive and mystical union with God, especially once the elusive difference between *dianoia* and *noēsis* is overlooked. Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān, Ibn Ṭufayl (d.1185)'s *theologus autodidactus*, has such a Neoplatonic, non-discursive union [*wuṣūl*] with the Active Intellect that, unlike al-Fārābī and Ibn Bājjah, displays a distinctly Sufi character. It not only overlooks the distinction between Active Intellect, i.e., "the second god" and God, but it also entails a non-discursive union that is not syllogistic, and safely mystical.

Ibn Yaqzān's philosophical tale is a vast theological manifesto. The philosophical proof for God comes through the observation of creation, and discursive thinking. God as the Necessary Being, is the cause of all things,⁸⁵⁵ and necessarily dissimilar from them. Discursive thought indicates that the cause of all perfections should be devoid of any privation, but that all attributes of perfection apply to Him eminently.⁸⁵⁶ Hence, Ibn Yaqzān realizes that

all belong to Him, and are more *truly* predicated of Him... [His] essence is necessary existence, Who gives being to all that is. There is no existence [*wujūd*] but Him. He is being, perfection and wholeness. He is goodness, beauty, power, and knowledge. He is He.⁸⁵⁷

Following al-Fārābī, Ibn Ṭufayl now applies all classical theological attributes to God by indicating that the Necessary Being is the cause of everything. This causality not only makes all perfections applicable to God, but also entails a

⁸⁵⁴ Ibn Khallikān 1398/1978, Vol.4, #670, ppp.429-431. For an English translation see Ibn Khallikān 1843, Vol.3, pp.130-132.

⁸⁵⁵ "He is the Cause of all things, and all are His effects. ... He, in Himself, has no need of them and is utterly independent of them." (Ibn Ṭufayl 2009, p.133.)

⁸⁵⁶ Ibn Ṭufayl 2009, p.137.

⁸⁵⁷ Ibn Ṭufayl 2009, p.134.

negative move beyond them, pushing God “beyond perfection”⁸⁵⁸ *via eminentiae*:

The existence of the non-corporeal Author of the universe remained unscathed: He is neither connected to nor separated from matter; neither within nor outside it—for “connection” and “separation,” “inside” and “outside” are merely attributes of physical things; and He transcends them all.⁸⁵⁹

Worldly attributes are created, and their creator must be *eminently* beyond them. The attributes of creation cannot be applied to God literally, but only eminently, thus, metaphorically. God does not have negative attributes; in His decisive dissimilarity, He rather can be approached by negating worldly qualities.⁸⁶⁰ Ibn Yaḳzān’s entire discursive process of the realization of the divine eminence is based on emulating the higher, positive qualities in creation, from which its ultimate cause is independent. Echoing Plotinus and Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Ṭufayl underlines that all of these discursive [*naẓarī*] demonstrations are bound up with human thought, and decisively situated within the realm of “*separation and union, aggregation and distinction, agreement and difference.*”⁸⁶¹ Discursive thought’s limits are still drawn in Neoplatonic terms, and it follows the philosophical tradition. Ibn Yaḳzān’s non-discursive level of union, however, is distinctly Sufi, as the terms he employs, “dying to oneself,” “ecstasy” [*wajd*], and “witnessing” display:

Ḥayy made a concerted effort to purge his awareness-of-the-Truth, die to Himself. At last it came. From memory and mind all disappeared, ... all forms of the spirit and powers of the body, even the disembodied powers... And with the rest vanished the identity that was himself. Everything melted away, dissolved... Not knowing how to speak did not prevent him from understanding. Drowned in ecstasy he witnessed “what no eye has seen or ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man of conscience.”⁸⁶²

Now, the non-discursive union that Ibn Yaḳzān attains follows that of Plotinus and diverges from the Muslim Philosophers. First, it presupposes a total separation of the soul from the body via purification and self-abnegation. Second,

⁸⁵⁸ Ibn Ṭufayl 2009, p.134.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibn Ṭufayl 2009, p.133.

⁸⁶⁰ Ibn Ṭufayl 2009, p.148.

⁸⁶¹ Here *naẓar* operates very much like *dianoia*.

⁸⁶² Ibn Ṭufayl 2009, pp.148-149. For the depiction of Ḥayy as a Sufi saint [*walī*], see Ibn Ṭufayl 2009, p.160.

it has a noetic content that is temporary, ineffable⁸⁶³ and non-syllogistic.⁸⁶⁴ Third, these two moves towards mysticism accompany a clear turn to the Sufi vocabulary. In contrast to earlier Philosophers, Ibn Ṭufayl's conception of mystical divine union follows Plotinus and adopts a Sufi vocabulary of non-discursive access to divine unity. But it also diverges from Plotinus as the latter's long-standing distinction between Active Intellect and God the apophatic One has disappeared in Ibn Ṭufayl's account. The discursively proven, but still unknown God of Philosophers turns into a God that can be non-discursively accessed by Sufi practices, and loses some of its key philosophical apophatic dimensions. In short, Ibn Ṭufayl's approach perfectly fits into the position that Ibn Bājjah's critique attributed to Sufis.

Within the context of apophaticism on the divine essence, in other words, the relationship between Neoplatonism and the School of Philosophy is a complex one. Yet it is clear that there are serious problems in the associations of apophaticism with Neoplatonism, and in the widespread assumption that medieval monotheistic traditions became apophatic to the extent that they accommodated Neoplatonism. In the case of philosophical apophaticism, the development was quite the opposite of these associations. The non-discursive intellection of philosophical apophaticism in al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā and others was not properly "mystical" but also syllogistic, and the human visionary quests were limited with an emphasis on the inseparability of the body from the soul. Sufis were more inclined to associate non-discursive thought with mystical and visionary experience that cannot be expressed in syllogistic form at all. For them, vision [*kashf*] and experience [*dhawq*] form an independent epistemological source in addition to reasoning.

Aristotle in al-Andalus: al-Baṭalyawsī, Maimonides, and Ibn Sabʿīn

The controversial Andalusian Sufi Ibn Sabʿīn (d.1269) claims to be the greatest expert on philosophical matters and questions. While hubris plays a major role in his *Sijilian Questions*, the work is well-informed by major philosophical works. The *Letters* of the Brethren of Purity, al-Fārābī's *Philosophy of Aristotle*, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's *Purposes of the Philosophers*, Ibn Sīnā's *Book of Definitions*

⁸⁶³ "Now do not set your heart on a description of what has never been represented in human heart. For many things that are articulate in the heart cannot be described. How can I formularize something that cannot possibly be projected in the heart, belonging to a different world, a different order of being?" (Ibn Ṭufayl 2009, p.149.)

⁸⁶⁴ Ibn Ṭufayl 2009, pp.148-150.

[*Kitāb al-Hudūd*], Ibn Bājja's *Book of Soul*, al-Baṭalyawsī (d.1127)'s *Book of Gardens* and various works of Ibn Ruṣd (d.1198) were among the visible first-hand philosophical sources for Ibn Sabʿīn's *Sijilian Questions*. Among the four questions that Ibn Sabʿīn deeply engages, the one on the aims of metaphysics and its necessary premises [*muqaddamāt al-ḍarūriyyah*] is key for understanding his conception of the divine essence, and its apophatic dimensions.

With the support of the Greek philosophers, Ibn Sabʿīn dismisses accusations of advocating access to the divine essence and an essential union with God. God is utterly unknowable, and Ibn Sabʿīn not only evokes ancient philosophers in order to demonstrate his philosophical prowess, but also to support his theological positions. Aristotle had argued that demonstrating something entails showing its causes [*ʿilal*], principles [*mabādīʿ*] and origin [*al-awwal*]. As none of these can be attributed to God, assumptions about the individual uniting with God are misplaced, as they mean to know the necessarily unknowable. Human incapability [*ʿajz*] to know God is a major theme that repeats itself throughout the *Sijilian Questions*:

[T]he person who supposes that he has connected with the First, Supreme, United [*mutawaḥḥidah*] Cause, and that he has coalesced with His essence [*yatajawhar*] has in fact transgressed the limits of understanding. ... Whoever says that he knows the essence of the First Truth -transcendent as He is- has transgressed the limits of understanding.⁸⁶⁵

This position is very much in line with Ibn Bājja's critique of the supposedly experiential access to the divine essence. On the unknowability of the First Cause, Socrates and Plato were in agreement with Aristotle according to Ibn Sabʿīn. He writes:

The First Truth is transcendent; nothing precedes His Being. But you are under the universals, and the universals are prior to you. On this point, Plato, the saved one, stated the following: "the inability [*ʿajz*] in [knowing] the essence of the First Truth is essential [*bi-l-dhāt*] to us. For, we are relational [*maḥmūl*], caused [*muʿallal*] and subject to synthesis [*muʿallaf*]."⁸⁶⁶

The depiction of Aristotle by al-ʿĀmirī, Ibn Bājja and Ibn Sabʿīn as a negative theologian *per se* is perfectly consistent with the popular Arabic texts and their

⁸⁶⁵ Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, p.38.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, p.38.

Latin translations attributed to Aristotle. Al-Mubashshir Ibn Fātik (d.1048)'s compilation of maxims attributed to Aristotle entitled *The Choicest Maxims and Best Sayings* [*Mukhtār al-Ḥikam wa Maḥāsīn al-Kalim*] describes Aristotle as a powerful champion of negative theology of the divine attributes as well as the divine essence. *The Choicest Maxims* contains only a couple of sayings that address the nature of the divine, but both of them reflect the key themes of philosophical apophaticism. The first one underlines the unknowable nature of God, the ineffability of His praise, the impotence of the human faculties of estimation, reason, or imagination before His transcendence, and the incapacity of language in His description.⁸⁶⁷ The second maxim attributed to Aristotle supplies this divine unknowability and ineffability with a negative theology of the divine attributes:

Reasoning on God is difficult, and speaking [*tanṭiq*] of Him is not possible. *An affirmative discourse* [*al-khabar al-mawjib*] is not applicable to Him, but it is applicable to anything but Him. For example, one can say "Socrates is the servant of God," but one cannot say that God is of someone or something among things that are attached. *But a negative discourse is applicable to Him, as in your saying "God has no attribute," "God has no definition," "God has no match." Other than this [i.e., negative discourse], nothing is applicable to Him.*⁸⁶⁸

Al-Mubashshir Ibn Fātik's *Choicest Maxims and Best Sayings* with its main character, the negative theologian Aristotle, was rendered into Latin twice, by Gerard of Cremona (d.1187) and John of Procida (d.ca.1300), under different titles.⁸⁶⁹ Gerard of Cremona, the most prolific translator of scientific and philosophical works from Arabic in the middle ages, added these maxims in the preface to the *Almagest*, describing them as the sayings of Ptolemy (d.168). The first Latin *Almagest* (pbl.1515, Venice) was Gerard's, and it seems that Copernicus (d.1543) acquired one of these copies for himself.⁸⁷⁰

⁸⁶⁷ "Praise to God who precedes how-ness and substance; and transcends all presences, definitions, and descriptions. ... All praises of Him are inferior, all analogies [*qiyāsāt*] to His transcendence are vile. He is more elevated than all estimations, and loftier than all that which is praised." (Aristotle in Ibn Fātik 2013, pp.350-351. For another Turkish version, see Aristotle in Kaya and Ibn Fātik 1987, p.256, #4.)

⁸⁶⁸ Aristotle in Ibn Fātik 2013, pp.388-389; my emphases. For another Turkish version, see Aristotle in Kaya and Ibn Fātik 1987, p.283, #155.

⁸⁶⁹ See Burnett 2005, p.396.

⁸⁷⁰ Lemay 2008.

In line with Ibn Sabʿīn's portrayal of Aristotle, apophaticism of the divine essence in the Arabic philosophical tradition is clearly a result of the categorical division between the Necessary Being and beings, or, the creator and the created realm wherein thought and discourse operate. "Being" applies truly and eminently only to God, while our engendered existence, with all the attributes that it is subject to, is an illusion that applies to us only metaphorically. Ibn Sabʿīn explains the point with reference to Themistius (d.ca.390), the peripatetic commentator whose works and orations had long been translated into Arabic:

Themistius said: "The Being of the First, lofty Cause is Her Essence. Nothing except Her has being, except that which stretches from Her. Hence, nothing can be called a 'thing' except through Her, and nothing can be called 'being' except through Her, and nothing can be called 'truth' except through Her. ... She [i.e., the First, lofty Cause] ... precedes everything. Thus, nothing else has being, and they have no ipseity, no attribute, and no reality except from Her. Their metaphorical existence [*al-wujūd al-mustaʿār*] is not Being. ... There is no being except Her." And I say: non-existence has no ipseity, and the ipseity is one as mentioned above, and there is no Being except that ipseity.⁸⁷¹

The existence of the engendered world, with all attributes in it, is in fact borrowed from the First Cause, to which these attributes apply *via eminentiae*. The perfection of divine knowledge, thus, lies in admitting the famous dictum of negativity attributed to Abū Bakr (d.634) that "the incapacity in attaining understanding is understanding,"⁸⁷² and in negating attributes from creation. The names Ibn Sabʿīn cites here are al-Fārābī, Socrates, and Alexander Aphrodisias. Accordingly, "*Being is realized by negation [salb] from us. ... When we say that it is ours, with us, and from us, we have not realized it. It is realized when we say that it is not ours, not from us, not with us.*"⁸⁷³ Hence Ibn Sabʿīn follows a negative theology of attributes like earlier Philosophers, but he adds a key Sufi dimension. *Philosophers negated the attributes of God, while Ibn Sabʿīn negates the attributes of creation.*

The philosophical negative theology Ibn Sabʿīn propounds is similar to that of the well-known Jewish Philosopher of the previous generation, Moses Maimonides

⁸⁷¹ Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, p.40.

⁸⁷² Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, p.41.

⁸⁷³ Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, p.40; my emphasis.

(d.1204). Per Maimonides,⁸⁷⁴ Ibn Sabʿīn claims that one’s path to God follows a hierarchy beginning with reflecting (i) His actions; then (ii) the relationship between divine actions and the attributes to which they are related; and then, (iii) the relationship between both positive and negative attributes and the divine essence.⁸⁷⁵ Both share the necessary dissimilarity of creation from its source.⁸⁷⁶ Ibn Sabʿīn’s removal of God from all relations is also similar to Maimonides. After introducing the classical fourfold causality of Aristotle, Ibn Sabʿīn argues that none of these possible causal relations, nor the nine Aristotelian categories apply to God.⁸⁷⁷ Like Maimonides, he argues that Aristotle’s position on the eternity of the world was ambivalent, and Ibn Sabʿīn’s own skeptical position was parallel to that of Maimonides.⁸⁷⁸ Also they share the claim that ultimately the prophets and philosophers agreed upon [*ijmāʿ*] the soul’s survival of death.⁸⁷⁹ On the issue of philosophical apophaticism, Maimonides was more explicit than Ibn Sabʿīn. He argued that names apply to God eminently, and that the divine attributes were all negations in their meanings. This was very much parallel to what Ibn Sīnā pointed out in his works. For Ibn Sabʿīn, on the other hand, this process of perpetual negation focuses on one’s self: one should negate one’s own attributes in order to connect [*wuṣūl*] with God. This performance of self-negation is distinctly Sufi, and focuses on one’s transitory attributes, as all attributes truly and eminently belong to God. While Maimonides and Ibn Sabʿīn agree on all dimensions of philosophical

⁸⁷⁴ “There is ... no way to apprehend Him except ... through the things He has made.” (Maimonides 2008, 1.34; also quoted in E. R. Wolfson 2008, p.410.) For human perfection, see Maimonides 2008, 3.51-54.

⁸⁷⁵ Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, p.42.

⁸⁷⁶ E.g. Maimonides 2008, 1.1, p.14.

⁸⁷⁷ Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, p.60.

⁸⁷⁸ Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, pp.23-24.

Maimonides shares the same skepticism—indeed, he argues that even Aristotle himself did not see the argument for the eternity of the world a conclusive proof [*ḥujjah*], but just an opinion [*raʿy*], or a working hypothesis. (Maimonides 2008, 2.15.) Accordingly, it was the later philosophical tradition that dogmatized Aristotle’s hypothesis. Instead, for Maimonides both the theory in favor of and against creation of the world are admissible. (Maimonides 2008, 2.16.) Hence this is a “methodical skepticism,” as trying to exceed the limit of human understanding is more imperfect than everything; and suspending the inaccessible is the human perfection [*kamāl insānī*]. Ibn Sabʿīn perceptively traces the skeptical position on the created or uncreated nature of the world back to Galen (d.216). (Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, p.7.) This skepticism on the origins of creation is found in Ibn Ṭufayl’s *Ḥayy ibn Yaqdhān* and Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (d.925)’s *Medicine of the Soul* [*Ṭibb al-Rūḥānī*], which also converses with Galen.

⁸⁷⁹ Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, p.80. Maimonides 2008, 1.70.

negative theology and its method of negation, their divergence on the object of negation, i.e., the attributes of God or the ego, defines the difference of philosophical and Sufi versions of negation, while they both engender an apophaticism on divine essence.⁸⁸⁰

One of Ibn Sabʿīn's major sources was *The Book of Gardens* (or *The Book of Imaginary Circles*),⁸⁸¹ written by the famous grammarian and philosopher of Badajoz, Ibn al-Sīd al-Baṭalyawsī (d.1127). Indeed, the *Book of Gardens* was one of the most impressive books in philosophical apophaticism of the time. The book presents a few enigmatic dictums of Andalusian Philosophers [*hukamāʾ*] of the time, and explains what they mean by them in seven chapters. The fifth chapter attests to the popularity of philosophical apophaticism among Andalusian intellectuals. It is entitled “explaining their [i.e., Philosophers’] statement: ‘the attributes of the transcendent Originator cannot describe Him except through negation’.”⁸⁸² Al-Baṭalyawsī argues that descriptions aim at (i) either removing partnership, or (ii) praising or reviling its addressee. The first option does not apply to God, because He already has no similarity in any way to creation by being its transcendent creator. The second option, proceeds al-Baṭalyawsī in a rigorous logical manner, can be employed in three possible ways:

(ii.a.) exaggeration: the praise is excessive for the praised,

(ii.b.) balance: the praise fits to the degree of praised,

(ii.c.) incompetence: the praise cannot reach to the degree of the praised.

As God is utterly unknowable, no possible way except that of incompetence could work in describing God. Else, the describer will violate divine dissimilarity [*mukhālafah*], and describe Him in accordance with one’s own capacity. While describing God with terms employed for creation, one will necessarily fall into anthropomorphism [*tashbīh*].⁸⁸³ Al-Baṭalyawsī’s examples for such anthropomorphism are “All-Living,” “All-Knowing,” “All-Hearing,” “All-Seeing”—all the attributes that fly in the face of the popular theological and traditionist

⁸⁸⁰ The fact that Sufi negation focuses on the self, while Ibn Sīnā and Maimonides’ negative theology concentrates on the divine attributes does not mean that the Philosophers are less concerned with self-cultivation or the Delphic maxim. See Goodman 1992, p.164.

⁸⁸¹ Eliyahu argues that the authentic title of the work was the *Book of Imaginary Circles* [*Kitāb al-Dawāʾir al-Wahmiyyah*], instead of its popular title, the *Book of Gardens* [*Kitāb al-Hadāʾiq*]. See Eliyahu 2013, pp.53-54; Ogren 2009, p.53.

⁸⁸² al-Baṭalyawsī 1408/1988, p.93. (*fī sharḥi qawlihim: inna šifāt al-Bāriʾ Taʾāla lā yašihhu an yūṣaf bihā illā ʾalā wajh al-salb.*)

⁸⁸³ al-Baṭalyawsī 1408/1988, pp.94-95.

positions. He further develops his assailment by challenging the popular position:

[They] claim: “We require for Him the attributes, and we add a negative clause [*ḥarf al-salb*] to remove that which is presupposed by the similarity to creation [*tashbīh*]. So we say: ‘He is Living unlike animates,’ ‘He is All-Knowing unlike knowers,’ ‘He is existent unlike objects’.”⁸⁸⁴

Al-Baṭalyawsī undermines this popular position arguing that adding negative clause makes no difference at all, because it is already proven that God has no like. In other words, attributes already have no option other than the way of incompetence when applied to God. Hence the popular positions on the divine transcendence fall into the fallacies of anthropomorphism, and of assuming that they already know the unknowable.

Al-Baṭalyawsī’s own position, and the position of the Philosophers as he argues, is a negative theology of the divine attributes that strongly coheres with that of Aristotle presented by al-Mubashshir Ibn Fātik. Al-Baṭalyawsī explicitly positions himself and the Philosophers against all affirmative, kataphatic positions:

[we] do not affirm any attribute *via kataphasis* [*‘ala ṭarīq al-ijāb*], because this will necessitate likening Him to creation. But we negate from Him the opposites of these attributes. So we do not call Him “All-Knowing,” but we say “He is not ignorant;” we don’t say “He is All-Powerful,” but we say “He is not incapable;” we don’t say “He is Existent,” rather we say “He is not non-existent.”⁸⁸⁵

Al-Baṭalyawsī also claims that this *via negativa* does not violate divine unknowability or dissimilarity. One might argue that the negation “G is not A” has no superiority over the proposition “G is A,” because saying what something is not implies that one already knows what it is. (Such a critique of the negative language was actually prevalent among Sufis, as we will see in the next chapter.) Al-Baṭalyawsī responds to this possible logical challenge by recalling the first logical step that he took. Any divine attribute is employed only as an insufficient praise for Him, not in order to distinguish Him from something else. Distinction entails knowledge, but praise entails only one’s own incapacity. As an expression of incompetence, negation does not contain any positive content [*ḥukm*] as it is directed towards discursivity itself. In other words, the negation of Philosophers

⁸⁸⁴ al-Baṭalyawsī 1408/1988, p.95.

⁸⁸⁵ al-Baṭalyawsī 1408/1988, p.95.

is not “G is not A,” rather “not (G is A).” “The table is not white” implies that I know the color of the table. But when it is applied to God, it does not affirm any positive content. It only indicates God through negation from what we can know, as the very transgression of human limits.⁸⁸⁶ Negation is praise, a performative that indicates one’s own incapacity.⁸⁸⁷

In brief, al-Baṭalyawsī’s account addresses (i) the unknowability of the divine essence, (ii) a negative theology of divine attributes, (iii) the necessary dissimilarity of God on the basis of the decisive distinction between the creator and the created. The fundamental similarities in the philosophical apophaticism of al-Baṭalyawsī and Maimonides are obvious. Also, both of them distinguish the divine attributes in the fashion of Ibn Sīnā’s appropriation of the Mu’tazilites. Essential names operate as negations of an unknowable God, while names of divine actions are not only non-essential, but also created.⁸⁸⁸

Jewish Mysticism and Arabic Philosophical Apophaticism: Eyn Sof and Lam Yazal

Parallels in the philosophical apophaticism of al-Baṭalyawsī, Maimonides and Ibn Sab’īn manifest the intellectual porosity between not only mysticism and philosophy, but also Islam and Judaism in Andalusia. The interest of Sufis put aside, al-Baṭalyawsī’s *Book of Gardens* remained an inconspicuous work among Muslim intellectuals, compared to its popular reception and immense influence upon Andalusian Jewish scholars. The work has two complete Hebrew translations, the most popular being the one by Moses ibn Tibbon (fl.second half of the 13th CE), the other by Solomon ibn Dā’ūd (fl.first half of the 13th CE). It also has three partial translations, one of them undertaken by Samuel ibn Matut (Motot, or Motat) (d. at the beginning of the 15th CE).⁸⁸⁹ Al-Baṭalyawsī was cited by a plethora of Jewish and Christian scholars, such as the great polymath Abraham ibn Ezra (d.1164),

several commentators of his biblical commentary (such as Shem Tov ibn Shaprut and Samuel ibn Matut); philosophers such as Abraham ibn Daud, Maimonides, Jacob Anatoli, Nissim of Marseille, Joseph ibn Kaspi, Moses Narboni; Halachists or

⁸⁸⁶ al-Baṭalyawsī 1408/1988, pp.96-97.

⁸⁸⁷ Al-Baṭalyawsī’s apophaticism of praise coincide with Marion’s reading of Dionysius the Areopagite in *God without Being*. See T. Jones 2011, pp.29-35.

⁸⁸⁸ Cf. Maimonides 2008, 1.52-54.

⁸⁸⁹ Eliyahu 2013, pp.58-59. Also see Akasoy 2008; Ozbalkici 1988, p.139.

commentators such as Nissim Gerondi, Simeon ben Zemah Duran, Isaac and Judah Abrabanel; and Kabbalists such as the Gerona Kabbalists Jacob ben Sheshet and Azriel, Isaac ibn Latif, Abraham Abulafia, Moses de Leon, Johanan Alemanno and Eliezer ben Abraham Eilenburg, and many others.

Through these translations and citations, and especially through the influence of Johanan Alemanno, al-Baṭalyawsī's ideas even reached Renaissance Christian thinkers such as Pico de la Mirandola, Johannes Reuchlin and Giordano Bruno.⁸⁹⁰

Al-Baṭalyawsī's approach to the universal soul, the median line, eschatology, and his connection of the image of the ladder with the ascent of dead souls had a lasting influence on the Jewish thought in the medieval period as well as on some major Jewish Renaissance figures, as contemporary scholars like Altmann, Kaufmann, and Idel have already highlighted.⁸⁹¹ Yet the prominence of philosophical apophaticism in al-Baṭalyawsī's context and work, and its reception in the later Jewish and Muslim mystical and philosophical traditions are still understudied. The popularity of this apophaticism not only among western Jewish and Muslim Philosophers, but more surprisingly, among mystics is attested by Jewish mysticism in the pre-Zoharic period. Particularly Azriel of Girona (d.1238), probably a disciple of Isaac the Blind (d.1235), and a central figure in the development of Kabbalah, demonstrates not only the prominence of philosophical apophaticism among Philosophers, but also its harmony with the early Kabbalistic theosophy in Catalonia. Azriel founded a new center for the Kabbalah in Gerona together with the elder Rabbi Ezra ben Solomon, and wrote the most important Kabbalistic works of the circle in Gerona.⁸⁹² In his influential *Explanation of the Ten Sefirot*, Azriel writes:

The philosophers admit to this fact that *the Cause of all causes* and the *Origin of origins* is *end-less [Eyn Sof], unfathomable, and*

⁸⁹⁰ Eliyahu 2013, p.59; with my minor modification.

Rabbi Michael Balbo (d.af.1484)'s "wise Ptolemy," and his "Book of Circles" is actually nothing but al-Baṭalyawsī and his *Book of Circles*, which was later called the *Book of Gardens*. See Ogren 2009, p.53. On the title of the book, see Eliyahu 2013.

⁸⁹¹ See especially Idel 2005, Ch.5, pp.167-203.

⁸⁹² "Rabbi Azriel's works represent an important step in the systematization of Kabbalistic symbolism and its application to various aspects of Jewish religious life. Rabbi Azriel, like other Gerona Kabbalists, was well educated in philosophy, and it is due to his mastery of that subject that many philosophical terms were incorporated into the Kabbalah." (Dan in Dan and Kiener 1986, p.34.)

*without limit. ... [I]f He is [truly] without limit, then nothing exists outside Him. ... Furthermore, the philosophers are in agreement with these statements that our perception of Him cannot be except by way of negative attribution.*⁸⁹³

This fascinating passage illustrates that Azriel adopted not only an emphasis on divine unknowability, but also a negative theology of divine attributes, and a proof of the One as the negation of creation by being its ultimate cause.

The convergence of western Sufism and Kabbalah on philosophical apophaticism, especially Azriel's appeal to the now famous phrase "End-less" [*Eyn Sof*], pulls us back to the ninth century Mu'tazilites and Arabic Philosophers. Early doxographical accounts noted that "Philosophers" as well as the Mu'tazilites like al-Nazzām (d.846) and 'Abbād ibn Sulaymān (d.864) of the ninth century, preferred the phrase "End-less" [*Lam Yazal*], a negative designation in reference to the divine essence insofar as no name applied to Him. Al-Kindī's preferences for the negative names *Lam Yazal* as well as "the Eternal" [*al-Azalī*] confirmed these early doxographical depictions. This nominal form was novel, and admittedly problematic from a grammatical perspective. From a theological perspective, *Lam Yazal* was also an uncanny name for God that had no precedent in the Qur'ān or the prophetic traditions. While the ninth century Mu'tazilites and Philosophers employed *lam yazal* both in adverbial and nominal forms, later Philosophers like al-'Āmirī (d.992) and Ibn Sīnā (d.1037) began employing *Lam Yazal* as well its cognate *Azalī* exclusively in the nominal form. Ibn Miskawayh (d.1030), for example, appeals to *Azalī* as the essential definition of God:

If, as we asserted, existence in Him is essential, He could not possibly be imagined to be non-existent; thus He is necessary of existence, and whatever is the Necessary Existent will be perpetual of existence, and whatever is perpetual of existence will be Eternal [*Azalī*].⁸⁹⁴

Strikingly, Ibn Miskawayh's proof of God as the Necessary Existent [*wājib al-wujūd*] is based on His essentially *azalī* ipseity. In the same vein, Jewish scholar

⁸⁹³ Azriel of Girona in Dan and Kiener 1986, pp.89-90; with my slight modification, and my emphases.

⁸⁹⁴ "*Wa idhā kāna al-wujūdu fīhi ka-mā qulnā dhātīyyan fa-laysa yajūzu an yutawahhama ma'dūman fa-huwa wājibu al-wujūdi wa-mā kāna wājiba al-wujūdi fa-huwa dā'imu al-wujūdi wa-mā kāna dā'ima al-wujūdi fa-huwa azaliyyun.*" (Ibn Miskawayh in Wisnovsky 2004, p.67; with my slight modification in the English translation.)

Moses Maimonides (d.1204) associates the unsayable divine name, “the Tetragrammaton” [*ism dhī arba‘at ḥurūf*], with “but Pure Existence” [*mujarrad wujūd lā-ghayr*] that does not denote any attribute. Accordingly, the unsayable name implies only Absolute Existence [*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*], which entails it be “Eternal, I mean, Necessary Existent.”⁸⁹⁵ Indeed, in post-Avicennian philosophy as well as Sunnī theology, defining something as “*azalī*” or “*lam yazal*” actually means that it is nothing but the essential philosophical name of God, the Necessary Existent.⁸⁹⁶ While their masters were relatively reluctant, from the eleventh century onwards Sunnī theologians like al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (fl.ea.11th CE), Ibn al-Farrā’ al-Ḥanbalī (d.1066), and Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d.1085) joined in this sweeping trend of defining the divine essence, applying *Lam Yazal* and *Azalī* in the nominal, rather than adverbial, forms.⁸⁹⁷

The rise of *Lam Yazal* in the nominal form, and as a defining, negative designation for God has strong parallels with the emergence of the nominal appeal to *Eyn Sof* in Jewish mysticism. In tenth century Jewish mysticism that flourished around the commentaries on the *Sefer Yesirah* [*Book of Creation*], *Eyn Sof* transformed from an adverb to a negative noun addressing the divine essence. This nominal employment of the term can be observed first with the tenth century physician and theologian Shabbatai Donnolo (d.af.982), and it “marks the integration of the philosophical transcendental description of God into Kabbalah and bears the mark of negative (apophatic) theology.”⁸⁹⁸ This linguistic change was accompanied with another shift in the understanding of infinity from a spatial dimension to an epistemological and vertical dimension, and played in important theosophical role in Kabbalah. “The End-less” emerged

⁸⁹⁵ “*Dā‘iman, ā‘ni, wājib al-wujūd.*” (Maimonides 2008, 1:63, p.160; my emphasis.) In other words, Maimonides employs the Arabic terms *azalī* and *dā‘imi* interchangeably, both of which are necessarily entailed in the designation “Necessary Existence” that addresses the apophatic divine essence.

⁸⁹⁶

Post-Avicennian attempts ... argue that when we define an eternal thing as ‘that which has never ceased to be nor will ever cease to be’ [*mā lam yazal wa lā-yazālu*], what we really mean is that an eternal thing cannot possibly not exist, and that therefore an eternal thing is necessary of existence. (Wisnovsky 2004, p.67.)

⁸⁹⁷ See Wisnovsky 2004.

Sufis were not immune to this Avicennian turn in associating the divine essence with *azaliyyah*. See e.g. Ibn al-‘Arabī in Chittick 1989, p.64.

⁸⁹⁸ Valabregue-Perry 2012, p.406.

in the wake of Kabbalah as the apophatic designation of the divine essence, accompanied not only by a negative theology of divine attributes, but also a negative proof of the creator. J. Dan describes the role of *Eyn Sof* in Kabbalistic theosophy as follows:

The Godhead itself is beyond all symbolic description and can therefore be described only by negative statements. The most frequently used negative appellation for the Godhead is *Eyn Sof* [*End-less*], but this term does not contain any specific meaning that renders it superior to any other negative term such as “no beginning” or “no color.”⁸⁹⁹

The negative description of the divine essence, coupled with a negative theology of divine attributes, flourished not only among Mu'tazilites and the Muslim philosophers of the following centuries, but also among Jewish philosophers and Kabbalists. *Lam Yazal* and *Eyn Sof* play a strikingly similar role within a philosophical apophatic context shared by Jewish and Muslim philosophical and mystical currents. Interestingly, while Kabbalah and Sufism are widely depicted as twins in their theologies, the apophatic conception of God that early Kabbalists adopted is much closer to the philosophical apophatic path of Ibn Sīnā, al-Baṭalyawsī, and Maimonides than the more popular paradoxical apophaticism associated with Sufis. Particularly, Azriel's Hebrew *Eyn Sof* is virtually interchangeable with the *Lam Yazal* of Arabic philosophical apophaticism. Al-Kindī's apophatic End-less is in parallel with Azriel's depiction of *Eyn Sof*. Even more strikingly, the key passages of philosophical apophaticism in Azriel and the Andalusian mystic Ibn Masarraḥ (d.931), quoted below in sequence, are largely indistinguishable:

Know that everything visible and perceivable to human contemplation is limited, and that everything that is limited is finite and that everything that is finite is insignificant. Conversely, that which is not limited is called “Endless” and is absolutely undifferentiated in a complete and changeless unity. And if He is without limit, then nothing exists outside Him. ... Our perception of Him cannot be except by way of negative attribution.⁹⁰⁰

⁸⁹⁹ Dan in Dan and Kiener 1986, p.8; with my slight modification.

⁹⁰⁰ Azriel of Girona in Dan and Kiener 1986, pp.89-90; with my minor editions.

Please note cosmological difference between the philosophical apophaticism of Azriel and the Ismā'īlī apophaticism of Nethanel al-Fayyūmī (d.1162). Nethanel has a negative theology of divine attributes as well, and he cites Q.42:11 in the same context with Ibn Masarraḥ. On the

The intellects are limited; the limited cannot contain or encompass whatever is above it, what does not correspond to it, what is loftier than it, or what contains it. ... This implies necessarily that the lofty one has no similitude; He has no end; He has no beginning; He has no parts; and He has no limit, nor does any of it enter into His oneness and greatness. ... Nothing of what He has created resembles Him. He is distinct in essence and attribute from all that He has created, yet He is with all things.⁹⁰¹

Before its apophatic employment within the theosophic system developed by Isaac the Blind (d.1235), Azriel, and the later Kabbalah, *Eyn Sof* was used in this new apophatic sense by Judah ben Barzillai (fl.12th CE), Shlomo ibn Gabirol (d.ca.1058), and Shabbatai Donnolo (d.af.982). Hence Donnolo plays a key role in the puzzle of the emergence of *Eyn Sof* as the apophatic designation for the divine essence in Jewish thought. The connections between tenth century Arabic thought and Donnolo, one of the founders of Hebrew culture in medieval Europe, is of particular importance in analyzing possible convergences in the apophatic philosophical and mystical employments of *Lam Yazal* and *Eyn Sof*.⁹⁰²

other hand, in the very next sentence, al-Fayyūmī follows the Ismāʿīlī cosmology claiming that the first creation of God was the Universal Intellect via Divine Word. (al-Fayyūmī 1908, p.2 (English text), p.2 (Judeo-Arabic text).) Ibn Masarraḥ's next sentence, on the other hand, is that "the first to be created were the throne and the water, and within the throne He inscribed all His decrees and rulings and that upon which His will is borne." (Ibn Masarraḥ in Stroumsa and Svirī 2009, #41, p.224. For the Arabic text, see Ibn Masarraḥ in Morris 1973, p.258. For Ibn Barraḡān on water created under the throne, see Casewit 2014, pp.364-365, 379-381.) Azriel argues that "if you claim that the first limited being that is brought into existence from Him is this world -lacking in perfection- then you ascribe imperfection to the force which stems from Him." (Azriel in Dan and Kiener 1986, p.90.)

This comparison also sheds light on Ibn Masarraḥ's cosmological ideas that do not fit into Ismāʿīlism. Recent scholarship on mysticism in al-Andalus underlines Ibn Masarraḥ's Ismāʿīlī leanings. (See e.g. Ebstein 2013, Casewit 2014.) Yet, Ibn Masarraḥ's cosmology and his negative reading of the divine attributes makes him closer to philosophical apophaticism than the Ismāʿīlī double negation—the difference between the two negative theologies of the divine attributes are easy to confuse, but different.

⁹⁰¹ Ibn Masarraḥ in Stroumsa and Svirī 2009, p.223. For the Arabic text itself, see Ibn Masarraḥ in Morris 1973, p.258.

⁹⁰² Donnolo's intellectual journey began with an apprenticeship to "a Gentile scholar from Babylon," probably a scientist named "al-Baghdādī," after he fell captive to the Fāṭimids. On the other hand, there is no cogent proof that Donnolo knew Arabic, except a couple Arabic terms that appear in his writings. (Mancuso in Donnolo 2010, pp.13-35.)

It is well-known that philosophical apophaticism could transcend religious boundaries. Thomas Aquinas (d.1225), as a famous example, referred to Ibn Sīnā and Maimonides in his discussion of negative theology. However, its adoption by Kabbalists like Azriel and Sufis like Ibn Sabʿīn, and the key role Ibn Masarraḥ, an early mystic, plays in Andalusian philosophical apophaticism are surprising. After Ibn Masarraḥ, al-Baṭalyawsī serves as even more obvious crossroad role for philosophical apophaticism in Andalusia. Ibn Sabʿīn quotes lengthy paragraphs from the *Book of Gardens* without, however, citing al-Baṭalyawsī's name. Ibn al-ʿArabī (d.1240) mentions al-Baṭalyawsī a few times with appreciation, and another mystic Ibn Barraġān (d.1141)'s writings display traces of al-Baṭalyawsī's thought.⁹⁰³ Ibn Sabʿīn was familiar with the Jewish polymath Maimonides as well. He mentioned Maimonides as “the author of *The Guide to the Perplexed*” in his *Treatise on the Illuminative*, and his mystic student Badr al-Dīn Ibn Hūd al-Judhāmī (d.ca.1300) is said to have taught Maimonides' *Guide*, a controversial book among Jews at that time, in a multi-faith circle [*majlis*] in Damascus.⁹⁰⁴ The historian Muḥammad ibn Shākir al-Kutubī (d.1363) mentions the ascetic Ibn Hūd as one of the great authorities on a distinctly “monistic” form of Sufism [*aḥad al-kubbār taṣawwuf ʿalā ṭarīqat al-waḥdah*], which was associated with Ibn Sabʿīn as well.⁹⁰⁵ Al-Kutubī also notes that Ibn Hūd wrote a poem that underlined the unknowability of God, which began as follows:

The knowledge of my folk is for me ignorance:
My dignity is well beyond.⁹⁰⁶

⁹⁰³ Eliyahu 2013, p.58.

⁹⁰⁴ A surprising variety of non-Jewish scholars of the thirteenth century had access to Maimonides. The Ḥanbalī jurist and theologian Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī (d.1316) discusses an anonymous polemical work by a Christian author that attacked Islam and quoted several Arabic sources, the latest apparently being Ibn Rushd (d.1198) and Maimonides (d.1204). (Shihadeh 2006, p.2.)

⁹⁰⁵ Al-Kutubī notes:

Under his guidance the Jews were wont to occupy themselves with the study of the *Book of the Guide*: this is a work upon the principles of their religion by the Master Mūsā [Maimonides]. ... Al-Wāsiṭī (d.1311) came to him [Ibn Hūd] and begged him to undertake to guide me in spiritual things. He asked: “Upon which road? The Mosaic, the Christian, or the Muḥammadan?” At sunrise he turned towards the sun, and crossed himself. (Goldziher 1893, p.220; al-Kutubī [undated], pp.196-197; with my minor modifications.)

⁹⁰⁶ al-Kutubī [undated], p.197.

As philosophy transcended disciplinary and religious borders, the negative theology of the divine essence that developed with it also found expression across traditions. The negative theology of divine attributes occasionally shared among Sufis and Philosophers of Andalusia in the thirteenth century well illustrates this porosity. For example, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s incorporation of Ibn Masarraḥ in order to develop his exquisite apophaticism was similar to Maimonides’ negative theology of divine attributes. They share the radical theme that even “One” cannot apply to God as it will violate that very oneness. The idea was first articulated in *Parmenides*, one of Plato’s most difficult yet influential dialogues. Plato wrote:

[if the one is one, then] the one in no sense is. It cannot, then, “be” even to the extent of “being” one, for then it would be a thing that is and has being. ... Consequently, it cannot *have* a name or be spoken of, nor can there be any knowledge or perception or opinion *of* it.⁹⁰⁷

Sufis like Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240)⁹⁰⁸ and later Awḥad al-Dīn Balyānī (d.ca.1284)⁹⁰⁹ played with Plato’s hypothesis, and argued that even “Oneness” cannot apply to God as it will violate that very oneness. Indeed the idea that “God is One without possessing the attribute of oneness” can be traced within Sufism itself even more powerfully than in Arabic Philosophy. The phrase appears as early as in al-Ḥallāj (d.922)’s enigmatic *Kitāb al-Ṭawāsīn*, and recurs as a theme in Rūzbihān Baqlī (d.1209)’s thought, among other Sufis.⁹¹⁰ Maimonides’ philosophical negative theology of divine attributes follows the same line of apophaticism. Nothing should compromise God’s necessary oneness and absolutely dissimilar transcendence. No predicate applies to God in the way they apply to creation, as this would result in anthropomorphism. Even the essential attributes of “unity” or “being” (as understood by human beings) cannot apply to Him literally. Hence Maimonides writes that “He is one [*wāḥid*] without possessing oneness [*wāḥidah*].”⁹¹¹ Its influence was not limited to later Jewish Philosophy, and the same expression would also appear in the works of later Kabbalists.⁹¹² The key

⁹⁰⁷ Plato in Franke 2007, Vol.1, p.45; Franke’s emphasis.

⁹⁰⁸ See Abrahamov 2014, p.100.

⁹⁰⁹ “He is the One without oneness [*al-wāḥid bilā waḥdāniyyah*], and the single without singleness [*al-fard bilā fardāniyyah*].” (Balyānī 1976, p.3.)

⁹¹⁰ al-Ḥallāj 1913, p.68. I made this point in my comparative study of Ibn al-‘Arabī and Maimonides. See Kars 2013, p.266.

⁹¹¹ Maimonides 2008, 1.57, p.135.

⁹¹² See E. R. Wolfson 2008, p. 403.

aspects of philosophical apophaticism, like other theological ideas and currents, were shared across disciplinary and religious traditions in Andalusia.⁹¹³

Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī on the Dilemma of Philosophical Apophaticism

While Sufis were adopting philosophical apophaticism, Philosophers like Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī also kept the tradition alive. Ṭūsī's *Catharsis of the Articles of Faith* exemplifies a negativist approach to the divine attributes. Ṭūsī's earlier works as a young Ismā'īlī aspirant already contained a perpetual negation of divine attributes,⁹¹⁴ and his later Twelver Imāmī masterpiece displays a negative theological approach to the divine attributes, with a subtle difference. "Negating the divine attributes" meant their *inapplicability* within the Ismā'īlī apophatic tradition. Yet it indicates their *negative application* in philosophical apophaticism—a position that Ṭūsī is now adopting:

Revelation indicates that the Almighty possesses the attribute of apprehension, and reasoning proves the impossibility of His use of instruments. His all-embracing power indicates His possession of speech; but the inner speech of the soul is impossible. Whereas the negation of evil indicates His truthfulness, the necessity of existence indicates His eternity [*sarmadiyyah*], as well as the negation of the extraneous, the partner, the peer, composition in all senses, contrariety, location, immanence and union, the direction and the inherence of accidents in Him, need, pain and pleasure—all these are negated of Him, and so are the notions, states, extraneous attributes, the impossibility [*nafy*] of seeing Him, as well as Moses' question addressing his own people.⁹¹⁵

God is the Necessary Being, the negatively proven, necessarily dissimilar cause of creation. Hence no attribute that applies to creation can be literally applied to God; only homonymous employment is possible.

The homonymous application of attributes and the unknowability of God in philosophical apophaticism are best expounded in the exchange of letters between Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī. In his letter, al-Qūnawī makes an explicit distinction between what is knowable and what is not. There are things

⁹¹³ Schmidtke reminds us that the intellectual history of the Islamic world disregards disciplinary and religious borders. "The one-dimensional perspective that still prevails in modern research should be replaced by true multi-dimensionalism." (Schmidtke 2008, p.20.)

⁹¹⁴ E.g. Ṭūsī 1998, p.37 (English translation), p.11 (Persian text).

⁹¹⁵ Ṭūsī 2010a, p.392. For the original Arabic text, see Ṭūsī 1996, p.118-120.

knowable independently by pure, theoretical reasoning, and things knowable not just through reasoning, but with the instruments of perception, feeling, vision, and natural disposition. The category of the unknowable, on the other hand, entails the divine essence, and the nature of the divine attributes:

There is another category, in which reason is not independent in any way, be it via *theoria* [*naẓar*], thought [*fikr*], perception, or the power of natural disposition [*mizāj*]; no matter if they are employed together or individually. It comprises of (1) the ipseity of the transcendent Truth, (2) the realities of the names and attributes associated with Him by the tradition, the law, and reason, (3) and how [*kayfiyyah*] names and attributes are related to the transcendent ipseity. The gnosis of how names and attributes are related to the transcendent ipseity. ... All of those who have inner vision know that human thought is incapable of knowing these realities ... on divine attributes and how they relate to Him. Rational perception of the attributes of the Truth in its absolute reality is *not possible in the realm of human thought* [*fī 'arṣat al-fikr al-insānī*]. Human being perceives something only as determined [*muta'ayyinān*] and delimited [*mutaqayyidan*] with his theoretical capacity according to his power of intellection.⁹¹⁶

Intellection, by definition, entails comparability; hence it precludes the divine essence and even the nature of divine attributes. Al-Qūnawī makes the claim, which Ṭūsī agrees with, that Philosophers indeed defended these unknowabilities as well:

The power of intellection is an attribute and characteristics of the soul, thus it apprehends attributes that are similar to it. ... It is possible for theoretical reflection [*naẓar*] to know a reality, but only from the perspective related to the attribute that limits this theoretical reflection its knowledge. ... Ibn Sīnā, the leader, who is the master of theoreticians and their pioneer, found this secret. ... [He said] that it is not within human capacities to know [*wuqūf*] the realities of things. Instead, the limit of human apprehension is the characteristics, qualities, and accidents of things.⁹¹⁷

After pages-long philosophical discussions on the unknowability of the divine essence, and the process of comparison that inheres in thinking [*fikr*] and

⁹¹⁶ al-Qūnawī in Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī 1995, pp.16-18; my emphasis.

⁹¹⁷ al-Qūnawī in Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī 1995, p.36.

discourse, al-Qūnawī's first question to Ṭūsī focuses on the dilemma of negative proof in philosophical apophaticism. If God is the Necessary Existence, how do we still argue that He is unknowable? Al-Qūnawī's sophistication is striking:

Do you confirm that the existence of the Necessary Existence is something added to His essence? Or is existence His very essence, and He does not have an essence beyond His existence? ... Any thinking person will accept that Necessary Existence has an entification [*ta'ayyun*] in one's reasoning. This entification and reasoning require the negation [*salb*] of diverse of things from it, and the affirmation of diverse things to it. All rational people agree that its reality remains unknown. Yet, if His being was His very essence, then His essence would become knowable.⁹¹⁸

Al-Qūnawī's reservation reminds us of al-Shahrastānī's and al-Rāzī's critiques of Ibn Sīnā, where they accused the latter of rendering God, by implication, knowable.⁹¹⁹ Such a claim embodies an accusation exactly because Ibn Sīnā repeatedly defends divine unknowability. For al-Qūnawī, in the same vein, God's unknowability is an issue that all serious thinkers confirm. Hence he agrees with the Philosophers that God is unknowable, and whatever we imagine as God is nothing but a limited representation entified in our mind. But the question is how, then, can Philosophers make essential claims on God, and argue that his essence is nothing but His pure, though unknowable, existence?

Similar to al-Shahrastānī's challenge, al-Qūnawī's question addresses the main tension of philosophical apophaticism since the time of al-Kindī. Hence Ṭūsī's response to al-Qūnawī's question follows the main strategy that philosophical apophaticism employed: a hermeneutics that buttresses the divine dissimilarity [*tanzīh*]. Ṭūsī follows the same strategy by pointing out the equivocal employment [*ishtirāk*] of terms that Philosophers employ when they talk about "Existence" with reference to creation and to God. Ṭūsī begins by giving discursive, classical philosophical *reductio ad absurdum* proof for God's being the unique Necessary Existence.⁹²⁰ Then he gives a long explanation of the shared employment of a term in different meanings. It would be a mistake to assume that "existence" that applies to creation is the same as the "existence" of the

⁹¹⁸ Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī 1995, pp.48-49.

⁹¹⁹ "He is exalted above intellecting, such that there is both He *and* a form. Rather, He is beyond knowing and being known! And you, you began the proof with the fact that He is knowable in order to establish that He knows." (al-Shahrastānī 2001, p.64.)

⁹²⁰ Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī 1995, p.96.

cause of all existence.⁹²¹ The equivocal employment of “existence” indicates actually a *negation*, the reality of which cannot be known:

Here lies a sublime secret. The “existence,” that applies to the Necessary Existence and the possible existents jointly⁹²² is a mental concept. For existence in itself cannot apply to other things jointly. This is the case for the Necessary Existence, which is subsistent in-itself and does not attach to substances, and for all existents. Therefore, if His mental existence is considered, then this is a possible existent, and not Necessary Existence. The name “existence” applies to the Necessary Existence as “Zayd” applies both to the person himself as well as to his name. “Existence,” in this sense, is a mental concept. *The Necessary Existence in His fullness and reality is not knowable. Instead, He is apprehended as this mental existence, delimited by a negative limitation [qayd salbi].*⁹²³

Even the name that describes God’s essence, i.e., “Necessary Existent” does not violate God’s unknowability since it operates as a negation of what we can imagine or know. Philosophers present discursive proofs for God being the ultimate and unique cause of creation, but they keep His essence unknowable via hermeneutical strategies. His attributes operate as negations, or as metaphors that apply to God eminently, unlike how they apply to creation. A discursive proof of the divine essence, and its simultaneous undoing via negative theology of divine attributes is closely connected with the philosophical apophatic approach to the divine essence.

Ṭūsī’s response, interestingly, is exactly al-Shahrastānī’s Ismā’īlī alternative that the latter suggested in his attack to Ibn Sīnā. Al-Shahrastānī compared philosophical apophaticism with Ismā’īlī apophaticism, without explicitly giving the latter’s name, but finding it superior. Al-Shahrastānī argued that nothing will rescue the Philosophers from inconsistencies

except treating existence and every attribute and term which they apply to Him (Exalted and Sanctified is He!), such as “unity,” “the One,” “the Truth,” “the Good,” “the Intellect,” “the Intellecting,”

⁹²¹ Muḥammad Mahdī ibn Abī Ḍarr Narāqī (d.1794), one of the greatest among later Shī’ī authorities not only in philosophy and theology but also in mathematics, astronomy and literature, follows the same strategy with his *Pupils [Qurrat al-‘Uyūn]*. See Narāqī 2010, p.447.

⁹²² The Arabic text should have a typo as it has the phrase “*tashkīk*” instead of “*tashrīk*.”

⁹²³ Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī 1995, p.99; emphasis mine.

“the Intellected,” etc., by way of equivocity, not univocity, nor ambiguity. They are agreed on the fact that the application of “unity” and “the one” to Him (Exalted is He!) and to other than Him is by way of pure equivocity.⁹²⁴

Hence Ṭūsī’s solution to the main tension of philosophical apophaticism is to follow the Ismā’īlī suggestion that even the so-called essential names are in fact negations beyond which nothing can be known. Ṭūsī was actually moving from the philosophical *negative applicability* of the divine attributes to their Ismā’īlī *inapplicability*. It was Plotinus’ distinction between discursive thought and non-discursive intellection that helped Ibn Sīnā to solve the tension in proving the creator and negating all relations indicating His transcendence. For Ṭūsī, the Neoplatonic distinction is not helpful, or even clear, anymore. His easy shift to the Ismā’īlī answer shows us, again, the complex interrelations between apophatic theological heritages.

Philosophical Apophaticism within Sufi Epistemology: Two Kubrāwī Sufis in Eastern Persia

Mysticism and philosophy in Andalusia engaged in creative encounters around philosophical apophaticism. Mystics like Ibn Sab’īn employed it with Sufi adaptations, such as revising the negative theology of divine attributes into a negative theology of worldly attributes. The exchange of letters between two Persian Kubrāwī Sufis, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī (d.1219) and his disciple Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī (fl. ea. 13th CE) witnesses another visionary version of the philosophical path of negation. In an interesting vision, what seems to be a circle of learned genies [*jinn*s] was unveiled to Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī. Quite surprisingly, the *jinn*s were discussing nothing other than Plato’s hypothesis, ending with an experiential version of philosophical apophaticism:

The spirits, words and questions of the *jinn*s became manifest: “what is the meaning of saying ‘there is no god but God?’ *If your saying ‘there is no god but God’ is correct, then you cannot say ‘there is no god but God’.*” They said: “We have a master from Alexandria, and he says: ‘*the wayfaring of all wayfarers happens in ‘there is no God’ [i.e., in negation]. No one is allowed to transgress it, or depart from it. And no one among the wayfarers can access ‘but God’ [i.e., the affirmation], because the eternal [qidam] is not to be entered by the originated [ḥadaṣ]. When the wayfaring ends in ‘there is no God,’ which is the negation [nafy],*

⁹²⁴ al-Shahrastānī 2001, p.43.

the negator and the wayfarer are negated [*intafā al-nāfī va al-sālik*]. If so, then who will wayfare thereafter?”⁹²⁵

The question of the *jinn* master pushed Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī to endless deserts, with the vision getting more perplexing for him and his reader as it unfolds. This brief but dense conversation of the circle of learned *jinn*s is composed of three key aspects of philosophical apophaticism in a Sufi context: (1) the discursive inapplicability of any attribute to God, including oneness—a glaring appropriation of Plato’s hypothesis, (2) the inaccessibility of the divine essence based on the decisive distinction between the creator and the created realm, and (3) negation as the most suitable, and indeed, only possible path of approaching God.

The master, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī (d.1219) is aware of the import of the dream of Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī. Hence his interpretation of the dream has two parts, both of which lay bare the harmonious mixture of Sufi principles and philosophical apophaticism. Majd al-Dīn writes:

“If your saying ‘there is no god but God’ is correct, then you cannot say ‘there is no god but God’.” This is a correct statement. It is the truth, because the validity of the saying “there is no god but God” is based on the negation of human presence [*nafy-a bashariyyat*]. As long as their human attributes are extant, the claimers are not sincere. For, divine unity is the negator of ego and presence. ... For this reason, this poor [i.e., Majd al-Dīn himself] chooses the invocation [*zīkr*] “there is no god but God,” and prefers it over the invocation “God.” *As long as you are a wayfarer, you need negation.* As long as the attributes are not negated, one’s need is affirmed [*ṣābit*]. As long as the need for negation is extant, the phrase [*kalima*, i.e., “there is no god but God”] [*kalima-yi tavhīd*] shall be present [*bar kār ast*].

As for the saying of the master from Alexandria, “the wayfaring of all wayfarers happens in ‘there is no God’ [i.e., in negation]. No one can access ‘but God’ [i.e., the affirmation].” This is a correct statement, because this world, ... which is the realm of wayfaring,

⁹²⁵ Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī in Meier 1999, p.269; my emphases. (The letter is in Persian, while the quotation from the Alexandrian master is in Arabic.)

The following translation is also legitimate: “When the wayfaring ends in *lā ilāh* (i.e., the negation that negates the negator and the wayfarer), who will wayfare after that?”

is bounded with ... human attributes. The completion of this wayfaring is “there is no God.”⁹²⁶

In the exchange of letters between the two early Kubrāwī Sufis, we find an exquisite employment of the components of philosophical apophaticism in a Sufi epistemological context. Approaching the unknowable one, in its ineffable oneness, is possible only within the realm of the perpetual negation of attributes. What is negated is not the divine attributes, but the attributes of the human self. Unlike with the Philosophers, perpetual negation is non-discursive and experiential, as the purported access of mystics to the divine essence is non-discursive and visionary. Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī and Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī are undermining the claims for mystical, non-discursive access to the divine essence. Their bias towards the negative aspect of the declaration of faith in favor of negative speech on God was quite rare among thirteenth century Sufis. This negativist interpretation of the declaration of faith [“there is no god but God”] does not proliferate either among the Kubrāwī, Suhrawardī or Khwājagān circles with which Majd al-Dīn was conversant. The key piece of the puzzle, if not the Alexandrian master, is Sharaf al-Dīn Muḥammad Balkhī about whom we know nothing except what we can deduce from this correspondence.⁹²⁷

Yet their preference for negative over positive language was not without precedent among Sufis. The influential polymath, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111) also had a distinctly negative approach to the language concerning God. In the *Highest Aim*, al-Ghazālī adopts all principles of a philosophical apophaticism. The unknowability of the divine essence is strongly emphasized, again and again underlining that the highest knowledge concerning God is one’s own incapacity to know. Not only divine essence, but even divine attributes cannot be known to us as much as they relate to the divine essence. We can only imagine divine attributes through comparison with their created counterparts, but their reality is beyond human conception, imagination, and intellection. Comparing negative and positive language concerning the divine essence, al-Ghazālī finds the former superior. Accordingly, negations contain a latent praise of God more powerful and correct than positively describing Him with qualified attributes:

Since there is no likeness of Him, none knows His essence other than He. So al-Junayd ... was right when he remarked: “none knows God except God.” For that reason, He gave even His

⁹²⁶ Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī in Meier 1999, p.274; my emphasis.

⁹²⁷ See Meier 1999, pp.246-252.

noblest creature a name, with which He veiled Himself, as He said: “Praise the name of your Lord Most High” [Q.87:1]. So, by God, none knows God except God, in this world, or the next.

On his deathbed, Dhū al-Nūn was asked, “what do you long for?” He replied: “that I knew Him before I die—be it for an instant.” Now, this confuses the hearts of the most of the weak, and leads them to the delusion of negation [*naḥy*] and ineffectualism [*taʿtīl*]. ... I say: if someone were to say “I do not know God,” that would be true. And if they were to say “I know God” that would also be true. Now it is known that negation and affirmation (of the same proposition) cannot both be true, but rather split truth and falsity. If the negation is true then the affirmation is false; and vice versa. However, if the aspects of the proposition are different, then the negation and affirmation can be both true.

This would be the case were a person ask another “do you know Abū Bakr, the faithful one?” ... If one replied, “who doesn’t know Abū Bakr, or is ignorant about him? Given the visibility, fame, and renown of his name, is it conceivable that anyone in the world doesn’t know him? ...” This reply would be true. ...

But if another were asked, “do you know him [Abū Bakr, the faithful one],” and replied: “who am I to know the faithful one? Alas, far from it! None knows him except himself, or someone who is like him or above him. Who am I to claim to know him or even hope for that? People like me hear his name and attributes, but as for claiming to know him—that is impossible.” This is also true—indeed, this proposition has an aspect, which comes closer to the due glorification and homage.⁹²⁸

In following discussion, al-Ghazālī gives other examples as well, in order to point out that the negative language is superior to positive language concerning the divine essence. His depiction of negative language as a path of praise and glorification more suitable than positive language is shared with al-Baṭalyawṣī and the Arabic Aristotle.

Later, the Naqshbandī master Muḥammad Pārsā (d.1420) quotes Majd al-Dīn’s preponderance of negation over affirmation in the declaration of faith [*takhlīl*].⁹²⁹ While Pārsā’s work as well as Majd al-Dīn’s original letter to Sharaf al-

⁹²⁸ al-Ghazālī 1999, pp.33-34; al-Ghazālī 2007, pp.35-36. Also see Shehadi 1964, p.38.

⁹²⁹ Muḥammad Pārsā 1975, p.44.

Dīn are in Persian, the quotation from Majd al-Dīn is in Arabic. Hence, it appears that Majd al-Dīn's bias towards negation in the *takhlīl* was testified in different sources associated with him. The philosophical preference for negative speech in al-Ghazālī, or its personalized, experiential version in Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī and Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī's asymmetrical approach to the *takhlīl* do not find immediate followers among Sufis. Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d.1221)'s followers kept their master's tradition⁹³⁰ of using the *takhlīl* as their common invocation, but they did not adopt the preference of negation over affirmation that Majd al-Dīn, Sharaf al-Dīn and his spiritual master from Alexandria have. The asymmetry of negation and affirmation disappears in the writings of later Kubrāwīs, Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī (d.1256),⁹³¹ Nūr al-Dīn Isfarā'īnī (d.717/1317), Sharaf al-Dīn al-Ḥanawayh (fl. late 13th CE), 'Alā' al-Dawlah al-Simnānī (d.1336),⁹³² as well as in the writings of Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d.ca.1230), who might be a direct student of Majd al-Dīn, and 'Azīz Nasafī (fl.13th CE) who may have associated with Kubrāwīs.⁹³³ Najm al-Dīn Kubrā's own approach is very similar to that of Dāya Rāzī and al-Simnānī, and underlines the balance of affirmation and negation, as in non-Sufi sources.⁹³⁴ Pārsā himself is following the same practice of invoking "there is no god but God," established by Abū Yūsuf al-Hamadānī (d.1140),⁹³⁵ who was a student of Abu 'Alī al-Fārmadhī (d.1084) together with Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī. Yet, while Pārsā is familiar with Majd al-Dīn's negative interpretation of the *takhlīl*, he follows the balanced version of Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī.

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī and Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī have a negationist emphasis on the binary of transcendence and imminence in the divine unity. Indeed, their negationist reading of the *takhlīl* is a philosophical variation on the stronger line of paradoxical apophaticism, developed by Persian Sufis Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d.1126), Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bustī (d.af.1077), 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī (d.1131), and Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī among others. However brief, the negativist departure from the common, balanced Sufi approach is a significant case by which to assess the prominence of philosophy in early

⁹³⁰ Kubrā in Mole 1963, #8, p.27. For a Turkish translation, see Kubrā 1980, p.78.

⁹³¹ Dāya Rāzī 1982, pp.269-270; 272-277.

⁹³² Elias 1995, p.24.

Muḥammad Pārsā (d.1420)'s compilation indicates that the approach of Khwājagān to the *takhlīl* was a balanced one as well. See Muḥammad Pārsā 1975, p.34.

⁹³³ See below Ch.6, the section titled "Healing with Paradoxes."

⁹³⁴ Kubrā in Mole 1963, #8, p.27. For a Turkish translation, see Kubrā 1980, p.78.

⁹³⁵ Yūsuf al-Hamadānī 2007.

thirteenth century western Central Asia. Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī (d.1219), came from Khuwārazm, a terrain not really hospitable for Sufis at the time, as a result of the prominence of the philosopher Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī at the Khuwārazmshāhī court.⁹³⁶ Similarly, Sharaf al-Dīn's hometown was captured by Muḥammad Khuwārazmshāh from the Ghūrids in 603/1206, and remained under their control until 617/1220, when Chingiz Khān massacred the inhabitants of Balkh and destroyed the city, even though the city had already surrendered to him. As the correspondence apparently belongs to the first two decades of the century, Majd al-Dīn and Sharaf al-Dīn's shared bias towards a negative language might be a direct result of the political eminence of philosophy under Khuwārazmshāhī rule. By the time of Muḥammad Pārsā, however, the asymmetry between negation and affirmation had given way to a symmetrical balance that creates paradoxical statements that resist propositional logical analysis. Pārsā himself promoted paradoxes, and he was an exponent of influential Sufi masters like Ibn al-'Arabī and Rūmī who were known as champions of paradoxes in the thirteenth century. Accordingly, the declaration of faith is composed of the perfect balance of negation and affirmation, which creates "the principle of healing with paradoxes."

C. Summary

The apophatic tradition of the Philosophers on the divine essence had a set of distinguishing marks, composed of (i) a negative theology of divine attributes, (ii) the unknowability the divine essence, closely connected with an Aristotelian version of the Neoplatonic distinction between discursive thought [*dianoia*] and non-discursive intellection [*noēsis*], (iii) the necessary dissimilarity of God as the First Cause of everything else, (iv) and a philosophical hermeneutics that protects divine oneness and dissimilarity.

Ibn Sīnā's elusive distinction between discursive thought and non-discursive intellection was an important dimension in separating God's immediate knowledge of things, and the human endeavor to apprehend things through the division and unification of intelligible forms, which by definition excluded the comprehension of the apophatic one. Ibn Sīnā's legacy was split into two in the thirteenth century between the followers of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī. Later works of 'Allamāh Ḥillī (d.1325), Badr al-Dīn al-Tustarī (d.1332), and Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1364) claimed to be the "arbitrators" between the two great interpreters, but they invariably preferred the latter, Shī'ite scholar over

⁹³⁶ Algar in Dāya Rāzī 1982, pp.9-10.

the belligerent Ash'arite theologian. From the mid-fourteenth century onwards, Ṭūsī became the unchallenged, premier interpreter of Ibn Sīnā.⁹³⁷ In the thirteenth century, however, opinions on Ibn Sīnā's legacy were not settled, and diverse schools of thought read Ibn Sīnā through different lenses. A variety of ideas flexibly moved among Philosophers and Sufis of this century, and Philosophy as well as philosophical apophaticism found representatives among Sufis of this period. Especially in Andalusia, we find that philosophical apophaticism transcended religious and disciplinary borders, and circulated among Sufis from Ibn Mar'ah to Ibn Sab'īn. The correspondence between Ṭūsī and al-Qūnawī on divine unknowability, or Ibn al-'Arabī's take on the negative theology of divine attributes further indicate the intellectual bridges across disciplines. The strikingly powerful philosophical apophaticism circulating among early Kabbalists beyond the Islamicate world suggests that the surprising parallels in the rise of nominal employment of the terms "*Lam Yazal*" and "*Eyn Sof*" are more than a coincidence.

While other components of philosophical apophaticism were found among many Sufis of the thirteenth century, the negativist approach to the divine attributes was its most important barrier for them. The majority of Sufis challenged a negativist reading of the divine attributes from the ninth century onwards in favor of paradoxes, as discussed in the next chapter. Yet Ibn Sab'īn's writings and the correspondence between two Kubrāwī Sufis of the thirteenth century indicate that a negative theology of divine attributes could and did flourish among Sufis, with fine-tunings in order to confirm the superiority of vision and unveiling in Sufi epistemology. For the vast majority of Sufis of the thirteenth century, it was a sustained epistemological principle that no discourse or intellect could apprehend God by any means. Instead, Sufi epistemology, and mysticism at large, underlined non-discursive forms of access, as we saw in the case of Ibn Ṭufayl. As accessing deity via discourse was already out of question, it was the discussions on and approaches to the visionary, experiential connection with God that determined a negative theology of divine essence among Sufis. In other words, negative theology of divine essence relied not only on canceling discursive knowledge on God, but also on non-discursive, visionary possibilities. Al-Ghazālī, Ibn Sab'īn, al-Qūnawī, and the two Kubrāwī Sufis forbid the accessibility of the divine essence not only to intellection, but also to unveiling or vision.

⁹³⁷ See Wisnovsky 2014.

With the epistemological shift from discourse to vision, the negative theology of divine attributes also underwent a Sufi fine-tuning, parallel to the experientializing shift in the negative theology of divine essence. For the Philosophers, a negative theology of divine attributes entailed the discursive negation of the attributes, or the negative interpretation of affirmative predicates, following Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā,’ al-Najjār (d.836), Ḍirār (d.815),⁹³⁸ and al-Nazzām (d.848), if not earlier Ibādī theologians like al-Fazārī (8th CE).⁹³⁹ Such negative theology of divine attributes was key for the divine transcendence [*tanzīh*], and for their critique of divine comparability [*tashbīh*]. For Sufis, as in the case of Ibn Sab‘īn, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī and Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī, the negative theology of divine attributes had to relate to their visions and practices as well. What should be negated is not divine attributes, but one’s own human, created attributes. The theoretical negation of divine attributes by the Mu‘tazilites and Philosophers turns into the experiential negation of one’s own attributes, and relates to human apotheosis defined by the Sufi path. Hence the philosophical apophaticism of Sufis in the thirteenth century is regulated by Sufi epistemology, norms and institutions, and has a more explicit performative dimension than the discursive negation of divine attributes.⁹⁴⁰

⁹³⁸ Al-Najjār and Ḍirār (d.815) were among the earliest to introduce negative interpretation of affirmative predicates. Accordingly, the meaning of the statement that God is knowing or powerful is that He is not ignorant and not powerless (See Wolfson 1976, p.223.) Wolfson’s evaluation should be revised in the light of the recent discovery of earlier Ibādī theological texts.

⁹³⁹ See al-Fazārī 2014, pp.172-176.

For al-Nazzām’s negative theology of divine attributes, see Abrahamov in al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1990, p.24.

⁹⁴⁰ This does not mean that discursive negation of divine attributes is bereft of performative dimensions related to human perfection. Maimonides, among others, makes it quite clear that philosophical apophaticism transforms human soul, and leads to its intellectual as well as practical perfection.

CHAPTER 6. "YES AND NO:" PARADOXICAL APOPHATICISM AND DIALECTICAL LOGIC IN MEDIEVAL SUFISM

This chapter introduces paradoxical apophaticism on the divine essence in thirteenth century Sufism, and tests the common association of paradox and Sufism, with a particular focus on phrases and statements in the "X-not-X" forms. I argue that neither the employment nor the celebration of paradoxes were uniquely Sufi phenomenon. Yet it was primarily Sufis who adopted paradoxical apophatic approaches to the divine essence. While other theological positions sought to show that their X-not-X statements could be explained within propositional logic without violating logical meta-principles, Sufis appealed to X-not-X statements on God at the propositional level. Apophaticism here is performed via the self-negating binaries of a dialectical logic that shows the incapacity of discourse before an inaccessible, unknowable divine essence. In other words, the employment of paradoxes follows a rule-governed strategy in order to negate propositional discourse on the divine essence. Paradoxical apophaticism is better understood by formal logical analysis, especially with reference to dialectics, instead of the annulment of logic, or the violation of logical meta-principles.

A. Introduction: Apophaticism, Paradox, and Sufism in the Study of Religion ***Apophaticism as Theological Negation and Paradox as Its Unique Path***

With its contemplative path of perpetual negation, philosophical apophaticism is one of the most well-known forms of pre-modern negative theology, thanks to prominent philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas (d.1274), Maimonides (d.1204), and Ibn Sīnā (d.1037). For them, perpetual negation concerning God was not only a performance of devotion, but also a transformative declaration of an epistemological truth, and the logical conclusion of divine uniqueness. Accordingly, only negations could indicate human incapacity, divine transcendence, and God's apophatic oneness simultaneously through a logically valid procedure. Strict adherence to propositional logic and logical consistency were fundamental. Indeed, Protestant Reformation's one of the most trenchant critiques of Scholastic theology (and therefore of Thomas Aquinas) was that it relied too heavily on syllogism and ignored paradox.⁹⁴¹

Yet many prominent postmodern intellectuals and scholars of religion associate apophaticism with a specifically paradoxical form of negative theology. For Derrida,

⁹⁴¹ See Janz 1998, p.3.

“apophasis,” interchangeable with “negative theology,” always represents a “paradoxical hyperbole” in different religious and cultural traditions.⁹⁴² It is the paradox through which the movement beyond being or beingness is possible. Derrida’s lens of paradox is extensively shaped by the work of Marion to whom he was responding in *Save the Name*. Marion’s answer to Derrida, on the other hand, suggests that negative theology transgresses key principles of formal logic—exclusive bivalence, non-contradiction, hence predication in general:

[T]he third way is played out beyond the oppositions between affirmation and negation, synthesis and separation, in short, between the true and the false. Strictly speaking, if thesis and negation have it in common to speak the truth (and spurn the false), the way that transcends them should also transcend the true and the false. *The third way would transgress nothing less than the two truth values*, between which the entire logic of metaphysics is carried out. Therefore, if the third way is no longer about saying the true or the false, if it is precisely a matter of its *not* saying them, one can no longer claim that it means to affirm a predicate of a subject.⁹⁴³

Marion’s defense of negative theology proposes that unsaying is not a discourse that disguises itself as a negation, but a paradoxical path that dispenses with the metaphysics behind predication by transcending formal logical principles. “Paradox,” for Marion, is another name for the categories of excess, or the “saturated phenomena.”⁹⁴⁴ Paradox is *para-dox*, i.e., *inverted doxa*, and it names the only way that Marion recognizes for transcending the binaries of the metaphysics of discourse as such.

The influence of the tension between Derrida and Marion in the study of negative theology and apophaticism cannot be overemphasized. Much ink has been spilled on Derrida and Marion, yet the main assumptions that ground their divergences remain mostly intact. These claims can be summarized as follows: (1) apophasis is an inherently theological or mystical concept, (2) paradox is the only method of negating a discourse, (3) negative theology has a radically (or infinitely) critical capacity, (4) there is a single tradition of negative theology

⁹⁴² See Derrida 1995, p.63-67; 35; 78. Cf. Marion 2002, p.133.

⁹⁴³ Marion 2002, p.137-138; my emphasis.

⁹⁴⁴ Yet recently Marion has argued that *all* phenomena can be saturated. On Marion’s unclear employment of the term “saturated phenomena,” see T. Jones 2011, p.145.

developed throughout the history of Christianity, (5) apophasis, hence paradox, breaks, or dispenses with formal logical principles.

These are widely shared yet mostly unthought assumptions in the contemporary study of negative theologies and apophaticism. A few examples will be illustrative. In the contemporary scholarship, probably it is W. Franke's works which best represent the efforts to construct singular, consistent apophatic traditions within religious traditions, associating apophasis with infinite self-reflexivity, and a philosophical version of mysticism. Accordingly, "apophasis" is a mysterious concept that resists definition.⁹⁴⁵ It marks the break of discourse—indeed, it is this pure negation, an infinite capacity to negate all discursive fields. The two terms "apophasis" and "negative theology" converge, as the latter is the negation of the unlimited discourse, hence an unlimited critique. As Franke recently wrote:

*Negative theology is a way of thinking that is self-critical without limits. It can occur in all speculative discourses aiming at truth or meaning or sense. This sort of self-reflexive, self-critical negation of oneself or of one's own discourse or affirmation may even be viewed as the ineluctable and necessary destiny of all reflective discourses aiming to expand consciousness without recognizing any intrinsic limits.*⁹⁴⁶

Accordingly, there was a distinct, singular, western negative theological tradition raised by Jewish and Christian scholars on the Greek bedrock, particularly within the matrix of the commentary tradition on Plato's *Parmenides*.⁹⁴⁷ Christianity, Judaism and Islam developed their own negative theological traditions with their "idiosyncratic patterns of negation,"⁹⁴⁸ and that of Islam is represented by Sufis, Ibn al-'Arabī and Rūmī in particular.⁹⁴⁹ Yet, "negative theology," like "apophasis,"

⁹⁴⁵ "The attempt to delimit and define apophasis so as to avoid promiscuous and indiscriminate use of the term has strong scientific motivation, but apophasis remains recalcitrant to all definition and simply does not lend itself to being made a useful and well-behaved scientific term." (Franke 2006a, pp.66-67.)

⁹⁴⁶ Franke and Woods 2013, p.1446-1447; my emphasis.

⁹⁴⁷ Franke 2006b, p.141.

⁹⁴⁸ "Each tradition has manifested its own systematic outline of negative theology through the medieval, modern, and postmodern eras. Thus, while the several traditions often share a desire to limit the reach of human discourse vis-a-vis God, they each have developed their own idiosyncratic patterns of negation that should not be conflated indiscriminately." (Franke and Woods 2013, p.1443.)

⁹⁴⁹ See Franke 2007, Vol.1; Franke 2006b, p.147.

is impossible to define—the negation of the discourse on the unlimited should be itself an unlimited negation.⁹⁵⁰ Hence negative theology embodies a critical self-reflectiveness that was the hallmark of mystics of a wide range from the vedantic to the baroque and romantic. Of course, while all religions have such infinitely critical wisdom traditions, not all, for example shamanism, approached the “critical self-reflectiveness” that western negative theology has achieved.⁹⁵¹ Similar hierarchies might be observed within this western self-critical apophatic tradition from Plato to deconstruction and post-modernism, because not all negative theologians and philosophers were as self-critical as their successors.⁹⁵²

Another example that embodies similar assumptions, one of the major recent works on apophaticism, is the edited volume *Apophatic Bodies*. The very opening page penned by the editors sets some key assumptions that reverberate throughout the book—“apophasis” is an inherently theological term, it represents a singular tradition of negative theology, and its exclusive method is the paradox:

*The ancient tradition of apophasis, or negative theology, concerns itself with the infinity called “God.” It says and unsays talk about that God. It falls speechless before a mystery that inspires more speech in the next moment. Surely the paradox entailed in this traditional apophatic gesture is mind-bending enough—speaking as unspeaking, knowing as unknowing, darkness as light—to keep us occupied for all these pages.*⁹⁵³

Similarly, D. Turner and O. Davies employ “negative theology” and “apophasis” interchangeably, which is the most common way of reducing the speech-act of

⁹⁵⁰ “Theology, as the discourse of the unlimited, or as discourse without limits, turns out to be radically negative. However, this discourse is the revelation of a predicament that applies to the real quite generally. Negative theology, deeply considered, is not a specialized discourse or discipline to be ranged alongside others, each with a domain proper to itself and differentiated from others by criteria of exclusion. Negative theology invades discourse throughout its whole extent. There is always a factor of negation in discourse, since it is not what it says. And there are no limits to the capability of recursive self-negation of discourse: it reaches to infinity. *This makes negative theology impossible to define.*” (Franke and Woods 2013, p.1445; my emphasis.)

⁹⁵¹ Franke and Woods 2013, p.1445.

⁹⁵² E.g. Franke 2006a, p.74. For the critique of such teleological readings of apophaticism, see Kars 2013. T. Jones also opposes a similar tendency in the depictions of Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius of Areopagite. See T. Jones 2011, pp.47-48.

⁹⁵³ Boesel and Keller 2010, p.1.

unsaying into the field of theology.⁹⁵⁴ Turner's famous *Darkness of God* acknowledges that apophasis is not necessarily theological, yet "apophatic theology" delineates a discourse necessarily paradoxical.⁹⁵⁵ In the edited volume *Silence and the Word*, per many contributors of the book, Turner defines the whole medieval apophatic project as "paradoxical in nature."⁹⁵⁶ "Paradoxical" is here a term for the deliberate abandonment of logical principles. For example, W. Chittick, defines paradoxes within the context of Sufism as "statements that express subtle truths by *ignoring the law of non-contradiction*."⁹⁵⁷ Sufi paradoxes, accordingly, function like Zen koans as they deliberately violate logical principles in order to break the obsession with intellection.

The idea that "negative theology" with its unique path of paradox violates the laws of logic, the law of the excluded middle in particular, finds echoes in the study of Jewish mysticism as well. Elliott Wolfson, for example, claims that the coincidence of opposites is "a logic of the middle excluded by the logic of the excluded middle."⁹⁵⁸ By this phrase he means that the law of the excluded middle does not allow a statement and its negation be true at the same time. E. Wolfson goes to the Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (d.ca.250) to explain the middle way of the self-subverting paradoxes in Habad Hasidism. The example Wolfson gives for the possibility of the coincidence of opposites in eastern logical systems is a version of the Liar Paradox:

The middle of the four-cornered logic, which some scholars consider to be the core of Buddhist philosophy, should be conceived of not as a meridian point situated equidistantly between extremes, the venerated golden mean between excess and privation in the Western philosophical tradition, but as the indeterminate space that contains both and neither of the extremes, the absent presence that is present as absent, the lull between affirmation and negation, identity and nonidentity, the

⁹⁵⁴ The summary of the book *Silence and the Word* in its very first page of the book claims that "negative theology or apophasis [is] the idea that God is best identified in terms of 'absence,' 'otherness,' 'difference'." See Davies and Turner 2002.

⁹⁵⁵ Turner 1995, pp.20-22.

Alan Olson also employs the terms "paradoxical" and "apophatic" in an overlapping manner. See Olson 1979, pp.95-96.

⁹⁵⁶ Turner in Davies and Turner 2002, p.32.

⁹⁵⁷ Chittick 2000, p.42.

⁹⁵⁸ Wolfson 2010, p.160.

void that cannot be avoided. In this middle excluded by the logic of the excluded middle, ostensibly contradictory properties are attributed and not attributed to the (non)substance at the same time and in the same relation, whence it follows that the propositions $(A \wedge \text{not } A)$ and $\text{not } (A \wedge \text{not } A)$ converge in the point of their divergence. ... The most important insight is already imparted by the Centrist school's purported founder, the Indian sage Nāgārjuna: emptiness itself must be empty. The claim that all phenomena do not exist inherently ensnares the mind in a self-subverting paradox: it asserts a truth that is true only if it is false, but it is false only if it is true, in a manner analogous to the contention, "everything I say is false"—if this statement is true, it must be false, but if it is false, it must be true. Epistemologically, the doctrine of emptiness entails the discernment that the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth, that the essential reality is that there is no essential reality, that nature is inherently devoid of an inherent nature.⁹⁵⁹

Wolfson argues that the Liar Paradox is better understood by adopting the form of logic akin to what he finds in Nāgārjuna's Mahayana Buddhist tradition. However, the logical and historical problems in such a claim for breaking the law of the excluded middle are quite serious. First of all, as opposed to E. Wolfson's conviction, no clear instance of the Liar Paradox was present in any Eastern tradition until recently. Neither Nāgārjuna, nor later Sanskrit grammarians were familiar with the Liar Paradox. Instead, it was only the Ancient Greek, Medieval Latin, and Medieval Arabic and Persian traditions that introduced and discussed various forms of the Liar Paradox.⁹⁶⁰ Second, the distinct value system in Buddhist logic, including Nāgārjuna's inclusive system called "*catuṣkoṭi*" [*tetralemma*], can be seen as a different system of evaluation, not in violation of the law of non-contradiction or the law of the excluded middle. Even Aristotle himself foresaw such a distinct perspective on logical operations. In other words, there is no necessary incompatibility between formal logic and Nāgārjuna's inclusive system. "You can have your Aristotle and Buddha too."⁹⁶¹ Thirdly, the

⁹⁵⁹ Wolfson 2010, p.189.

⁹⁶⁰ The Sanskrit grammarian Bhartr̥hari (fl.7th CE), who discusses the sentence "everything I am saying is false," embodies an ambiguous instance. However, instead of generating a Contingent Liar Paradox from the sentence, Bhartr̥hari indicates that the sentence is self-refuting. See Alwishah and Sanson 2009, p.98.

⁹⁶¹ Horn 2014.

logical system of Aristotle is based not only on the law of the excluded middle, but heavily on the law of non-contradiction. In fact, for Aristotle, the law of the excluded middle is “not as first a principle as the principle of non-contradiction,”⁹⁶² which is “the firmest belief of all.”⁹⁶³ Even more dramatically, in *De Interpretatione* Aristotle is quite suspicious of the applicability of the law of the excluded middle to all statements, such as those related to future events. The interpretive tradition initiated by al-Fārābī (d.950) and continued by Thomas Aquinas, and William of Ockham (d.1347) sees Aristotle as rejecting only logical determinacy for future events. Yet other scholars like Boethius (d.524) and Lukasiewicz (d.1956) argue that Aristotle utterly rejected the law of the excluded middle in such cases. Many contemporary scholars of logic state that *De Interpretatione* argues against the law of the excluded middle,⁹⁶⁴ which Aristotle himself is supposed to have established. Thus the law of the excluded middle does not have an uncontested history, or the authority that we might assume it does.

More significantly, why would the term “paradox” necessarily indicate the “break” or “transgression” of formal logical principles? Such claims for “denying the validity of logical principles,” or “using logic to destroy logic” are difficult to make even about Nāgārjuna, the purported pioneer of paraconsistent logic.⁹⁶⁵ As Aristotle himself claims in the *Categories*, many apparent paradoxes arise indeed due to a poor understanding of logical rules, but they are solvable with a rigorous application of logic. He shows that what appears as the coincidence of the opposites, hence a violation of the law of non-contradiction, can be in fact the result of the omission or ill-definition of one or some of the categorical dimensions of statements. Some, perhaps Heraclitus among them, claimed that it is possible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same—an apparent

⁹⁶² Horn 2014.

⁹⁶³ Aristotle 1995, p.269 (1011b, 14).

⁹⁶⁴ Bonevac and Dever 2012, p.175.

⁹⁶⁵

There is no evidence that Nagarjuna “uses logic to destroy logic.” He makes mistakes in logic, but does not deny any principles of logic. He asserts that a certain set of propositions—the Buddhist doctrine—is true under a certain condition, that of emptiness, and false under another condition, that of own-beingness. It is not right to say that “Nagarjunana denies the validity of logic ... to establish ultimate truth.” (R. Robinson 1957, p.307.)

Also see Bhattacharya 1971, p.217; Bhattacharya 1990.

violation of the law of non-contradiction.⁹⁶⁶ Protagoras also held that everything that appears is true, and “everything must at the same time be true and false,” which is another violation of the law of non-contradiction.⁹⁶⁷ Anaxagoras and Democritus are Aristotle’s other examples for violating the law of non-contradiction,⁹⁶⁸ while the former also disregarded the law excluded middle, according to which “of any one subject, one thing must be either asserted or denied.”⁹⁶⁹ Aristotle’s response to these claims underlines the importance of clarifying all aspects of a statement that determine its truth conditions:

Our reply ... is that in a way what they say is correct, but in a way they are mistaken. ... *It is possible for the same thing at the same time both to be and not to be, but not in the same respect*; for it is possible for the same thing at the same time to have contrary properties potentially, but not to have them actually.⁹⁷⁰

Aristotle calls for us to be cautious before accepting paradoxes as claims for undoing logic. Zeno’s paradoxes, such as Achilles Paradox, the Flying Arrow Paradox, the Moving Blocks Paradox, and the Bisection Paradox, for example, make clearly false assumptions about motion according to Aristotle’s *Physics*.⁹⁷¹ Another example might be taken from the famous Liar Paradox—e.g. “what I say is false.” Does it break the law of non-contradiction (or the exclusive bivalence) and transcend logic, or is it a problem of self-reference that can be solved by logical analysis? While it has recently been suggested, following Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, that paradoxes should be accepted as natural,⁹⁷² logicians have generally continued to resist them. The majority of contemporary logicians approach the Liar Paradox as a problem that arises because of ill-defined self-referential employment of language.

Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d.1274) was the first intellectual in history to approach the Liar Paradox as a problem of self-reference that can be better understood and solved by logic. Yet many contemporary scholars of apophaticism go in the opposite direction of Ṭūsī by assuming that paradoxes inherently “transcend,” “break,” “subvert,” “transgress,” etc. logical principles. The powerful appeal to

⁹⁶⁶ Aristotle 1995, p.252 (1005b, 25).

⁹⁶⁷ Aristotle 1995, p.262 (1009a, 5).

⁹⁶⁸ Aristotle 1995, p.263 (1009a, 25-30).

⁹⁶⁹ See Horn 2014.

⁹⁷⁰ Aristotle 1995, p.263 (1009a 30-35); my emphasis.

⁹⁷¹ Aristotle 1995, pp.133-136 (233a13-240a). For Zeno’s paradoxes, see Horn 2014.

⁹⁷² Priest 1979.

postmodern thought in these verbs is obvious. Dramatically, however, such claims for subverting the logical via the paradoxical share the enduring post-Kantian assumption on the inherence of paradoxes in the realm of the mystical. Connecting logic-canceling paradoxes with mysticism actually inherits the abiding assumption that mysticism is the realm of the “irrational,” or “non-rational” as Otto would claim.⁹⁷³ The paradoxes that we have, Bertrand Russell (d.1970) grudgingly argued, “are really the paradoxes of mysticism.”⁹⁷⁴ Even those scholars who attribute mysticism an epistemological content detached it from reason. Most famously, William James employed the terms “rationalistic” and “non-mystical” interchangeably.⁹⁷⁵ When introducing the two essential features of mystical experience, James carefully divested mysticism of rationality: “1. *Ineffability*. ... [M]ystical states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect. ... 2. *Noetic quality*. ... They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.”⁹⁷⁶ The Russian philosopher and theologian N. Berdyaev (d.1948) underlined that the superiority of apophatic theology lies in its inherent mysticism, and its inclusion of an irrational freedom.⁹⁷⁷ Accordingly, “*apophatic-negative theology is more mystical than kataphatic-positive theology, which always includes within itself a strong dose of rationalism.*”⁹⁷⁸ Later studies in mysticism, including the recent efforts to define mysticism as the inherently para-doxical and logic-breaking realm mirror the same enduring scholarly binary between the logical and the mystical. Indeed, Marion’s defense of the third way against Derrida’s challenge that negative theology remains within the boundaries of onto-theology relies exactly on the idea that the para-dox it entails “transgresses” the law of non-contradiction. It is thanks to this transgression of logical principles that negative theology is able to refuse predication and the presence of the divine subject implicated in it according to Marion.

The claim that apophasis, with its method of paradox, transgresses the rules of logic leads some scholars to take a further step and develop an apophatic logic of

⁹⁷³ King 1999, pp.7-34.

⁹⁷⁴ Russell 1919, p.19. In the same vein, when Habermas criticized Adorno’s notion of “non-identity,” he compared it with the “hidden, world-transcendent God” in mysticism. Apophaticism is *eo ipso* mystical for Habermas. (Finlayson 2012, p.3.)

⁹⁷⁵ James 1902, p.414.

⁹⁷⁶ James 1902, p.371.

⁹⁷⁷ Berdyaev 1928, #329.

⁹⁷⁸ Berdyaev 1927, #321; my emphasis.

its own. In *Apophatic Bodies*, Clayton defines a “kenotic epistemology,” which dispenses with the law of the excluded middle in expounding the paradox of incarnation.⁹⁷⁹ If not an inherently religious logic, Oliver Davies suggests that apophasis has its own discursive mode that is inherently religious. “Apophasis,” he writes, “distinguishes *Christian* speech from *ordinary human* speech acts.”⁹⁸⁰ In the search for an inherently religious logic, Schumann’s edited volume *Logic in Religious Discourse* also discovers apophaticism. Again, he cites Nāgārjuna “as the forerunner of paraconsistent logic,” for the same purpose with E. R. Wolfson—allowing the inherent paradoxes of apophatic theology to be logically valid. Schumann writes:

Another example is the substantiation of apophatic theological reasoning from the point of view of modern formal logic, namely the proof within the limits of a logical system that the following two statements are valid simultaneously (i) God has negations of all positive properties and (ii) God has negations of all negations of positive properties. In this connection, the logical theories of Indian philosophy proving the validity of inconsistency of some statements are very interesting, too. For example, Nāgārjuna in *Vigrahavyāvartanī* v.57 offers a special type of negation called *prasajya prativedha*.⁹⁸¹

Hence apophasis, with its allegedly necessarily paradoxical nature, is put under the rubric of “religious logic” which cannot be contained within formal logical principles. This newly developing field aims for “the construction of consistent logical systems formalizing *religious reasoning* that at first sight seems inconsistent. This research is carried out within the limits of modal logic, paraconsistent logic and many-valued logic.”⁹⁸² The self-declared assumption is that religion has its own logic that transcends the consistency requirement and law of exclusive bivalence of formal logic. The less obvious but more common assumption is that there exists a mode of consciousness, reasoning, and discourse that is inherently and exclusively, *sui generis religious*. This assumption can be found in the key figures of the phenomenological study of religion. Yet, approaching apophasis as an inherently religious performance is so widespread that it is by no means limited to the early phenomenology of religion, or to the scholarship of previous generations.

⁹⁷⁹ See e.g. Clayton in Boesel and Keller 2010, p.302.

⁹⁸⁰ Davies in Davies and Turner 2002, p.201; my emphasis.

⁹⁸¹ Schumann 2010, pp.15-16.

⁹⁸² Schumann 2010, p.15; my emphasis.

Approaching “religion”⁹⁸³ and “mysticism”⁹⁸⁴ as exclusively religious concepts has been vocally criticized at last for three decades. Yet such approaches are still very prominent in the study of apophaticism, partially because the concept “apophasis” has not undergone such a higher-order genealogical study—yet.⁹⁸⁵ In the contemporary scholarship “apophasis” is widely seen as a *sui generis* mystical or religious concept that defies definition, or has inherent critical or mystical capacities.

Sufism and Its Path of Paradox

As Turner, Davies, and McGinn⁹⁸⁶ among others indicate, the primary negative theological tradition within Christianity is defined as mystical. Eventually, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite called his apophatic enterprise “mystical theology.” Extrapolating from this starting point, most scholars directly associate apophaticism with mysticisms across religious traditions. The *Apophatic Bodies*, again, on its very first page clearly makes the association: apophasis is a mystical approach in the field of theology, and it is the mystics from different religious traditions who adopt apophatic positions:

The *apophatic mystics*—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—do surely speak. They speak and unspeak volumes. With uninhibited kataphasis (the presumed affirmative opposite of apophasis), at once confessional and speculative, liturgical and philosophical, they speak about God.⁹⁸⁷

Phrases such as “mystical and apophatic traditions” abound in the study of apophaticism.⁹⁸⁸ Yet generally no explanation is given for the reduction of a general speech act into theology, or for the logical gap in the leaps between negative speech and mysticism. Instead, the gap is filled by paradox, the supposedly unique path of apophasis and the hallmark of mysticism. Once paradox is defined as the unique path of negative speech, and mysticism to be

⁹⁸³ E.g. J. Z. Smith 1982, p.xi.

⁹⁸⁴ See Katz 1978, Proudfoot 1985, Schmidt 2003, King 1999.

⁹⁸⁵ For the first proposal to define “apophasis” as a second-order, scholarly category, see Kars 2013.

⁹⁸⁶ McGinn, in Davies and Turner 2002, p.99.

⁹⁸⁷ Boesel and Keller 2010, p.1.

⁹⁸⁸ E.g. Clayton in Boesel and Keller 2010, p.288; Rojek in Schuman 2010, p.192; Ward in Davies and Turner 2002, p.164. Sells also describes “classical apophaticism” as a mystical inquiry across Abrahamic religions. (Sells 1994, pp.5-11; 220-221 fn.14.)

intrinsically paradoxical, negative speech as a mystical inquiry becomes nothing but the inevitable conclusion. W.T. Stace (d.1967), for example, depicts paradox as one of the “*universal common characteristics of mysticism in all cultures, ages, religions, and civilizations of the world.*”⁹⁸⁹ William James, Rudolf Otto, and Aldous Huxley (d.1963),⁹⁹⁰ among others⁹⁹¹ join Stace in defining paradox as the “mark” of authentic mystical experience.⁹⁹² As one contemporary author puts it, mysticism is the realm of paradox:⁹⁹³ “mysticism within the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—is built on paradox.”⁹⁹⁴

This enduring binary of the rational/logical versus mystical/paradoxical has been influential in the study of Sufism from early on—even before W. James. Max Muller (d.1900) finds in Sufism traces of the influence of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, with a particular reference to paradoxical issues, such as “the One and the Many,” “the figment of Not-being,” and “the generation of opposites from opposites.”⁹⁹⁵ Similarly, R. Nicholson (d.1945) argues that Muslim mystics find delight in paradoxes.⁹⁹⁶ In order to support his argument, Nicholson ironically cites B. Russell, the philosopher who attached to mystical claims “*not a logical, but an emotional, significance,*” and was quite unhappy with the otherwise “unwarranted” beliefs of mystics.⁹⁹⁷ The association of Sufism with paradoxicality is a widespread theme also within the contemporary scholarly context. A. Schimmel (d.2003) is one of the leading names to argue that in Sufism, “the paradox [is] the most legitimate form of guiding the seeker toward

⁹⁸⁹ Stace in Katz 1978, p.50; original emphasis. Also see Geaves 2014, p.239.

⁹⁹⁰ Katz 1978, p.55. Here Katz presents an excellent critique of the appeal to generic terms like “ineffable” “paradoxical” in the comparative analysis of mystical experience. Katz illustrates how these two terms undermine the contextual comparative study of mysticism by their allegedly similar content.

⁹⁹¹ “Mystical speech is paradoxical in structure. ... Paradoxical speaking is grounded in the tension unique to mystical experience.” (Blans 2000, p.65.)

⁹⁹² Katz in Katz, Smith and King 1988, p.752.

⁹⁹³ Soltes 2008, p1.

⁹⁹⁴ Soltes 2011, p.2.

⁹⁹⁵ Muller 1895, p.342.

⁹⁹⁶ E.g. Nicholson 2005, p.138.

Massignon’s key monograph on Sufi language, *Essays on the Origins on the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, interestingly, does not even mention of paradoxes. (See Massignon 1997.)

⁹⁹⁷ Russell 1997, p.186; my emphasis.

the goal.”⁹⁹⁸ In his anthropological work on the paradoxical themes in Persian carpets, Cammann (d.1991) claims that the carpets woven in the Şafavid period (r.1501-1722) adopt paradoxes because the Şafavids were deeply influenced by Sufi thought.⁹⁹⁹ One should be a Sufi to find delight in paradoxes, or to combine logical opposites. Chittick agrees that Sufis are “especially fond of paradoxes” insofar as they “help break down the insistence of the rational mind that everything can be explained and grasped.”¹⁰⁰⁰ Sells’ monumental *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, the *magnum opus* in the study of comparative mysticism, depicts apophaticism as a cross-cultural but mystical enterprise that necessarily operates with paradoxes. The paradoxes that apophatic mystics employ are not rhetorical but real, and they perform deeper dialectical tensions, such as that of divine incomparability and imminence.¹⁰⁰¹

Most of the scholarly assumptions discussed above have already been challenged in the previous chapters of the current historical study. For example, the previous parts on Ismā’īlī and philosophical apophaticism have shown that apophatic theology is neither necessarily paradoxical nor mystical. Instead, it can be pursued by strong adherence to logic and with explicit reservations against paradoxes. Maimonides, Ibn Sīnā, Ṭūsī, al-Rāzī, and many others who adopted apophatic theologies were close followers of Greek logic. Most of them see paradoxes as instances of sophistry [*mughālaṭah*] or logical fallacies [*tanāqudh*]. Logic is “the foremost science” [*‘ilm al-awā’il*] for these thinkers, and the claim for violating it in theology would be nothing but an insult for them. These parts have also demonstrated that there is no one path of apophatic theology, and none of these paths can be easily claimed to be more “critical” than the other. Reading negative theological positions as more critical forms of thinking is blatantly anachronistic, at least in the vast majority of cases. Observing this diversity concerning a single theological question, “negative theology,” like the phenomenon that is “Neoplatonism,” appears as an overly simplistic blanket term that has no explanatory power without further qualifications and contextualization. The specific theological question, the ways in which kataphatic

⁹⁹⁸ Schimmel 1975, p.336. She adds that paradoxes “have always been a stumbling block for the orthodox and even for moderate Sufis, in many cases defy rational explanation and can only be understood by reaching the same state as the mystic who uttered them.” (Schimmel 1975, p.297.)

⁹⁹⁹ See Cammann 1978.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Chittick 2000, p.42.

¹⁰⁰¹ E.g. Sells 1994, pp.5-15, 207-208; 221.

discourses are historically established around the question, and in which ways these discourses lend themselves to negation, all need to be clarified in order to talk about specific apophatic positions around that question. Apophasis of a discourse is possible in more than one way; it is contextual, contingent, and never absolute, unique, or infinite.

The last, pervasive assumption has not been discussed yet: the widespread association of paradox with Sufism. This chapter tests this common contemporary association by focusing on statements and phrases in the “X-not-X” forms in thirteenth century Sufism.

B. Paradoxes in Medieval Muslim Thought

Paradox in Literature and Sufism: an Overview

Paradox as *para-dox*, or “inverted doxa” as Marion, Turner and other contemporary scholars find in negative theology, is irreducible to religious discourses. Indeed, *para-dox*, i.e., “going against the received beliefs” [*taghāyur*] is one of the favorite practices of Arabic literature since its emergence. The ability “to beautify the ugly and uglify the beautiful” has been a desired skill from at least the seventh century. Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī (d.af.1005) attributed examples of this poetical skill to Ibn Muqaffa’ (d.ca.755), while Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d.967) and Ibn Durayd (d.933) gave examples from even earlier poets, Labīd (d.661) and Ḥasan ibn Thābit (d.680) respectively.¹⁰⁰² Such literary paradoxes were widely employed early on in diverse arenas of Arabic scholarship, no less than the scowling field of Islamic law. Just to give an example, the distinguished Ḥanafī jurist Abū Yūsuf al-Anṣārī (d.798) grumbled that knowledge through speculative theology [*kalām*] is ignorance, and ignorance of it is knowledge.¹⁰⁰³ A key figure in the long historiography of Arabic literary and poetical paradox is the famous polymath al-Jāḥiẓ (d.869), yet he was not the first person to spill ink on paradox, describing it as a poetical and literary skill. Al-Jāḥiẓ himself quoted the poet Kulthūm Ibn ‘Amr al-‘Attābī (d.823 or 835), who had already listed “rendering what is false in the form of what is true” as one of the elements of eloquence.¹⁰⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰² See Van Gelder 2003. Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī uniquely employs the term *takhyīl* to address the rhetorical figure [*badī’*] of “giving the impression of praising while lampooning, and *vice versa*.” See Heinrichs 2008, p.2, 10-11.

¹⁰⁰³ See Abrahamov 1998, p.28.)

¹⁰⁰⁴ Van Gelder 2003, p.325. Also see al-Tawḥīdī 2013, p.198.

In some cases, the poetical virtuosity to represent things against conventional beliefs could also entail the joint truth of two contrary statements, or opposites. The famous literary critic Ibn Rashīq (d.1063 or 1070) commended Abū Nuwās (d.813) for his eloquence in describing the wine maiden, who brings love-sickness, which she herself cures through serving wine.¹⁰⁰⁵ The same Ibn Rashīq introduced the term “*taghāyur*” exactly for the purpose of theorizing such X-not-X form of paradoxes. He wrote that *taghāyur* (or para-dox) “is that two opinions are contrary [*yataḍāddu*] in meaning, so that they are opposed to each other, while both are correct.”¹⁰⁰⁶ Paradox, in this sense of the employment of contradiction [*taḍādd*] in apparent violation of the law of non-contradiction embodied a key poetical device, with Abū Tammām (d.846) and Ibn al-Rūmī (d.896) as its famous early representatives.¹⁰⁰⁷ The greatest Arab court poet, al-Mutanabbī (d.965) liked employing such paradoxes as well. One of his poems is cited by Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha‘alībī (d.1038), one of his most critical commentators, as an example for his paradoxical employment of contrasting propositions:

Beloved,
You are the world to me,
So my leaving you
Is but my return!¹⁰⁰⁸

Sufism somewhat unexpectedly comes into play exactly with the paradoxical coexistence of the opposites in al-Mutanabbī’s poetry. Al-Tha‘alībī dislikes the verse quoted above, arguing that al-Mutanabbī is here “imitating the expressions of the Sufis and using *their tangled words* [*kalimātihim al-mu‘aqqadah*] and *abstruse meanings*.”¹⁰⁰⁹ The employment of paradox, or tangled words with opaque meanings, for al-Tha‘alībī, is a Sufi gesture that he does not really appreciate. He might have compared al-Mutanabbī’s verse to the similar

¹⁰⁰⁵ Ibn Rashīq in Cowell and Ibn Rashīq 1982, p.72.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Van Gelder 2003, p.328.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Later Arabic lyrical prose employs this coincidence of the opposites as an important device as well. The Yemenī author al-Ḥaymī al-Kawkabānī (d.ca. 1738) describes the beauty of a servant as follows:

“His cheeks were soft and lush, fresh, and with a bright red blush; *in them two opposites seemed to conspire: moisture and fire*. Hearts were scorched within their rib cages by the glow of each cheek; seeing their redness all colors seem weak. The rose and the anemone borrow their hue from the charm of his” (al-Kawkabānī 2013, p.347; my emphasis.)

¹⁰⁰⁸ al-Tha‘alībī in Stetkevych 1994, p.195.

¹⁰⁰⁹ al-Tha‘alībī in Stetkevych 1994, p.194; my emphasis.

statements made by the Sufi masters of Baghdād, al-Junayd (d.911) and al-Shiblī (d.945).

Al-Tha'alībī was certainly not alone in his association of paradox and Sufism. An earlier commentator on al-Mutanabbī's *Dīwān*, and his friend, Ibn Jinnī (d.1002) claimed more vocally that al-Mutanabbī adopted a specifically Sufi style in some of his poems. The example that Ibn Jinnī gives is unmistakably paradoxical:

“When the cup startles my hands
I sober up—
It won't part
Me from myself?”

... [Al-Mutanabbī] took this from the style [*tarz*] of Sufi speech, like the statement of one of them:

“I am amazed by you and me—
You annihilated me
In you from me!

You stood me in a station
Where I supposed
That you were me!”¹⁰¹⁰

A version of the latter poem that Ibn Jinnī compares with that of al-Mutanabbī is ascribed to al-Ḥallāj (d.922).¹⁰¹¹ The phrase “you stood me in a station” [*aqamtanī bi-maqāmin*] is also strikingly similar to the *Stations* of his contemporary, legendary mystic al-Niffarī (d.ca.965). The *Stations* entails seventy-seven or more poems, all of which begin with the phrase “he stopped me at the end of the station” of a mystical theme that changes in each poem. One can easily claim that al-Niffarī's work is one of the most exquisite books of paradoxical poems ever written. While his identity is foggy, historians of the later Islamic tradition such as al-Sha'rānī (d.1565) and Kātib Chalabī (aka Ḥajjī Khalīfah) (d.1657) defined al-Niffarī as a Sufi.¹⁰¹² *The Explanation and Clarification of Difficult Points of Sahl al-Tustarī's Doctrine* [*Kitāb al-Sharḥ wa al-Bayān Li-mā Ashkala min Kalām Sahl*] mentions as its own compiler a certain 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣaḥalī (fl.late 10th CE), calling al-Ṣaḥalī a Sufi master [*al-shaykh al-'arīf*]. In one passage, al-Ṣaḥalī directly transmitted from Sahl al-Tustarī on the

¹⁰¹⁰ Ibn Jinnī in Stetkevych 1994, p.196.

¹⁰¹¹ See Stetkevych 1994, p.198.

¹⁰¹² See Arberry's introduction in Niffarī 1987.

authority of al-Niffarī.¹⁰¹³ It is three western Sufis of the thirteenth century, Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240), al-Shushtarī (d.1269) and ‘Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d.1289) who popularized al-Niffarī’s *Stations*. The Sufi woman Bint al-Nafīs (d.1288)’s commentary on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Witnessing of the Holy Mysteries* [*Mashāhid al-Asrār al-Qudsiyyah*] is at once intellectual and poetical, with abundant employment of paradoxes, and evident familiarity with the work of al-Niffarī.¹⁰¹⁴

Almost contemporaneous with al-Niffarī, the collections of Sufi teachings began emerging in the late tenth century. The manuals of al-Sarrāj, al-Kalābādhī, al-Makkī, al-Kharkūshī, al-Sīrjānī, al-Ṭabarī, al-Qushayrī and al-Sulamī contained a plethora of Arabic Sufi poems with dense paradoxes attributed to the earliest Sufis and their forbearers. These Sufi compilations employ paradoxes quite comfortably. Even Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d.996), with his conservative position in terms of Sufi language, writes that God is “Last in His Firstness, First in His Lastness,”¹⁰¹⁵ or “First without first; not from First; Last not to last.”¹⁰¹⁶ In the same vein, amusing literary compilations of paradoxical anecdotes like Abū al-Qāsim al-Nisābūrī (d.1016)’s *Wise Fools* [*‘Uqalā’ al-Majānīn*] were already filled with Sufi themes, and narratives about the Sufi masters when they emerged.¹⁰¹⁷ These Sufi and literary compilations also provide us a large body of evidence on early Sufi employment of a strange, unclear language, and abandonment of the customary one. Al-Kalābādhī, Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.ca.1229),¹⁰¹⁸ and others¹⁰¹⁹ cite a theologian who accused Sufis exactly of this unhappy departure from norms in his conversation with the Baghdādīan Sufi, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ (d.922). Their conversation very much reflects the issue of the *tangled words and abstruse meanings* that al-Tha‘alībī associated with Sufism:

A certain theologian [*mutakallim*] asked Abū al-‘Abbās Ibn ‘Aṭā’: “What is it with you, Sufis? You have spun language so that it is strange to the ears of its listeners, and you departed from customary speech.” ... Abū al-‘Abbās replied: “We only did this

¹⁰¹³ Bowering 1980, p.14.

¹⁰¹⁴ See Langhi 2009, fn.113.

¹⁰¹⁵ al-Makkī 2001, Vol.3, Ch.33, p.1171

¹⁰¹⁶ al-Makkī 2001, Vol.3, Ch.33, p.1173.

¹⁰¹⁷ See al-Nisābūrī 1987. See Karamustafa 2014, pp.114-115.

¹⁰¹⁸ ‘Aṭṭār 2000, p.321.

¹⁰¹⁹ See e.g. al-Suyūṭī 1934, p.34.

because we were jealous of His power over us” [‘*izzatihi ‘alaynā*].¹⁰²⁰

Al-Mawṣiliyyah by al-Murṭaḍā Ibn al-Shahrazūrī (d. 511/1117) is another witness to this typical association of paradoxes with Sufism. *Al-Mawṣiliyyah* is among the earliest Arabic odes [*qaṣīdah*] on Sufism, and it follows earlier Sufi poetic precedents by using several prepositions to establish a paradox suggesting the spiritual nature of love:

“People of passion,” I said, “Peace be upon you!

My heart’s attraction to you distracts it from you.”¹⁰²¹

The famous historian Ibn Khallikān (d.1282) describes *al-Mawṣiliyyah* as an “excellent ode on the Sufi path,” and praises its language as “the finest expression of the mystic way.”¹⁰²²

This brief overview resists the temptation to depict the paradoxes of Sufis as borrowings from secular Arabic poetry. A similar observation can be made on the development of paradox in Persian literature as well. The earliest extant compendium of rhetorical rules in Persian poetry was written by the rhetorician Rashīd al-Dīn Vaṭvāt (d.ca.1182). The only form of paradox that he discusses is “contrast” [*mutazādd*]¹⁰²³—al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d.728) and al-Mutanabbī are among the names that he cites. Later Shams-i Qays (fl.1204-1230), the author of the next standard manual of rhetoric, discusses the art of juxtaposing contrasting things, calling it *mutābaqah*. The employment of such forms of paradox in Persian poetry seems to precede the compilation of the rhetorical rules. More importantly, the presence of paradox in Persian poetry coincides not only with mysticism, but more specifically, with the history of Sufi poetry. Paradoxes are densely employed in the quatrains [*rubāʿīs*] attributed to Ibn Abī al-Khayr (d.1049). The authenticity of his quatrains are debated, but at least such early examples of paradoxes were either his own, or of his associates. Ibn Abī al-Khayr

¹⁰²⁰ al-Kalābādhī 1993 p.102. For Arberry’s translation, see al-Kalābādhī 1935, pp.77-78.

¹⁰²¹ See Homerin 2015, p.39. For the Arabic text, see Ibn al-Shahrazūrī in Homerin 2015, #21, p.31.

¹⁰²² See Homerin 2015, p.27.

¹⁰²³ Vaṭvāt 1308/1929, pp.24-25.

Heinrichs notes that *takhyīl*, which might embody literary paradoxes in various context, indicates “amphiboly, double entendre” for Vaṭvāt. (See Heinrichs 2008, p.2, 14.) Hence he sees *takhyīl* interchangeable with *tawriyah*, and introduces *takhyīl* under *ihām*. (Vaṭvāt 1308/1929, pp.39-42.) As Heinrichs notes, the encyclopedist al-Nuwayrī (d.1332), and authors like Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ḥalabī, al-Ruʿaynī, Ibn Ḥijjah, and Ibn Maʿṣūm listed these three terms as synonyms, which differed from the speech figures that signify paradox.

is not only counted among the pioneers of mystical Persian poetry, but also he is known to have established the first known Sufi convent in eastern Iran. Aḥmad-i Jām (d.1141), whose lyrics [*ghazals*] show patterns strikingly similar to those of Rūmī, is another early Sufi poet to make use of paradoxes in his Persian quatrains.¹⁰²⁴ Together with Ibn Abī al-Khayr, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bustī (d.af.1077) is one of the earliest poets to write *rubāʿīs*. A Persian Sufi of Nīsabūr, al-Bustī was a student of Abu ʿAlī al-Fārmadhī (d.1084) together with Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d.1126). Al-Bustī’s famous paradoxical quatrain on the “black light” [*nūr-a siyāh*] was quoted and re-quoted by Persian mystics and Philosophers from the time of Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d.1126) and his student ʿAyn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī (d.1131) onwards.

The case of Persian prose is not different from the case of lyrics insofar as the earliest instances of paradoxes appear in unmistakably Sufi contexts. Notably, the earliest examples of paradoxes in Persian prose are the ecstatic sayings [*shaṭahāt*]*—*the theologically transgressive outbursts of the Sufi master al-Biṣṭāmī (d.848). Also the hagiography of Ibn Abī al-Khayr already contained X-not-X phrases and statements by the time it took its final shape in the hands of his descendant Muḥammad ibn al-Munavvar (d.1202). Accordingly, when mentioning his perpetual meditations and invocations of God in his youth, Ibn Abī al-Khayr said: “in my seeing I was blind, in my hearing deaf, in my speaking dumb.”¹⁰²⁵ This is a key paradox in al-Shiblī (d.946)’s line,¹⁰²⁶ the importance of which cannot be overstated, for Ibn al-ʿArabī’s creative and controversial hermeneutics on Noah employs the subversion of the same terms in the Qurʾān.¹⁰²⁷ Briefly, Persian Sufism was already a wellspring of paradoxes in the twelfth century even before the compilation of the Persian rhetorical rules. The early development of paradox in the Persian literature and poetry, very much like in Arabic, is strongly tied to Sufism.

Paradoxes in Philosophy: an Overview

The Paradox of Human Apotheosis: from Sufism to Philosophy?

¹⁰²⁴ Keshavarz 1998, p.43.

¹⁰²⁵ See Nicholson 2005, p.12.

¹⁰²⁶ Anonymous, *ʿIlm al-Taṣawwuf* 2012, p.199.

¹⁰²⁷ See Ibn al-ʿArabī 1946, Ch.3, pp.68-74. Ibn al-ʿArīf (d.1140)’s *Assemblies* employed the same subversion of meaning in these binaries. See Ibn al-ʿArīf 1933, p.93. For a new French translation, see Ibn al-ʿArīf 2012, p.40.

An explicit and intriguing case of Sufi paradoxes adopted by others can be shown in the case of one of the most important Philosophers in history. Ibn Sīnā (d.1037)'s labor on logic was so significant that by the end of the twelfth century, Aristotle ceased to be a significant coordinate for logicians writing in Arabic—that place having been filled by Ibn Sīnā.¹⁰²⁸ Ibn Sīnā devoted volumes to logic, and strictly followed logical meta-principles, including the laws of exclusive bivalence and non-contradiction, in the demonstration of proofs or refutations. Yet there is one context wherein the joint presence of opposites, hence the apparent transgression of the law of non-contradiction, did not indicate a violation of logic for him. This is the penultimate section of Ibn Sīnā's *Remarks and Admonitions* where he explained "the Stations of the Gnostics" [*Maqāmāt al-ʿArifīn*], with a densely Sufi terminology. According to Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210), the key figure in the establishment of the commentary tradition on the *Remarks and Admonitions*, this was the most important section of the monumental work insofar as it explained "the path of Sufis."¹⁰²⁹ As Ibn Sīnā described it, the stations of the gnostics began with their remaking into "a disciple" [*murīd*] via a transformation in their volition [*irādah*]. Then the purification of their souls could begin with disciplinary practices [*riyāḍah*]. At an advanced level, the disciple-gnostic was donated a stable attainment of gnosis via her disciplinary practices. At this level, the disciple's constantly changing states transformed [*inqilāb*] into non-transformation [*sakīnah*] where apparently exclusive binaries unified. In Ibn Sīnā's words, "the stolen prize [*makḥṭūf*] becomes the commonplace [*ma'lūf*]. The twinkling one [*al-wamīḍ*] becomes a fixed star [*shihāb*]."¹⁰³⁰ Not only what she is witnessing, but the disciple-gnostic herself becomes the coincidence of opposites—the *embodied paradox*:

Up to this point [*ḥadd*], [the gnostic-disciple] was maybe manifesting whatever he was undergoing. Once he is immersed in this gnosis, his presence will dwindle. *So he becomes absent-present* [*ghā'ib ḥāḍir*], and *moving-stable* [*zā'in muqīm*].¹⁰³¹

Ibn Sīnā's unusual employment of an "X-not-X" form of paradox in relation to human perfection is significant on the basis of two immediate observations.

¹⁰²⁸ Street 2005, p.248.

¹⁰²⁹ Ṭūsī in Ibn Sīnā and Ṭūsī 1960, p.47. Cf. Ibn Sab'īn 1978, p.144.

¹⁰³⁰ Ibn Sīnā in Ibn Sīnā and Ṭūsī 1960, Vol.4, Ch.12, p.88. For Inati's translation, see Ibn Sīnā 1996, Ch.13, p.86.

¹⁰³¹ Ibn Sīnā in Ibn Sīnā and Ṭūsī 1960, Vol.4, Ch.13, p.89; my emphasis. For Inati's translation, see Ibn Sīnā 1996, Ch.13, p.89.

First, one of the most important logicians of his time, Ibn Sīnā adopts paradoxical X-not-X phrases, without immediately assuming that this is violating logical principles—a position unlike many contemporary scholars of religion. Instead, Philosophers paid utmost attention to logical principles, and their employment of paradoxes followed these principles. Indeed, in his commentary on Aristotle, Ibn Sīnā claims that one should threaten the “obstinate” opponent of the law of non-contradiction with being thrown into a fire, as it should not make any difference for that person. “Let him be beaten, since suffering and not suffering are the same. Let him be deprived of food and drink, since eating and drinking are identical to abstaining.”¹⁰³² For Aristotle himself, one had nothing to talk about with such a fool who asks for a proof for the law of non-contradiction, “for, insofar as he does not engage in any rational discourse, *he is like a plant*.”¹⁰³³ In brief, there is no reason to argue that Ibn Sīnā calls for canceling, queering, or transgressing logical principles in employing X-not-X statements in describing human perfection.

Ibn Sīnā was not the only Muslim Philosopher of his time to employ such paradoxical statements in the context of human perfection. The great Mu’tazilite polymath al-Jāhīz, who had a fundamental role in the development of paradoxes in Arabic literature, employed X-not-X statements within the context of human perfection. Transmitting the late Khārijite rebel Abū Ḥamza (d.747)’s description of the piety of his own radical sect, al-Jāhīz wrote that “these are young men who are *old in their young age*.”¹⁰³⁴ But Ibn Sīnā had more immediate precedents from within Arabic Philosophy. Just a couple of decades before Ibn Sīnā, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d.1023)’s teacher, Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī (fl.late 10th CE) adopted the X-not-X form of paradox as well, with a careful logical explanation reminiscent of Aristotle’s critique of the violations of the principle of non-contradiction. Al-Tawḥīdī reports that a nightly session gathered in the learned circle of Ibn Sa’dān (d.986), the vizier of the Būyid Grand Amīr in Baghdād. The topic of the group of lovers [*muḥibb*] of Philosophy [*falsafah*] in the session was whether temperament [*akhlāq*] is changeable or fixed. Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī points to the perspective-dependency of the human temperament. Accordingly, the same person might appear to have opposite qualities, depending on this perspectival difference:

¹⁰³² Ibn Sīnā in Horn 2014. Al-Māturīdī (d.944) also claimed that the person who denies reasoning has nothing but reasoning itself to support their claim. (al-Māturīdī 2003, p.73.)

¹⁰³³ Aristotle 1995, p.253 (1006a, 14-15); my emphasis.

¹⁰³⁴ al-Jāhīz in Zaman 1988, p.273; my emphasis.

The knowledge of our own temperament is generally not transparent to us. Our companions [*ṣāhib*], neighbors [*jār*], and friends [*‘ashīr*] might know us better [than we know ourselves], even though we might assume the opposite. Hence, we *are knower-ignorant, aware-neglectful, coward-brave, gentle-severe*.¹⁰³⁵

Al-Sijistānī’s employment of the X-not-X paradox strictly follows the principles of Aristotelian logic rather than transgressing or canceling it. Indeed, not only the pivotal role of friendship, but also the immediately following discussion in the session displays the heavily Aristotelian context, insofar as al-Sijistānī defends that a “golden mean” [*al-mizāj al-mu’tadil*] is the key to a virtuous human temperament.¹⁰³⁶ X-not-X statements are not seen as a violation of the law of non-contradiction, but perfectly consistent with it if one follows logical principles, and uncovers the unstated categories in such a compound statement. A person might be absent (at a certain given moment, in a specific location, in one sense, from one perspective, etc.) and present (at another moment, in another location, in another sense, from another perspective, etc.) simultaneously. Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī himself stresses the necessity of following logical principles in any discourse. Aristotelian logic is not a rival to be challenged with paradoxes, but the remedy for solving apparent contradictions.

The second observation is in support of the widespread association of Sufism with paradox. The same paradox in Ibn Sīnā’s *Remarks and Admonitions*, with a strikingly similar word choice and in the same context, appears in the famous Sufi manual of Ibn Sīnā’s fellow countryman, al-Kalābādhī (d.990). Al-Kalābādhī had employed the same paradoxical binary of “absent-present” in the introduction to the *Disclosure of the Path of the Sufis* [*Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*], where the term “Sufi” appeared for the first time in the book:

[The elects] were spiritual-bodily, ordinary-divine, silent-observing, *absent-present*, kings in rags, outcasts from every tribe, possessors of all virtues and lights of all guidance; their ears attentive, their hearts pure [*ṣāfiyah*], their qualities concealed—chosen [*ṣafawiyyah*], “ṣūfīs,” illuminated, pure [*ṣafiyyah*].¹⁰³⁷

¹⁰³⁵ al-Tawḥīdī 1992, Session 3, p.141.

¹⁰³⁶ al-Tawḥīdī 1992, Session 3, p.141.

¹⁰³⁷ al-Kalābādhī 1993 p.6. Here I followed Arberry’s translation with slight modifications; see al-Kalābādhī 1935, p.2.

A possible influence of al-Kalābādhī on Ibn Sīnā, and even their personal encounter, has long been postulated, yet the evidence was rather feeble. One major point of theoretical convergence between the two has been the distinction between “ontological” and “cosmological” approaches to God that Ibn Sīnā makes use of in his proof. The distinction is based on the dichotomy between “disclosure” [*ta’arruf*] and “making known” [*ta’rīf*], firmly rooted in Sufi theory pre-dating Ibn Sīnā.¹⁰³⁸ The distinction is evident from the very title of the Sufi manual of al-Kalābādhī, who himself attributes the *ta’rīf* - *ta’arruf* dichotomy further back to the Sufi master al-Junayd. Al-Kalābādhī and Ibn Sīnā also cite the same Qur’ānic verse on the dichotomy. Al-Kalābādhī’s situation of the *ta’rīf* - *ta’arruf* dichotomy within mysticism finds further support in al-Niffarī’s enigmatic *Stations*. The distinction, indeed, appears within the context of the paradox of divine proximity and distance, which Ibn al-‘Arabī, among other later Sufis, intensively employed. Al-Niffarī wrote:

I am the Near, but not as one thing is near to another.
 And I am the Far, but not as one thing is far from another.
 Thy nearness is not thy farness, and thy farness is not thy nearness.
I am the Near-Far, with a nearness which is farness, and a farness which is nearness.
 The nearness which *thou knowest* [*ta’rīf*] is distance,
 And the farness which *thou knowest* [*ta’rīf*] is distance: *I am the Near-Far without distance.*
 ...
I disclosed [*ta’arruf*] *Myself unto thee, and thou knewest Me not:*
 that is farness.
 Thy heart saw Me, and saw Me not: that is farness.¹⁰³⁹

The *ta’rīf* - *ta’arruf* distinction was employed by the mystic al-Niffarī within a densely paradoxical context. The distinction that Ibn Sīnā appealed to was already situated within the field of mysticism by the tenth century. In addition to this distinction, we can now postulate another continuity between the Bukhārān Sufi author al-Kalābādhī and his polymath townsman: the adoption of an “X-not-X” form of paradox within the context and vocabulary of Sufi wayfaring.

¹⁰³⁸ Mayer 2008, p.279.

¹⁰³⁹ al-Niffarī 1987, p.28 (English translation), pp.2-3 (Arabic text); my emphases; with my slight modifications.

For the Arabic original with al-Tilimsānī’s commentary, see al-Tilimsānī and al-Niffarī 1997, pp.73-76.

Al-Kalābādhī is by no means the first Sufi to employ X-not-X statements to describe the apotheosis of the soul. Indeed, if we follow his commentator al-Tilimsānī (d.1291), the paradox of *the near-far* in al-Niffarī's *Stations* is actually a reference to the Sufi wayfarer's attainment of perfection.¹⁰⁴⁰ Al-Niffarī's affiliation with Sufism is dubious. Still, we can safely postulate that the Sufi employment of X-not-X statements within the context of the soul's perfection precedes that of Philosophers at least a couple centuries. Al-Junayd himself, introducing the ones who have attained the degree of "gnostic" [*ʿārif*], employs self-negating binaries closely related to the ones that al-Kalābādhī and Ibn Sīnā adopted. Accordingly, the gnostics are at once present and absent, absent and present: "[the gnostic] is *found-lost* [*mawjūd mafqūd*], and *lost-found*; he is as he is not, and he is not as he is."¹⁰⁴¹ The Persian Sufi manual of al-Hujvīrī (d.1077), the *Unveiling of the Hidden* [*Kashf al-Maḥjūb*] even reports even a debate among some Sufi masters on the paradoxical nature the soul attains during daily prayer [*namāz*]:

One group said: "Prayer is a means to attain presence." Another group said: "It is a means to attain absence." The group that was in absence became present in the prayer; and those who were present became absent.¹⁰⁴²

Al-Hujvīrī explains that the debate on absence and presence also has eschatological ramifications. But our sources trace paradoxes on the perfection of the human soul even further back among Sufis. Al-Kharkūshī (d.1016) reports an exquisite example from the famous master of paradoxes—al-Biṣṭāmī (d.848):

Al-Biṣṭāmī was asked: "when does one know whether he is on track to the reality of gnosis?" He said: "When he becomes annihilated [*fāniyan*] under divine knowledge, and persistent [*bāqiyan*] on the divine carpet without ego, without causality, and without engendering. So he is *annihilated-persistent, dead-alive, alive-dead, veiled-manifested, manifested-veiled*."¹⁰⁴³

Similarly, the attainment of ultimate knowledge, which is eventually a negative one, the *docta ignorantia*, is one of many cases in which al-Biṣṭāmī appeals to

¹⁰⁴⁰ See al-Tilimsānī and al-Niffarī 1997, p.73.

¹⁰⁴¹ al-Junayd 2003, p.58; my emphasis. Cf. *ibid.*, p.54. Also see Abdel-Kader 1962, p.103.

¹⁰⁴² Hujvīrī 1926, p.387. For English translations, see Hujvīrī 1911, p.301; Hujvīrī 2001, Ch.19, p.398.

¹⁰⁴³ al-Kharkūshī 1999, p.46.

dizzying paradoxes.¹⁰⁴⁴ Such paradoxical descriptions of human perfection became a widespread Sufi theme well before the rise of Ibn al-‘Arabī, whose school saw the human being as the coincidence of opposites that mirrors the divine essence. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own teacher ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Mahdawī (d.1221), according to Ibn al-Qunfudh (d.1407), wrote a panegyric poem for his master and the pole of Sufis of the West, Abū Madyan (d.1198), praising him with paradoxes: “you are present and not present, absent and not absent.”¹⁰⁴⁵ The eponym of the Rifā‘iyyah, a major Sufi order in ‘Iraq and Anatolia, described those who have attained gnosis as “dead-living, living-dead, veiled-unveiled, and unveiled-veiled.”¹⁰⁴⁶ Rūmī’s Bukhārān master Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn (d.1244) employs X-not-X statements in his description of soul’s perfection in the daily prayer, echoing al-Hujvīrī. Accordingly, the faithful see creation through divine lenses during the prayer. In this condition, they are *absent-present*, *drunken-wine*.¹⁰⁴⁷ The binary of “absent-present” follows that of al-Kalābādhī and Ibn Sīnā, and the “drunken-wine” binary Abū Nuwās (d.813)’s description of the wine maiden—both, however, in Persian instead of Arabic. His student, Rūmī is the poet of paradoxes, but his discourses and conversations also witness his appeal to X-not-X statements for human perfection. During an audition [*samā*] assembly, when a drunken Darvīsh at the height of ecstasy questions the theological veracity of an utterance of Rūmī, the master declares that it was not an unintentional outburst. Instead, the ecstatic saying was perfect both from esoteric and exoteric perspectives. Accordingly, the Darvīsh was drunken, but Rūmī himself was “sober-drunken.”¹⁰⁴⁸ He celebrates his perfect mirror-companion, Shams Tabrīzī via paradoxes, such as “mature-immature” [*pukhta tūyi khām tūyi*], “droplet-ocean” [*qaṭra tūyi baḥr tūyi*], “blessing-anguish” [*luṭf tūyi qahr tūyi*], “sweet-poison” [*qand tūyi zahr tūyi*].¹⁰⁴⁹ Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.1229)’s description of the wayfarer at the valley of perplexity [*ḥayrat*] employs a wide array of apparently self-contradictory binaries, like Rūmī. The one who arrives at the valley of perplexity messes with many binaries, including

¹⁰⁴⁴ “The servant continues to know so long as he remains unknowing, but when he leaves his unknowing his knowing departs” [*la yazālu al-‘abdu ‘arīfan mā dāma jāhīlan fa-idhā zāla ‘an jahlihi zālat ma‘rifatuhu*]. (al-Biṣṭāmī in Frank 2005, p.244-245).

¹⁰⁴⁵ Ibn al-Qunfudh in Elmore 2001, p.604.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī 1425/2004, p.9.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn 1973, p.48.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Aflākī 2001, Vol.1, #30, p.283.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Rūmī 1376/1998, #37, p.64. Shahram Nazeri (b.1950), the famous Iranian musician performs this poem in his album *Flames in the Reedbed* [*Ātash Dar Nayastān*].

day and night, absence and presence, and sobriety and drunkenness—she becomes a “frozen fire.”¹⁰⁵⁰ Per Rūmī, ‘Aṭṭār himself follows a sustained tradition which depicts man as the coincidence of the opposites; the soul and the body, the raised and the lowly, the pure and the impure—he is both the very Sulṭān himself as well as his vicegerent.¹⁰⁵¹

The transcendence of binaries in the perfection of the soul is a subtle one that does not nullify or cancel logical principles. Once the relationship between the opposite terms in the same proposition is clarified, its structure stands as irreducible a self-contradictory statement. For example, ‘Ammār al-Bidlīsī (d.1207) summarizes the most popular explanation of the self-contradictory descriptions of Sufis as the “*dead-living*.” He writes that “they are ‘dead’ in terms of humanity and habits; ‘alive’ with the attributes of lordship and witnessing.”¹⁰⁵² In other words, such self-contradictory propositions actually embody intended performative challenges to the propositional discourse, and instead follow the principle of non-contradiction at the dialectical level. They are gestures that indicate the transcendence of propositional discourse through a rather systematic, dialectical, hence logical, employment of carefully chosen binaries that sustain it. Within the context of human apotheosis, if X-not-X statements or phrases do not adopt a systematic dialectical logic and stay merely at the propositional level, they cannot go beyond outright contradictions. In other words, the coincidence of opposites is acceptable only on dialectical grounds. Andalusian Sufi Ibn Sab‘īn (d.1269)’s discussion of paradoxes and self-contradiction within the context of his explanation of Aristotle’s *Categories* [*Maqūlāt*] is of particular importance in this context. Here Ibn Sab‘īn introduces the ten categories that define the logical possibilities in which a subject is related to its predicate. If these categories are ill-defined, then apparent self-contradictions might arise due to vagueness. Self-contradictions, in other words, emerge because one does not understand or apply logic rigorously at the propositional level.¹⁰⁵³ Ibn Sab‘īn’s fierce critique of the prominent polymath, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī is another exemplary case. The Andalusian mystic accuses al-Ghazālī of inconsistency, as he joins irreconcilable opposites within his body simultaneously:

¹⁰⁵⁰ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #4125.

¹⁰⁵¹ See e.g. ‘Aṭṭār [undated] #135-140.

¹⁰⁵² ‘Ammār al-Bidlīsī 1999a, p.59 (Arabic text).

¹⁰⁵³ Ibn Sab‘īn 1941, pp.54-57.

Al-Ghazālī—a discourse lacking explanation [*lisān dūna bayān*], a voice lacking remark [*ṣawt dūna kalām*], a hodgepodge that unites the opposites [*takhlīṭ yajmaʿ al-aḍḍād*], a breath-taking confusion... Now he is a Sufi, now a Philosopher, now an Ashʿarī, now a jurist, and now, *puzzle-headed!*¹⁰⁵⁴

Hence, if we limit them to the realm of propositional logic, X-not-X phrases are nothing but self-contradiction for mystics like al-Bidlīsī and Ibn Sabʿīn. They become indicators of a deeper truth only if understood from a dialectical perspective that aims to take the reader beyond these self-contradictory binaries. Bābā Afzāl (d.1213), the Avicennian mystic and philosopher explains this dialectical logic in employing X-not-X statements, again, within the context of human flourishing. The marks of the soul's perfection are, for Bābā Afzāl, distinctly paradoxical, similar to the statements of al-Kalābādhī and Ibn Sīnā:

[The perfected ones] are patient in trial and grateful in comfort. *They are the absent-present, the far-near, the evident-hidden, the lamp in darkness and obscurity, the clarification in bewilderment and bafflement.*¹⁰⁵⁵

Do these paradoxical binaries violate the law of non-contradiction, or invalidate logical analysis? Not at all, according to Bābā Afzāl, because the breaking of the law of non-contradiction indicates the logical failure of that statement. X-not-X statements on human apotheosis for Bābā Afzāl, do follow logical meta-principles. The contraries in such statements are either about different states of the body, or about the states of the soul, which can coexist because they are not contraries, as the knowledge of two opposites is not self-contradictory.¹⁰⁵⁶ Bābā Afzāl argues:

[T]wo incompatibles, two contraries, and two opposites can exist together in the soul, and from the one's existence the other's existence is not nullified or made deficient—such as movement and rest, life and death, white and black. From the existence and knowing of movement, the existence and knowing of rest are

¹⁰⁵⁴ Ibn Sabʿīn 1978, p.144; my emphasis.

Ibn Rushd (d.1198) directed a parallel critique to al-Ghazālī, adorning it with an old Arabic poem. (Cf. Ibn Rushd 1963, p.178.) Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328) later cites the same poem reporting Ibn Rushd's distaste with al-Ghazālī's supposed duplicity. (See Hanif 2002, p.179.)

¹⁰⁵⁵ Bābā Afzāl in Chittick 2001, p.267; my emphasis.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Bābā Afzāl's argument strikingly follows the same logic with Imām Riḍā (d.818)'s challenge to the Muʿtazilite theologian in al-Maʿmūn's court. See below section "Paradox in Theological Questions" in this Chapter.

neither nullified nor weakened and made deficient, for the soul knows both together. So also are life and death, white and black, and the other contraries. But in the body, the existence of movement nullifies the existence of rest, and so also rest movement, and *both cannot be found within it together in one state*.¹⁰⁵⁷

Bābā Afzāl's explanation, like that of Abū Sulaymān al-Sijistānī, follows Aristotle's response to Heraclitean paradoxes, and moves to clarify the different states under which the predication is made. The perfected ones transcend the logical binaries in propositional logic, but their transcendence itself follows a dialectical logic that complies with the principle of non-contradiction.

Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d.1221)'s emphasis on the law of non-contradiction is another excellent illustration of the role of logical principles in the employment of paradoxes in the Sufi wayfaring. Kubrā claims that a Sufi can be in the state of "fear-hope," or "contraction-expansion" at a given time. His explanation carefully follows the meta-principles of logic. First, Kubrā explains that the states of fear and hope are not logical opposites, and can co-exist in the same state of the soul. Hence the state of "fear-hope" does not really violate logical meta-principles.¹⁰⁵⁸ The case is different with the binary of contraction and expansion. According to Kubrā, contraction and expansion are indeed opposites that cannot be united [*ḍiddān lā yajtami'ān*] in one state of the soul. Here Kubrā perceptively adds another dimension that specifically clarifies the logical employment of this binary. Accordingly, "the station of transformation" [*maqām al-talwīn*] is a peculiar level of the soul, in which opposite states can co-exist without violating the law of non-contradiction.¹⁰⁵⁹ If one clarifies the exact station of the soul, the apparent contradictions in the coexistence of temporary states will be solved. In the *Stations of the Sufis* [*Maqāmāt al-Ṣūfiyyah*] Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d.1191) makes the same point. After stating that "gnosis has primacy over love, and love has primacy over gnosis" on the Sufi path, he explains how this apparent self-contradiction is solved when the terms of primacy are clarified.¹⁰⁶⁰

¹⁰⁵⁷ Bābā Afzāl in Chittick 2001, p.265; my emphasis.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Hence Kubrā does not support Sviri's assumption that fear and hope were necessarily opposite, "antithetical states" for Sufis. Cf. Sviri 1987, p.333-344.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Najm al-Dīn Kubrā 1993, p.189.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī 2002, p.82.

Even scholars directly treating Ibn al-‘Arabī’s paradoxical views did not accept the coincidence of opposites in the contexts where it meant self-contradiction. Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī’s exposition of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s cosmological and eschatological position exemplifies such an excellent appeal to logic to solve apparent contradictions. In a letter written at the end of thirteenth century, a certain scholar named Aḥmad expressed his concern over the fate of human soul in the afterlife:

If misery is real, then the soul must descend. This, however, is contrary to what we hope for from the divine mercy. If it goes neither to bliss nor to misery, a suspension will occur. *Its going to both together will combine two opposites [fa-yakūn jam‘an bayna ḍiddayn].*¹⁰⁶¹

Aḥmad is questioning whether human soul can attain opposite qualities which survive death. The response of Quṭb al-Dīn Shīrāzī strongly Akbarī and logical at the same time. In his response to the questions on eschatology, he gives a long exposition of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s cosmology, quoting the *Bezels of Wisdom* for pages, and answering each question within this framework. When he comes to the question whether human soul can combine opposites in the afterlife, Quṭb al-Dīn’s answer, again, underlines the categorical differences in the two statements: “man’s being *happy in one respect and in misery in another* only implies the conjunction of two opposites *in speech, not in reality.*”¹⁰⁶² No contradiction remains once we follow Aristotle’s advice, and clarify that X and not-X phrases apply to the same subject but in different respects.

None of these paradoxical cases of human apotheosis advocate the overturning of the law of non-contradiction. Instead, they all emphasize the incapacity of propositional logic on issues that transcend its nomenclature with its distinct discursive binaries. They indicate the transcendence of propositional logic via the employment of paradoxes that specifically target the key binaries of the discourse on human perfection. Paradox follows a rule-governed, dialectical logic: it systematically cancels the endemic binaries that ground a specific discourse, in order to show the incapacity of that discourse in the propositional level.

Paradoxes of Late Antiquity in Philosophy

¹⁰⁶¹ Aḥmad in Walbridge 1992, p.203 (English text); p.236 (Arabic text); my emphasis.

¹⁰⁶² Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī in Walbridge 1992, p.227 (English text); p.265 (Arabic text); my emphases.

The presence of al-Kalābādihī's X-not-X phrases in the influential works of subsequent philosophers in the same context of human apotheosis is arresting, because such statements are otherwise fiercely opposed by Philosophers. The Arabic terms that Philosophers employed to refer to such paradoxes were normally quite negative: "sophistry" [*mughālaṭah*] or "contradiction" [*tanāqudh*]. The evidence goes back to al-Kindī (d.873). He was the first scholar to frame a logical study of "infinity" as a mathematical concept. Al-Kindī showed that an infinite object would lead to its own negation and result in the simultaneous truth of a statement and its negation. This, for al-Kindī, was a violation of the law of non-contradiction.¹⁰⁶³ Hence, a statement in the form of "X-not-X" derived by syllogism was nothing but logical contradiction. The logical argumentations known as *reductio ad absurdum* [*al-khulf*], conversion [*al-'aks al-mustawī*] or full contraposition [*'aks al-naqīḍ*] made clear that "X-not-X" statements were violations of the law of non-contradiction, hence logically false, as Ibn Sīnā,¹⁰⁶⁴ Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d.1191),¹⁰⁶⁵ Athīr al-Dīn al-Abharī (d.1266)¹⁰⁶⁶ and others¹⁰⁶⁷ explained.

The popular paradoxes of Late Antiquity were familiar to Arab Philosophers, yet they meant unpleasant logical mistakes. When introducing the two famous paradoxographers, Zeno and Parmenides, al-Mubashshir Ibn Fātik wrote that they followed "the path of paradoxes" [*madhhab al-ghawāmiḍ*], but he does not hide his dislike for this path in describing Zeno's work: "a book of his written in the African language was found after his death. It was inundated with filth on the issue of metaphysics."¹⁰⁶⁸ The Paradox of Inquiry, or the question of how unknown things can be apprehended, also known as the Meno Paradox [*al-majhūl al-muṭlaq*] was sharply criticized by al-Fārābī (d.950) and later by Ibn Sīnā. Both of them refused Plato's original solution, i.e., the doctrine that "learning is a recollection," in favor of the construction of a "rule-governed art," which follows nothing but Aristotelian syllogism.¹⁰⁶⁹ The final answer to the Paradox of Inquiry was, for al-Fārābī, circumscribed by the canons of Aristotelian

¹⁰⁶³ See Garro 1994.

¹⁰⁶⁴ See e.g. Ibn Sīnā in Ibn Sīnā and Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī 1983, Vol.1, Section [*Nahj*] 7, pp.403-431.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī 1373/1994, Vol.2, p.40.

¹⁰⁶⁶ al-Abharī 2008, pp.159-160. For an English translation, see al-Abharī 2009, pp.113-115.

¹⁰⁶⁷ See e.g. Ibn Taymīyyah 1993, pp.141-142.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Ibn Fātik 2013, pp.96-97.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Black 2008.

demonstrative science.¹⁰⁷⁰ In approaching the Paradox of Inquiry, like al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā emphasized the distinction between conceptualization [*taṣawwur*] and assent [*taṣdīq*].¹⁰⁷¹ As Socrates¹⁰⁷² did not distinguish between the two, he falsely fell into the paradox in which a person can simultaneously know and not know something. “This is not logical discourse,” claimed Ibn Sīnā.¹⁰⁷³ As a logical weakness, the Meno Paradox arose because the premises were ambiguous. Once they were more clearly framed by the distinction between conceptualization and assent, it would become evident that we can conceptualize something that we do not exactly know. We have the Meno Paradox not because it transcends the principle of non-contradiction, but because the categories that determine the truth value of the statement are not well-stated.

The Liar Paradox [*al-jadhr al-aṣamm*] was also known at least since late ninth century to the Muʿtazilite theologians according to Sayf al-Dīn al-Āmidī (d.1243).¹⁰⁷⁴ But it was two contemporary Philosophers with al-Āmidī, Athīr al-Dīn al-Abharī (d.1266) and Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d.1274), who represent the first substantive work on the Liar Paradox in the Arabic tradition. Al-Abharī stated the Liar Paradox as a “difficult fallacy” [*mughālaṭah*] in the X-not-X form:

One of the difficult fallacies is the conjunction of the two contradictories [*jamʿ al-naqīḍayn*] when someone says, “All that I say at this moment is false.” This sentence is either true or false. If it is true, then it must be true and false. And if it is not true, then it is necessary that one of his sentences at this moment is true, as long as he utters something. But, he says nothing at this moment other than this sentence. Thus, this sentence is necessarily true and false.¹⁰⁷⁵

¹⁰⁷⁰ Black 2008.

¹⁰⁷¹ Ibn Taymīyyah also recognizes that the distinction lies at the very foundation of logic: “they have held that, inasmuch as knowledge is either a concept [*taṣawwur*] or a judgement [*taṣdīq*], the means by which a concept is formed is a definition, and that by which a judgement is formed is a syllogism.” (Ibn Taymīyyah 1993, pp.5-6.)

¹⁰⁷² By replacing Plato with Socrates, Ibn Sīnā saves Plato from inconsistency. See Marmura 2010, pp.55-56.

¹⁰⁷³ Ibn Sīnā in Marmura 2010, p.55.

¹⁰⁷⁴ See Alwishah and Sanson 2009, p.100; 124.

¹⁰⁷⁵ al-Abharī in Alwishah and Sanson 2009, p.107.

For al-Abharī, the Liar Paradox was as an instance of an X-not-X statement, which was nothing but a logical fallacy. Al-Abharī's *Guide to Philosophy* clearly manifested the Aristotelian lens in this judgment. Accordingly, an X-not-X compound statement is derived in the case of unity of the predicate, subject, relation, time, place, condition, potentiality or actuality, and particularity or universality categories.¹⁰⁷⁶ In other words, if one does not clearly state the Aristotelian categories that determine the conditions under which a statement is given, then the statement will be ambiguous enough to give rise to such self-contradictory statements. Ṭūsī's innovative approach to the Liar Paradox was critical to that of al-Abharī, yet his solution depicted it as a logical fallacy as well.¹⁰⁷⁷ Ibn Sab'īn (d.1269) also discussed a couple of paradoxes with reference to Zeno ["Zīzi"], labeling them as logical fallacies [*mughālaṭah*] and sophistries that emerge due to the lack of rigorous application of logic.¹⁰⁷⁸ After the thirteenth century, with the increasing contributions of Ottoman and Indo-Muslim logicians, the interest in paradoxes, particularly in the liar paradox, Meno's paradox, and certain apparent paradoxes of conditional logic (such as the *consequentia mirabilis*) intensified.¹⁰⁷⁹ Yet the negative attitude towards X-not-X statements or phrases prevailed. Such statements were considered instances of logical fallacies for Philosophers and logicians, as long as it is others who utter them.¹⁰⁸⁰

Their unfavorable approach to paradoxes did not mean that Philosophers' own doctrines were free of paradoxes, and they were certainly not.

Paradox in Theological Questions

The Qur'ān was one of the key sources of the paradoxes in medieval Muslim theology.¹⁰⁸¹ Yet Muslim intellectuals were familiar with older philosophical paradoxes as well. For example, the earliest Mu'tazilite theologians knew the paradoxes of antiquity. Both Abū al-Hudhayl (d.841) and al-Nazzām (d.846) employed Zeno's paradoxes to challenge the atomist conception of space as

¹⁰⁷⁶ al-Abharī 2008, pp.153-154. For the English translation, see al-Abharī 2009, pp.100-101.

¹⁰⁷⁷ See Alwishah and Sanson 2009, 113-127.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Ibn Sab'īn 1941, p.54.

¹⁰⁷⁹ El-Rouayheb 2010, pp.9-10.

¹⁰⁸⁰ On paradoxes in later Arabic and Persian philosophy, see Ziai 2005, pp.416-418.

¹⁰⁸¹ See Sviri 1987, pp.322-324. The rhetorician Rashīd al-Dīn Vaṭvāt (d.1182) reminded his readers that the Qur'ān was an important source of contrasts [*mutazādd*]. (Vaṭvāt 1308/1929, p.24.)

discrete.¹⁰⁸² Al-Āmidī (d.1243) discusses, though briefly and with some hostility, Abu ‘Alī al-Jubbā’i (d.916)’s, Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā’i (d.933)’s, al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d.1025)’s, and Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Baṣrī (fl.10th CE)’s responses to the Liar Paradox.¹⁰⁸³ Also Al-Nazzām’s theory of jump recalls the famous paradox known as “Aristotle’s Wheel,” a problem discussed for the first time in Pseudo-Aristotle’s *Mechanics*. Indeed, Hero of Alexandria (d.70 CE)’s account of this paradox survives only in Arabic translation.¹⁰⁸⁴

Theological discussions containing X-not-X statements and their relation to the law of non-contradiction had already taken a sophisticated form by the second Islamic century. One of the earliest instances of such paradoxical phrases and their logical status comes within the context of an early debate on the nature of divine unity and its relationship with plural attributes. A surviving fragment from an early primary source, al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn Sahl al-Nawfalī (fl.1.8th-ea.9th CE)’s *Remembrance of the Assemblies of al-Riḍā* [*Dhikr Majālis al-Riḍā*] contains the debate of ‘Alī ibn Mūsā, aka Imām Riḍā (d.818) with the Khurāsānian theologian Sulaymān al-Marwazī (fl.810s) before the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Ma’mūn (r.813-833) on divine unity [*tawḥīd*].¹⁰⁸⁵ Al-Marwazī, most probably a Mu’tazilite, does not accept Imām Riḍā’s claim that God can have real attributes like Wise, All-Knowing, or All-Powerful, insofar as He is One [*wāḥid*]. God’s having real attributes means that God is one and many at the same time, which is impossible [*muḥāl*]. In Socratic style, Imām Riḍā employs X-not-X phrases when he gives examples indicating that one can have the will, knowledge, and ability to do contradictory things at the same time.

Al-Riḍā : Sulaymān, can a person know that he is created, but he doesn’t want to be a creature? That he will die one day, and he doesn’t want to die?

Al-Marwazī : Yes.

Al-Riḍā : Can a person know that he is becoming something he wanted to become? Or, can he know that he is becoming what he doesn’t want to become?

Al-Marwazī : He can know if he becomes both.

Al-Riḍā : Then he could know when he is *living-dead*, *standing-sitting*, *blind-seeing* in one state—but this is impossible.

¹⁰⁸² Van Ess 2006, pp.96-97.

¹⁰⁸³ See Alwishah and Sanson 2009, p.100; 124.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Van Ess 2006, p.104.

¹⁰⁸⁵ See H. Anṣārī [undated], pp.281-290.

Al-Marwazī : That's right; then a person can know only one of them without the other in one state.

Al-Riḍā : So there is no problem if one becomes either what he wanted to become or what he did not want to become?

Al-Marwazī : Only if he becomes what he wants to become.

Al-Riḍā, al-Ma'mūn, and the people present in the assembly laughed.

Al-Riḍā : You have stumbled, and departed from truth.¹⁰⁸⁶

Al-Marwazī finds the one-manyness of the divine essence against non-contradiction, while Imām Riḍā disarms his opponent by steering him into X-not-X statements. Both scholars and their audience have an unquestioning trust in the principle of non-contradiction, and distaste with X-not-X statements in the theological context, unlike the literary one. Arrivals at such statements indicate simple fallacies in reasoning that mark the decisive victory of their adversary, and humiliate those who uttered them. In other words, even in early times when logic [*manṭiq*] was actually not evoked as a full-fledged discipline, the principle of non-contradiction was still known to theologians. The great theologian of Samarqand, Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī (d.944) argues that “two opposites cannot join to each other” [*lā yajūz ijtimā' al-ḍiddayn*].¹⁰⁸⁷ He employed this principle in support of his claim that the world is created. Accordingly, movement and stillness, beautiful and ugly, evil and good, excess and inadequacy co-exist in the world. Yet, as two opposites cannot co-exist in one place and time, they should have an ultimate Agent that creates them in sequence [*ta'āqqub*].¹⁰⁸⁸ Ibn Ḥazm (d.1064) employs the same principle in his book on legal methodology where he argues that consensus [*ijmā'*] and disagreement [*ikhtilāf*] are two opposites that cannot join together.¹⁰⁸⁹

Still, the very debate of Imām Riḍā with Sulaymān al-Marwazī on divine unity indicates that medieval philosophy and theology were neither immune to logical fallacies, nor free from paradoxes. We have already discussed the paradox of the

¹⁰⁸⁶ al-Nawfalī in H. Anṣārī [undated], p.289; my emphasis.

¹⁰⁸⁷ al-Māturīdī 2003 p.79. Also see al-Māturīdī 2003 p.82, 88-89; Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart 1997, p.213.

¹⁰⁸⁸ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.79.

Al-Māturīdī appeals to the same argument, based on the joint presence of opposite natures [*ijtima' al-ṭiba'ā' al-muttaḍādah*] in all entities [*'ayn*], which displays that there must be a Unifier Agent. (al-Māturīdī 2003, p.84, 88-89.)

¹⁰⁸⁹ Ibn Ḥazm 1420/1999, p.18, 26.

negative proof for God among Mu'tazilites and Philosophers as early as with al-Kindī, who adopted the proof of the Mu'tazilites. It was God's very relationship with the world as its unique creator that removed Him from all possible relations. Neither their critics, nor Philosophers themselves defended any paradoxicality at this point. Critics like Ibn Ḥazm, al-Shahrastānī, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, or Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī accused the philosophical position of being incoherent, while Philosophers like Ṭūsī tried to prove otherwise by showing that their negative proof is not reducible to X-not-X statements. Other Philosophers like Ibn Rushd preferred to distance themselves from such statements, and to whitewash their own versions of Philosophy.¹⁰⁹⁰ For all of these camps, it was a matter of proving (or from the critics' perspective, disproving) the logical consistency of the philosophical position on God's relation with creation. The impartial referee was the law of non-contradiction; the X-not-X statements, for both sides of the debate, marked logical failure.

This reduction of X-not-X statements to logical fallacies was the popular view not only among logicians, but also among those who were uneasy with the discipline of logic. Skeptical approaches to logic occasionally focused on paradoxes in order to challenge logical principles and the applicability of logic to religious discourse, or beyond the Greek language. For al-Āmidī, the Liar Paradox is a counterexample to the universal appeal of the law of exclusive bivalence, and a key component of his refutation against the Philosophers and the Mu'tazilite theologians. Accordingly, paradoxes and tautologies are among four exceptional cases in which the law of exclusive bivalence does not work. One of these exceptions is the Liar Paradox. According to al-Āmidī, it is a simultaneously true and false statement, hence a clear contradiction that indicates an exceptional problem, but still a challenge for the Mu'tazilites. A simultaneously true and false statement is not a *transgression*, but a *weakness* of logic—an embarrassment to al-Āmidī's mind. Another Ash'arite theologian 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d.1038) saw the Liar Paradox as an exception to the law of exclusive bivalence as well. He wrote:

there is no declarative sentence that is both true and false together, except one: namely, the declaration by he who has not lied at all, about himself, that he is a liar, and this declarative sentence, from him, is false. And a liar who declares that he is a

¹⁰⁹⁰ Ibn Rushd 1954, Ch.3, pp.104-108.

liar says the truth. And therefore this one declarative sentence is true and false, and it has one subject.¹⁰⁹¹

The Liar Paradox is both true and false, and an instance which violates the rule of exclusive bivalence according to al-Baghdādī. Still, like al-Āmidī, he depicts the paradox as an embarrassment, and an exceptional, isolated case. Paradoxes were not indicators of “paraconsistency,” but inconsistencies employed for attacking intellectual rivals.

Even the most famous opponents of logic in the thirteenth century do not welcome paradoxical or self-contradictory statements. One of the most famous skeptics on logic was Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328). Having written a few refutations of logic, Ibn Taymīyyah argued that statements in the X-not-X form were self-contradictory. This was a “pure rational matter” as he put it—one did not need to know Aristotelian logic to refute such statements:

[W]ith respect to all other things which are known to be contraries, if two particulars are known to be contrary to each other it will be known that they cannot simultaneously exist. ... *Arriving at the conclusion, that these are two contrary meanings and thus cannot be both true, is possible without knowing the major premise, namely, that “no two contraries can be both true.” In order to know this, there is no need for a syllogism.*¹⁰⁹²

Hence paradoxes served Ibn Taymīyyah’s more general claim that one does not need to learn logic in order to intuit that statements in X-not-X form are contradictory. (This self-evidence was in fact exactly Aristotle’s point in claiming that the person, who asks for a logical proof for the law of non-contradiction, is “like a plant!”) Ibn Taymīyyah’s argument for the self-evident contradictoriness in all X-not-X statements followed the earlier attack of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ al-Shahrazūrī (d.1245) on logic. The Shāfi’ī jurist had argued that “the use of the terminology of logic in the investigation of religious law is despicable and one of the recently introduced follies. Thank God, the laws of religion are not in need of logic.”¹⁰⁹³ The ground of logic is shaky, hence one should follow simple “common sense” in order to avoid paradoxes. Accordingly, this common sense already entails the law of non-contradiction and the excluded middle. Not only logicians, but also their opponents were skeptical of paradoxes, which were indicators of logical fallacies of one’s adversaries.

¹⁰⁹¹ ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī in Alwishah and Sanson 2009, p.101; my emphasis.

¹⁰⁹² Ibn Taymīyyah 1993, pp.36-37; my emphasis.

¹⁰⁹³ Street 2005, p.253.

Yet theology and philosophy were fields saturated with paradoxes. It is again Ibn Taymīyyah's diatribe on logic which most succinctly displays and criticizes the ubiquity of paradoxes in these fields. Dramatically, it was this fiercest opponent of logic who "refused to use ambiguous or equivocal language that either asserts two opposites or negates two opposites."¹⁰⁹⁴ The doctrine of states [*al-ahwāl*] was one of those theological issues that Ibn Taymīyyah vehemently criticized. This philosophical doctrine, developed by Abū 'Alī al-Jubbā'ī (d.916) and Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā'ī (d.933) if not by earlier Mu'tazilites,¹⁰⁹⁵ stated that the intellectual universals or universal concepts were neither existent nor non-existent. Ash'arites too followed the doctrine, as Ibn Ḥazm (d.1064) grumbled:

One of the stupidities of the Ash'arites is their assertion that [it is possible] for men [to believe in] states [*al-ahwāl*] and [universal] concepts [*al-ma'ānī*] which are neither existent nor non-existent, neither known nor unknown, neither created nor uncreated, neither beginningless nor originated, and neither real nor unreal.¹⁰⁹⁶

The Philosopher Ibn Sīnā and his followers joined Ibn Ḥazm in the critique of the theory of states as it violated the law of the excluded middle.¹⁰⁹⁷ In his *Treatise on Existence* [*Risālah fī al-Wujūd*], the mathematician and poet 'Umar Khayyām (d.1123) followed Ibn Sīnā, "the best of the Modern Philosophers" [*afḍal al-muta'akhhirīn*] in his words, in underlining that the theory of states contradicted the law of the excluded middle, one of the "greatest first principles" of logic.¹⁰⁹⁸ The paradoxical doctrine of states remained current among prominent Ash'arite theologians such as al-Bāqillānī (d.1013) and Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d.1085). While its prominence dwindled after Abū

¹⁰⁹⁴ Ajhar 2000, pp.54-55.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Al-Shahrastānī depicts al-Nazzām and Abū al-Hudhayl as their forerunners with regard to the problem of modes. (Wolfson 1976, p.229.)

¹⁰⁹⁶ Ibn Ḥazm in Wolfson 1976, pp.215-216. Also see Wisnovsky 2012, p.39.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Ibn Sīnā 2005, 1.5, pp.27-29.

¹⁰⁹⁸

Some reckless moderns ... posit coloriness and accidentality and existence and similar states as modes that obtain in what can be characterized by neither existence nor non-existence. The doubt that makes them fall into this grave mistake pertains to the greatest of First Premises: that there is no middle ground between negation and affirmation, the self-evident nature of which needs no discussion by us, nor is there any way for idiots to contradict it or explain it away. (Khayyām in Wisnovsky 2012, p.38.)

Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, it was still in circulation among later Ash‘arites such as Abū ‘Umar al-Sakūnī (d.1317).¹⁰⁹⁹

The theory of states was connected to another paradox that Ibn Taymīyyah saw as inconsistent. Philosophers, as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and Moses Maimonides (d.1204) corroborate, adapted the doctrine of states to the created attributes that are not firmly rooted [*ghayr rasikhah*] in their subject. Accordingly, an acquired state of an existent thing [*mawjūd*] could later become aptitudinal [*malakah*] and inseparable from that thing. Such a state was in itself, *neither existent nor non-existent*.¹¹⁰⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah defines this philosophical doctrine as a clear self-contradiction that can be refuted without any appeal to formal logic, as it violates common sense. Common sense itself, again, dictates the law of non-contradiction:

If one wishes to refute the argument of those who adhere to the doctrine of states and who argue that these states are neither existent nor non-existent, one will say: “these two are contradictories, and any two contradictory matters can neither be both true nor both false, for this would render one thing simultaneously existent and non-existent. ... In order to arrive at this conclusion, demonstration is not needed.”¹¹⁰¹

Yet another theological paradox that Ibn Taymīyyah, now more politely, criticizes is the well-known Kullābite doctrine of the divine attributes. Ibn al-Nadīm (d.af.990) listed Ibn Kullāb (d.855) as allegedly the main exponent of the “Riff-Raff Weeds” [*Nābitat al-Ḥashwiyyah*]¹¹⁰²—a twice-pejorative designation for anti-intellectual literalism and simplistic traditionism; yet later history disagreed with his judgment. In order to solve the dilemma of ascribing attributes to God while preserving His absolute unity, Sulaymān ibn Jarīr al-Zaydī (fl.785), Hishām ibn al-Ḥakam (d.815), and Ibn Kullāb developed a paradoxical doctrine with sustained influence in later Muslim theology, including Sufis.¹¹⁰³ By the twelfth

¹⁰⁹⁹ Groff argues that later Ash‘arites like Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī adopted the paradoxical theory of modes as well. (Groff 2007, p.57.)

¹¹⁰⁰ Ibn Taymīyyah 1993, p.37.

¹¹⁰¹ Ibn Taymīyyah 1993, p.37.

¹¹⁰² Pellat 2012.

¹¹⁰³ Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī 1904, p.111; ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī in Hamza, Rizvi and F. Mayer 2008, p.550; al-Kalābādhī 1993 p.36, al-Qushayrī 1409/1989 p.38; Hujvīrī 1926, p.15. (For the English translations, see al-Kalābādhī 1935, p.16; al-Qushayrī 2007 p.14; Hujvīrī 1911, p.14; Hujvīrī 2001, p.83.)

century, the Kullābite formula had already become a standard Ash‘arite¹¹⁰⁴ as well as Māturīdite¹¹⁰⁵ doctrine. Ibn Kullāb asserted that the divine attributes have a positive meaning, but they are inseparable from God. Hence he refused more prevalent Mu‘tazilite positions and argued that the divine attributes, including His Speech, are “neither God nor other than God.”¹¹⁰⁶ However, the paradoxical Kullābite formula was adopted even by later Mu‘tazilites. Abū Hāshim al-Jubbā‘i, for example, adopted the Kullābite formula in support of his doctrine of states by employing the term “state” as a new name for divine attributes.¹¹⁰⁷ Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī also argued that al-Ka‘bī (d.931)’s approach to the divine attributes was actually convertible to the Kullābite formula.¹¹⁰⁸ Although the Kullābite formula became dominant not only among the Ash‘arites but Sunnīs in general and even some Shī‘ī intellectuals,¹¹⁰⁹ Ibn Taymīyyah dismissed the paradoxical claim that God’s attributes are neither God nor other than God for violating simple common sense.¹¹¹⁰

As a final example, the debates on predestination and free-will also witnessed X-not-X statements made and solved by logical clarification in Aristotelian fashion. The Ḥanbalī jurist al-Ṭūfī (d.1316) claimed that human acts cannot be at once both voluntary and determined by God in the sense of being produced by God and by the human agent *in the same respect*.¹¹¹¹ The emphasis on, or the lack

¹¹⁰⁴ See e.g. al-Bayhaqī 1358/1939, p.112; Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī 1950, p.138. Also see Wolfson 1976, p.215.

¹¹⁰⁵ The famous *Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar* asserts that the divine attributes are “neither Him nor other than Him” [*lā huwa wa lā ghayruh*]. El-Bizri, like many scholars, assumes that the text is written by Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī (d.944) (see el Bizri 2008, p.127), but H. Daiber has convincingly shown that the authorship of al-Māturīdī is very improbable (See Daiber 1995). Instead, the *Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-Akbar* was written in, if not reworked by, the late eleventh century (see Rudolph 2015, pp.325-328). Hence it presents us important insights to the Transoxanian Māturīdism. Al-Māturīdī himself, did defend the Kullābite paradox. See e.g. al-Māturīdī 2003, p.122.

¹¹⁰⁶ See Wolfson 1976, pp.207-209.

Jokisch argues that “by using formulations such as *lā hiya huwa wa lā hiya ghayruhā*, Ibn Kullāb depends on the old Christian compromise between ‘unionists’ (Monophysites) and ‘separatists’ (Nestorians) confirmed in all Ecumenical Councils since 451.” (Jokisch 2007, p.363.)

¹¹⁰⁷ Wolfson 1976, p.174.

¹¹⁰⁸ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.119.

¹¹⁰⁹ E.g. ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī in Hamza, Rizvi and F. Mayer 2008, p.550.

¹¹¹⁰ Ahjar 2000, pp.54-55.

¹¹¹¹ See Shihadeh 2006, p.6.

thereof, such categorical clarifications were vital in debates of free-will and divine will. A thirteenth century Christian polemic accused the Qur'ānic and Sunnī theological emphasis on divine omnipotence of being reducible to self-contradiction. Accordingly, "God prohibits things that He does not will, and creates things that He wills; therefore, if He creates something that He prohibits, *then He both wills and does not will the same thing, which is inconceivable.*"¹¹¹² In response, al-Ṭūfī differentiated the various ways in which "will" is employed by Muslim theologians. Accordingly, Sunnī theologians typically distinguish between God's cosmogonic will [*irādah takwīniyyah*] and His normative will [*irādah taklīfiyyah*]. There is no contradiction, thus, if God both prohibits certain acts and creates them, or commands certain acts, yet determines that some humans omit them.¹¹¹³ In addition, against his opponent's claim that the Qur'ān contains self-contradictory statements, al-Ṭūfī appeals again to the categories:

[W]here Qur'ānic statements appear contradictory in the broadest sense [*muṭlaq al-ikhtilāf*], none of these cases satisfy all the conditions [*shurūṭ*], or restrictions, of real incoherence [*al-tanāquḍ al-mahḍ*], i.e. contradiction in the pure formal, logical sense. ... Once analyzed, these statements, or the propositional doctrines that follow once they are interpreted, do not affirm and negate *exactly the same thing in exactly the same respect*; hence the reference to the conditions of contradiction, which have to be fulfilled in two propositions for them to be contradictory. It follows that Qur'ānic verses [*āyās*] may be only *prima facie* contradictory, and do not violate the Aristotelian laws of non-contradiction and the excluded middle.¹¹¹⁴

Logical rigor was essential in such debates in pointing to, or solving, X-not-X statements—the Achilles' heel in rival arguments.

These debates show that theology was indeed a field full of paradoxes. Yet they were either instances of outright inconsistency for their adversaries, or valid arguments that could be expressed in propositional logic for their exponents. Nobody really claimed their truth in the very X-not-X format, in violation of the law of non-contradiction. Instead, scholars defended their positions by using logic, particularly by clarifying the categorical dimensions of compound statements. In refuting al-Ghazālī's attack Ibn Rushd appealed to Aristotle's

¹¹¹² Shihadeh 2006, p.8.

¹¹¹³ Shihadeh 2006, p.8.

¹¹¹⁴ Shihadeh 2006, p.15; my emphasis; with my minor modification.

categories. Al-Ghazālī's first accusation held that Philosophers fell into self-contradiction by defending that a thing's existence and its non-existence, in their system of emanations, are the same. Ibn Rushd concurs that this would be contradictory, but adds that "the time of the possibility of its existence is different from the time of the possibility of its non-existence."¹¹¹⁵ Hence the X-not-X statement is only an apparent self-contradiction which disappears once we clarify that the category of temporality is different in two statements.

Sufis were not an exception to the adherence to formal logical principles in philosophical or theological matters. The Kullābite formula, for example, was very prominent among Sufis, yet they explained the doctrine through logical principles, instead of surrendering to self-contradiction. Again, Aristotle was a big help. 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d.ca.1330), for example, follows the formula that "His attributes are not Him nor other than Him." Then he demonstrates that there is no self-contradiction in this compound statement by clarifying the categorical differences of the opposite predicates. Accordingly, "His attributes are not Him" with respect to human intellect, and "His attributes are not other than Him" with respect to His Reality.¹¹¹⁶ Sufis not only dissociated themselves from arguments reducible to X-not-X statements, but they appealed to the law of non-contradiction in their arguments, and criticized others for falling into such error, which in most contexts was self-contradiction.

Summary

To sum up, paradoxes in the X-not-X form circulated widely in the fields of Muslim philosophy and theology. The opponents of such paradoxical doctrines described them as sophistry and contradictions violating the law of non-contradiction or the excluded middle. The exponents of such controversial ideas were also not advocates of violating the law of non-contradiction. Instead, they attempted to explain that the apparent X-not-X statements were convertible to logically valid statements, as in the case of the paradoxes inherited from late antiquity, the Kullābite formula, or the doctrine of states. Nobody seems to really defend paradoxes as a challenge to the principle of non-contradiction or the excluded middle. For their champions, doctrines would not appear in the X-not-X form if logical analysis was applied more rigorously. One could question the veracity of logic as a discipline [*manṭiq*], but not that of the logical meta-

¹¹¹⁵ Ibn Rushd 1954, Ch.1. p.31.

¹¹¹⁶ 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī in Hamza, Rizvi and F. Mayer 2008, p.550.

principles. In other words, there were those who rejected Aristotle, but nobody who opposed the common-sense law of non-contradiction.

It is in this theological atmosphere hostile to paradoxes that Sufis intensively and intentionally employed X-not-X statements to describe the divine essence. On the other hand, their take on the principle of the law of contradiction was a nuanced one that differed from that of propositional logic. Aristotelian logic was a logic of terms, instead of propositions. Yet his meta-principles were propositional.¹¹¹⁷ The principle of non-contradiction, for example, stipulated that it was impossible for anything at the same time to be and not to be, i.e., *propositionally*. On the other hand, very much like paradoxes of human apotheosis, Sufi paradoxes on the divine essence negated propositional discourse, and worked within a *dialectical logic*. While discourse on God was negated in the level of propositions, the addition of a new, logical rule-following dimension structured this apophatic mode. It was necessary to find the right terms, create the right binaries, and employ them in the right dialectical context to perform the self-cancellation of propositional discourse. Instead of a break, or transcendence of logic, paradoxical apophasis demanded additional logical steps, hence rigour, in order to negate propositional theological discourse.

C. the Paradox of Divine Essence in Medieval Sufism: When Incomparability and Imminence are Balanced

Among Sufis, the appeal to paradoxes on the essence of God can be traced back to the earliest masters. Al-Bisṭāmī (d.848) and al-Ḥallāj (d.922) were probably the most exquisite paradoxographers among the earliest Sufis. In the fundamentally important section on divine incomparability in his *Orchard of the Gnostics*, al-Ḥallāj employs a plethora of negations in relation to God, which he eventually adorns with paradoxes as they address the divine essence. The section below is representative, and we will see it reappear, sometimes with changes, in several places:

“Before” does not outstrip Him, “after” does not interrupt Him, “of” does not root Him, “from” does not accord with Him, “to” does not attach to Him, “in” does not inhabit Him, “when” does not stop Him, “if” does not consult with Him, “over” does not overshadow Him, “under” does not support Him, “opposite” does not face Him, “with” does not press Him, “behind” does not take hold of Him, “before” does not limit Him, “previous” does not

¹¹¹⁷ Bonevac and Dever 2012, p.175.

manifest Him, “after” does not extinguish Him, “all” does not unite Him, “is” does not bring Him to being, “is not” does not deprive Him of being. Concealment does not veil Him. His pre-existence preceded time, His being preceded not-being, His eternity preceded limit. If thou sayest “when,” His existence has outstripped time. If thou sayest “before,” before is after Him. If thou sayest “He,” “H” and “e” are His creation. If thou sayest “how,” His essence is veiled from description. If thou sayest “where,” His being preceded space. If thou sayest “ipseity,” His ipseity is apart from things. *Other than He does not unite two opposite attributes at the same time; yet they don’t create any opposition [taḍādd] in Him. He is hidden in His manifestation, and manifest in His concealment. Hence He is the Manifest-Hidden, the Proximate-Distant.* He is removed from being comparable [tashbīh] to creation through this.¹¹¹⁸

Here al-Ḥallāj is following the earlier Baghdādian Sufis, Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d.892) and al-Junayd (d.910) on divine unknowability, which is marked by paradoxicality. For al-Kharrāz, “only God knows God,” and the only characteristic of God “known” to human beings is His transcending of what we know—a negative knowledge. For al-Kharrāz, this means God’s transcendence of all human discourses with their binaries, and His unique joining of contraries [*jam’ bayna al-ḍiddayn*].¹¹¹⁹ The exposition of divine unity by al-Ḥallāj also depicts God as the ultimate coincidence of opposites—God’s unique mark is the overturning of our binaries. Al-Ḥallāj’s entire passage, including the paradoxes, is quoted verbatim in al-Kalābādhī (d.990)’s section on divine unity as the saying of “one of the great Sufis.”¹¹²⁰

¹¹¹⁸ al-Ḥallāj 2002, p.224.

¹¹¹⁹ Abrahamov 2014, p.64.

¹¹²⁰ al-Kalābādhī 1993, pp.33-34. For Arberry’s translation, see al-Kalābādhī 1935, pp-15-16.

Mayer overlooks the fundamentally Ḥallājian origin of al-Kalābādhī’s creed, and tries to situate al-Kalābādhī’s approach exclusively to the Sunnī *kalām* schools that emerged in his time. Mayer also confuses al-Kalābādhī’s Sufi creed on the *divine unity and essence* with that on the *divine attributes*. It is correct that al-Kalābādhī adopts specific Ash’arī and Māturīdī *kalām* doctrines in his chapter on the divine attributes, but his chapter on the divine essence is simply a long excerpt from al-Ḥallāj, as Arberry already realized in his translation (al-Kalābādhī 1935, p.15fn.2). The Sufi doctrine on divine unity and divine attributes are clearly separated in al-Kalābādhī’s work, and his approach to the divine nature is informed by, yet irreducible to the Ash’arī or Māturīdī *kalām* positions which fully developed after the Sufi exposition of the divine essence quoted by al-Kalābādhī. (Cf. Mayer 2008, pp.269-270.)

What is going on logically in the creed of al-Ḥallāj, hence of al-Kalābādhī? First, we observe that the same attribute both belongs and does not belong to the same object, i.e., God; hence, at least apparently, we have a violation of the law of non-contradiction. Besides, the paradox of the divine essence seems to violate the law of the excluded middle that one thing must be either affirmed or negated of a subject as defined by Aristotle. Therefore, at the propositional level, the X-not-X statements do violate logical meta-principles. Yet the construction of the X-not-X statement is by no means the result of an illogical procedure. On the contrary, the joint employment of X and not-X places the divine essence not only beyond knowability, as well as all binaries, but also beyond the very discursivity that is composed of binaries given in the theological discourse. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī explains this dialectical logic in uniting X and not-X in an Aristotelian manner, immediately after employing a paradox on knowing the divine essence. Al-Ghazālī will eventually find the negative language superior to the positive one, but he indicates that the path of paradox, and the balance of negative and positive languages on God, still follow the law of non-contradiction:

If someone were to say “I do not know God,” that would be true.
 And if they were to say “I know God” that would also be true.
 Now it is known that negation and affirmation (of the same proposition) cannot both be true, but rather split truth and falsity.
 If the negation is true then the affirmation is false; and vice versa.
 However, *if the aspects of the proposition are different, then the negation and affirmation can be both true.*¹¹²¹

Al-Ghazālī points out that any statement concerning God can be as true as its negation, due to His simultaneous incomparability and excessive imminence. Hence it is only such X-not-X structures that can point to this simultaneity through their dialectical negation of propositional binaries. These paradoxes are real rather than rhetorical paradoxes or “seeming contradictions;” they do violate the law of non-contradiction, yet only at the propositional level. They are not illogical, rather they point out that, “rules of non-contradiction and excluded middle apply specifically to delimited language reference.”¹¹²² The paradox performs the unsayability, unknowability and non-discursivity of its subject in its

Notably, the section quoted by al-Kalābādhī under the heading of “divine unity [*tawḥīd*]” is actually al-Ḥallāj’s exposition of divine incomparability [*tanzīh*], even though al-Ḥallāj’s work had (or, at least, now has) a section titled “divine unity.” (Cf. al-Ḥallāj 2002, pp.227-229.)

¹¹²¹ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 1999, p.3; my emphasis. Cf. Shehadi 1964, p.38.

¹¹²² Sells 1994, pp.20-21.

own propositional failure, which is achieved by a dialectical logical procedure. Instead of an illogical “anything goes” where logical meta-principles have been canceled, we arrive at a dialectical logic that operates only through a systematic matching of the binaries endemic to the discourse. This dialectical logic plays against and upon the linear logic of delimited reference, and resists an illogical depiction.¹¹²³

Second, the paradoxical approach to divine unknowability has a uniquely balanced approach to the binary of divine incomparability and imminence. The apophatic theological strands developed by Ibādīs, Ismā‘īlīs, Mu‘tazilīs, traditionists, and philosophers followed the Qur’ānic discourse on divine incomparability as opposed to imminence. The binary Arabic technical terms through which they discussed the problem were *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. *Tanzīh* referred to God’s dissimilarity and incomparability; His being beyond any possible conception of man. *Tashbīh*, having the distinct connotation of “similarity,” indicated God’s being comparable to creation, or His ubiquity and imminence in creation, depending on the context.¹¹²⁴ God’s imminence welcomed the ascription of certain qualified attributes, and in certain interpretations, all possible attributes and names, widening the already open (and never-closing) door of anthropomorphism [*tajsīm*]. God’s incomparability, on the other hand, aimed to strip away from Him every predication and positive attribute in favor of His supreme ipseity that human mind and language cannot circumscribe.

Due to a common confusion in the literature, it is worth recalling that *tashbīh* is not necessarily anthropomorphism.¹¹²⁵ Instead, they are quite different, and sometimes even opposites. One could celebrate God’s imminence in creation with a simultaneous critique of anthropomorphism; or an anthropomorphist could criticize *tashbīh* underlining divine transcendence. Indeed, as I discuss in the next chapter, Ibn Ḥanbal (d.855) and many early Sunnī scholars were explicit inclined towards anthropomorphism, who had yet a negative view of *tashbīh*.¹¹²⁶ Mu‘tazilites, from early on, criticized *tashbīh* as well as the anthropomorphism of

¹¹²³ Sells 1994, p.21.

¹¹²⁴ Q.50:16. For an introduction to the Qur’ānic basis of the paradox, see Renard 2014, pp.4-7. On the other hand, the Qur’ān employs the term “*mithl*” instead of “*tashbīh*.”

¹¹²⁵ Just a brief list of contemporary works that equate the two: Abrahamov in al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1990, p.25; Abrahamov 1995; Ernst 1996, p.40; Kazuyo Murata 2012, p.104, 209.

¹¹²⁶ See Ch.7. Also see W. Williams 2002.

the Riff-Raff [*Ḥashwiyyah*], mostly composed of traditionists [*muḥaddithūn*]. On the other hand anthropomorphists, like many others, attacked both *tashbīh* and the negative theology of divine attributes of the Muʿtazilites. Ibn Ḥanbal, for example, accused the anti-anthropomorphist Jahm ibn Ṣafwān of *tashbīh*, which was about rendering God *comparable* instead of anthropomorphism. Hence a critique of *tashbīh* united the opposing camps. As we have seen above, Philosophers and Ismāʿīlīs also had a quite a negative view of *tashbīh*, which had to be rejected in favor of divine transcendence through performative negations.

It was putting *tanzīh* to the same level with *tashbīh*, a term marked with negative meaning for others, which grounded paradoxical apophaticism. This symmetry is evident in the popular, balanced approach to *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* among Sufis, as expressed by Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d.13th CE):

“Eyes perceive Him not” [Q.6:103] and “Thou shalt not see Me” [Q.7:143] allude to the properties of the name “Nonmanifest.” This is called the “position of asserting incomparability” [*tanzīh*]. But Upon that day faces shall be radiant, gazing upon their Lord [Q.75:22-23] and “I saw my Lord in the most beautiful form” allude to the properties of the name “Manifest.” This is called the “position of asserting similarity” [*tashbīh*]. “Glory be to God above *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*!”¹¹²⁷

Third, the balanced view towards divine comparability and incomparability accompanies a symmetrical approach to language. The paradox in these cases not only undermines the kataphatic discourse that underlines divine comparability, but also the negative discourse that underlines divine transcendence. Accordingly, the negative discourse that different Muslim groups employed is itself limiting God. Hence what makes the key difference between paradoxical apophaticism and other apophatic forms is their approach to language. The Muʿtazilīs, Philosophers, Ismāʿīlīs and Ibādīs, as we have seen, preferred a negative language over kataphatic language in escaping divine comparability [*tashbīh*] in favor of His incomparable transcendence [*tanzīh*]. Therefore, their approach to language was *asymmetrical*, as they argued that employing negative language is more appropriate than positive language if we are talking about God. But in the path of paradox, the approach to language is *symmetrical*; negative speech has no superiority over positive speech, as God is beyond both sides of this binary. In other words, not a hierarchy, but a symmetry

¹¹²⁷ Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī in Chittick 1992, p.40.

marks the binaries such as “negation-affirmation,” “absent-present,” “dead-alive,” “ignorant-knower,” “hidden-manifest.” These binaries sustain discourse on the divine essence, and it is their joint failure that negates propositional discourse, and performs the divine unknowability beyond the discursive field through its own incapacity.

What, then, demarcates paradoxical apophaticism is (1) its balanced take on the binary of divine comparability and incomparability before divine unknowability, while the vast majority of theologians and Philosophers have a negative view of the former; (2) a symmetrical approach to discourse on divine essence, while most of the Mu‘tazilites, Philosophers and Ismā‘īlīs prefer negation over affirmation; and (3) the employment of a dialectical logic that negates the propositional discourse on divine essence and indicates divine trans-discursivity by uniting the binaries that constitute propositional discourse. The discourse on God is negated at a dialectical level via paradoxes that performatively indicate divine excess and unknowability.

The thirteenth century continued and strengthened the apophatic paradoxical line inherited from ninth century Sufism. Thanks to its adoption by the influential eponyms of the Sufi orders as well as by the “ecumenical master” Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240), paradoxical apophaticism would have a sustained career, arguably, inseparable from Sufism.

Ibn al-‘Arabī: Symmetrical Approach to Language, and Dialectical Logic¹¹²⁸

Ibn al-‘Arabī opens the third chapter, “the Wisdom of Exaltation in the Word of Noah” of his “Bezels of Wisdom” [*Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*] with an enigmatic sentence: “the doctrine of incomparability [*tanzīh*] is on par with that of limitation [*taḥdīd*] and restraint [*taqyīd*] of God.”¹¹²⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabī is succinct; his claim is that God cannot be limited even with non-delimitedness, which is still anthropomorphic.¹¹³⁰ Therefore, apophasis is in no better position than

¹¹²⁸ This section has been adapted from Kars 2013.

¹¹²⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabī 1946, Ch.3, p.68. See also Ibn al-‘Arabī 2007j, p.395.

¹¹³⁰ Citing Ibn al-‘Arabī and Ṣadr al-dīn al-Qūnawī, Narāqī explains this radical non-delimitedness as follows:

Whatever is known to us is known through its effects and concomitants but here there are no effects or concomitants, therefore it is unknown in every respect and *absolutely free of all bonds, even from the absoluteness which is the opposite of particularity*. The absoluteness which is applicable to this stage is a negative feature that represents the negating of all attributes, qualities,

kataphasis; all ascriptions are symmetrical in front of the Absolute. To give examples, the negativist propositions such as “God has no fingers,” or “God does not sit on a throne,” “God does not get angry” or “God is not similar to anything” defended by Mu’tazilites and Philosophers still imply the accessibility of God’s essence, and violates rational transcendentalism. Maybe God has fingers, or maybe He sits on a throne; who knows? Here, Ibn al-‘Arabī is criticizing nothing less than the main hypothesis of philosophical apophaticism—the necessary dissimilarity [*mukhālafah*] of God. Claiming that God is necessarily dissimilar assumes that we can actually access His divine essence. In other words, the fact that our language is anthropomorphic does not necessarily prove that the absolutely transcendent *is not* in the way we imagine or think. Thus, true *tanzīh* must take a further critical step, and negate itself. From Ibn al-‘Arabī’s perspective, the prevalent negative theological currents are not radical enough; they still make essentialist claims implicitly about the Absolute, and presume to access its ipseity. The apophatic step he takes aims to free the Absolute from being limited to our own conception of non-delimitedness.

Ibn al-‘Arabī, while carrying incomparability further through negation, supplies it with an existential immanence via his cosmology. Accordingly, the world wherein we dwell is nothing but God’s finite, temporal and spatial manifestations [*tajallī*]. Creation and God are thus in a seemingly paradoxical relationship. On the one hand, God is so transcendent that nothing can be said about His ipseity. The term “God” is nothing but a word of negation.¹¹³¹ Our affirmations of His incomparability are still binding for Him. On the other hand, all things are the tongues of God;¹¹³² creation is the unveiling of God, and neither can be alienated from the other. Thus, *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* both must be pursued to their limits, which produce the dynamic of the famous “paradox of the veil.” *Tanzīh* (pushed to the extreme) dictates that God is always inaccessibly veiled from us however we affirm His incomparability. *Tashbīh* dictates that it is God’s “face” that appears through all phenomena. “All veils are He. Yet, none are He. This simultaneous identity and difference is the paradox.”¹¹³³ Once the two modes

names and effects from Its essence. Rather, *this necessitates the negation of every intellectual characterization, even these negations, from Its essence.* (Narāqī 2010, p.434; my emphasis.)

¹¹³¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī 2007c, p.48.

¹¹³² Ibn al-‘Arabī 1946, p.69.

¹¹³³ Chittick 2000, p.178. See Ibn al-‘Arabī 2007f, p.119.

are unified, existence and God present themselves within apparent paradoxes, as he wrote:

[E]very entity qualified by existence is it-not-it. The whole cosmos is He-not-He [*huwa-lā-huwa*]. The Real manifest through form is He-not-He. He is the limited who is not limited, the seen who is not seen.¹¹³⁴

From the subjective point of view, the paradox manifests itself in the very nature of one's self [*nafs*]: "you are not He [*mā anta huwa*] and you are He [*anta huwa*]" simultaneously.¹¹³⁵ The face of truth is nothing but its veils. The veil of truth is nothing but its face.¹¹³⁶

Two important aspects of Ibn al-'Arabī's objection are worth underlining briefly. First, the objection is not based on a mystical or anti-intellectualist negativist schema. The objection raised here is based on a rational argument, and refers to an elusive intellectual problem. It is fully rational, and accuses the *mutakallimūn* and Philosophers of avoiding the logical conclusions of reasoning.¹¹³⁷ In this sense, his critique does not attack reason and does not rely on mystical intuition *per se*. On the contrary, his reasoning is working in the same paradigm of intellectual negativity with his contemporaries. Second, the objection does not rely on a simple negation of everything predicated to God which yields an infinite regress. Instead, it reaches a resting point (or more accurately, an unresting,

In the dialectical logic of Ibn al-'Arabī's apophatic theology, the paradox of the veil is a key theme associated with many binaries, that of "hidden-manifest," and "proximate-distant" in particular.

¹¹³⁴ Ibn al-'Arabī in Chittick 1989, p.116. See also Ibn al-'Arabī 2007a, p.20.

¹¹³⁵ Ibn al-'Arabī 1946, p.70; Ibn al-'Arabī 1428/2007e, p.109-113. "[Y]ou veil yourself from you, and you are His curtain over you." (Ibn al-'Arabī in Chittick 2000, p.193.)

¹¹³⁶

[N]one but God is loved in the existent things. It is He who is manifest within every beloved to the eye of every lover—and there is nothing which is not a lover. So the cosmos is all lover and beloved, and all of it goes back to Him... Though no one loves any but his own Creator, he is veiled from Him by the love of Zaynab, Su'ād, Hind, Laylā, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world. Poets exhaust their words writing about all these existent things without knowing, but the gnostics never hear a verse, a riddle, a panegyric, or a love poem that is not about Him, hidden beyond the veils of forms. (Ibn al-'Arabī in Chittick 1989, p.181.)

¹¹³⁷ Challenging the scholarly stereotypes about Sufism, Ibn al-'Arabī's works are philosophically rigorous and precious. His Sufism and philosophy are "neighbors," which "visit each other." (See Rosenthal 1988.) The scholarly, stereotypical, mutually exclusive categories such as "philosophers" and "mystics" evidently do not do justice to the great many-faceted minds.

continuous dialectic) in the symmetry of positive and negative attributes ascribed to God. Accordingly, no defense of apophasis vis-à-vis kataphasis can be made without essential claims on the Absolute. This rigorous objection is radically intellectualist and negativist insofar as it pushes negativist reasoning to its extreme.¹¹³⁸

Negation is a purely rational process for Ibn al-‘Arabī,¹¹³⁹ while affirmation is more challenging to defend, because of its very excessive, inalienable immediacy.¹¹⁴⁰ *Tanzīh* is the function of the rational faculty; and must be audaciously pursued to its limits in a radically intellectualist spirit. *Tashbīh*, on the other hand, is the faculty of our imagination [*takhayyul*], and also has to be pursued to its limits. Ibn al-‘Arabī does not accept the widespread philosophical superiority of reason to imagination that was defended by Aristotle and accepted by al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Rushd, Maimonides, Ṭūsī, and many others. Instead, they are two distinct faculties, which have to operate in harmony, and complement each other. Wisdom and divine knowledge rely on the dialectic of reason and imagination, which are irreducible to each other.¹¹⁴¹ As complementary faculties, they should operate independently and fully to achieve highest knowledge. The two faculties are “blind” alone, and best operate together. Ibn al-‘Arabī uses the metaphor of binocular vision to explain their unity: transcendence and imminence are like two lenses through which we relate ourselves to God. Two eyes actually do not contradict, but testify and accord with each other. “Ontologically speaking, one eye sees Being and the other

¹¹³⁸ “[T]he element of transcendence in Islamic mysticism,” is pursued “to its extreme,” instead of being destroyed by Ibn al-‘Arabī. (Sells 1994, p.113.)

¹¹³⁹ Reason knows God “from the aspect of negation, not from the aspect of affirmation.” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2007i, p.185.)

¹¹⁴⁰ Ibn al-‘Arabī 2007d, p.78.

¹¹⁴¹ As Stelzer points out, this issue would be the major divergence between Ibn al-‘Arabī and Ibn Rushd, who firmly believed in the supreme authority of reason. Old Ibn Rushd’s meeting with the young Ibn al-‘Arabī in Cordova has a symbolic significance as it dramatizes the meeting (and separation) of two distinct positions of epistemology and worldviews. In his *Meccan Openings* [*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*], Ibn al-‘Arabī narrates this enigmatic meeting as follows:

He [Ibn Rushd] said, “How did you find the situation in unveiling and divine effusion [*fī al-kashfī wa al-fayḍ al-ilāhī*]? Is it what rational consideration [*al-nazār*] gives to us?” I replied, “Yes and no. Between the yes and the no spirits fly from their matter and heads from their bodies.” (Ibn al-‘Arabī in Chittick 1989, p.xiii.)

For an alternative translation, see Ibn al-‘Arabī, in Stelzer 1996, p.35.)

perceives nothingness. Through the two eyes working together, man perceives that he himself and the cosmos are He-not-He."¹¹⁴² One has to become a "possessor two eyes," [*dhū al-'aynayn*], which means to unify these two faculties, and hence, incomparability and imminence. *Tanzīh* must be unified [*jam*] with *tashbīh*.¹¹⁴³

If you insist only on His incomparability, you restrict Him,
And if you insist only on His imminence, you limit Him.¹¹⁴⁴

Scholars widely use the solemn term "*coincidentia oppositorum*" [coincidence of the opposites] to refer to Ibn al-'Arabī's paradox. Even if inspiring, the term might be misleading if we do not clarify what it means, for the visible and the invisible, or imminence and transcendence are actually not opposites for Ibn al-'Arabī. Defining the unity of God's manifestation with the world as the coincidence of the opposites means to assume that the two are opposites. However, the world is the manifestation of God not in the sense that God remains always veiled as the essential unground of being. God is neither the essential truth veiled behind the material un-truth, nor the being of beings according to Ibn al-'Arabī. Phenomena are not untruth, but the truth *of* the deeper truth, the visible *of* the invisible, the surface *of* a deeper reality.¹¹⁴⁵ The visible is not only the veil of the invisible, but also the way in which the invisible shows itself (as an absence). The face of God is not hidden behind infinite veils. On the contrary, relying on a dizzying perspective shift, the face *is* the veil, *and* the veil *is* the face.¹¹⁴⁶ The vessel and the wine it contains, the content and the form wherein the content appears are not opposites; but they are "the two daughters of a single father" [*"bintāni min abīn wāḥid"*]¹¹⁴⁷ which cannot be separated. In favor of a dialectical logical system, the law of non-contradiction is violated—and this violation is real in the propositional level.

Ibn al-'Arabī's critique of the asymmetry in the *tanzīh* versus *tashbīh* binary is not an additional negation deepening the already infinite asymmetry, but a step towards the (un)resting (dialectical) balance of apophasis and kataphasis, i.e., to

¹¹⁴² Chittick 1989, p.362.

¹¹⁴³ See Afifi in Ibn al-'Arabī 1946, p.362.

¹¹⁴⁴ Ibn al-'Arabī 1946, p.70.

¹¹⁴⁵ Cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962, p.143.

¹¹⁴⁶ See Chittick 2000, p.178; Ibn al-'Arabī 2007i, pp.187-188.

¹¹⁴⁷ Chodkiewicz 1993, p.10. Chodkiewicz notes that he borrowed the phrase "*bintāni min abīn wāḥid*" from Denis Gril's *Ishārāt al-Qur'ān*.

a different mode. His position does not simply add a negation to the perpetual negation of philosophical apophaticism, but adopts a different apophatic approach that reduces into blatant paradoxes intolerable within the propositional logico-philosophical standards of Philosophers. Hence it would be a grave error to assume that the paradoxical path rises to a higher, more critical level of thinking on the divine essence than the philosophical apophatic path. Philosophical and paradoxical negative theologies of medieval Islamic world were interconnected yet distinct apophatic modes with different ontological claims, performative dimensions, and methods of manipulating discourse on the divine essence, in order to point to its beyond.

Logic and Nomenclature in Paradoxical Apophaticism

The presence of paradoxical statements on the divine essence in Ibn Sīnā's and al-Kalābādhī's popular works already had an immense effect among Sufis before the rise of Ibn al-'Arabī's school. Al-Kalābādhī's paradoxical exposition of the divine essence, which originally belonged to al-Ḥallāj, was also preserved in the popular Sufi manual of al-Qushayrī (d.1072), which explicitly acknowledged the authorship of al-Ḥallāj.¹¹⁴⁸ Hence, a paradoxical approach to the unknowability of the divine essence was available both to intellectualist as well as to more drunken versions of Sufism. Al-Ḥallāj's paradox of the divine essence, for example, appears later in 'Umar al-Suhrawardī (d.1234)'s work on creed, *Rasā'il A'lām al-Hudā*. A few times in the *Gifts of Gnosis* [*Awārif al-Ma'ārif*] and the *Sealed Nectar* [*al-Raḥīq al-Makhtūm*] on various topics, such as divine providence, and the primordial tension between Adam and Satan, al-Suhrawardī quotes the controversial master.¹¹⁴⁹ More importantly, al-Suhrawardī's interpretations of al-Ḥallāj on the thorny issues of his ecstatic sayings [*shaṭaḥāt*]¹¹⁵⁰ and his theory of unity between man and God are quite constructive.¹¹⁵¹ Al-Suhrawardī's creed *Rasā'il A'lām al-Hudā* follows al-Ḥallāj's explanation of the divine unity, sometimes quoting him verbatim without giving his name. After a page-long list of negative statements and removal of all relationalities, paradoxes like "First-Last" and "Manifest-Hidden" irrupt in order to indicate God's transcendence of all binaries:

¹¹⁴⁸ al-Qushayrī 1409/1989, pp.27-28. For the English translation, see al-Qushayrī 2007, pp.6-7.

For further information on al-Ḥallāj and negative theology, see Michot 2007.

¹¹⁴⁹ See Salamah-Qudsi 2010.

¹¹⁵⁰ 'Umar al-Suhrawardī 1939, p.58.

¹¹⁵¹ See Salamah-Qudsi 2010.

If you ask for explanation for Him, the particles of creation explain and prove Him: *He is First-Last, Manifest-Hidden—all “firsts” and “lasts” vanish in His Preenity and Everlastingness.*¹¹⁵²

Around a century later, ‘Izz al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Kāshānī (d.1334)’s Persian *Lamp of Guidance* [*Miṣbāḥ al-Ḥidāya*] follows a version of the same Ḥallājīan paradoxical apophaticism on the divine essence. In its introduction, Kāshānī claims to be translating al-Suhrawardī’s the *Gifts of Gnosis*, but actually the section on the divine essence is a restatement of al-Suhrawardī’s *A’lām al-Hudā*.¹¹⁵³ Al-Kāshānī writes:

There is no beginning to His endless ipseity, and no ending to His countless attributes. Pre-eternity and infinity are under His enclosing sway. Existence and space are enveloped in His carpet. *All “firsts” are “last” in His pre-eternity. All “lasts” are “first” in His infinity. Their “manifestnesses” are hiddenness in His manifestness. The “hiddennesses” in creation are manifestness in His hiddenness. All “eternals” are posterior in His eternity. All “infinities” are successors in His infinity.* Ultimately, compared to whatever is contained in the intellect, understanding, estimation, perception or analogy, the essence of the glorious Lord is more transcendent and holy than that.¹¹⁵⁴

The balance of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*, equivalence of positive and negative discourse in front of the divine unknowability produces an intensive employment of paradoxes that do not cancel, nor annul, but follow logical meta-principles in a dialectical system that rather carefully chooses its binaries. This system indicates the helplessness of propositional discourse before divine unknowability. In other words, paradoxes follow a dialectical logic in systematically negating the binaries given in a discourse on the divine essence. Even well-known paradoxographers explain that the paradoxes on the divine essence are not negating logical principles, but following them in a dialectical form. Rūmī (d.1273) explains:

God is neither present, nor absent, but He is the creator of both. In other words, He is beyond both presence and absence. For, if He were present, then absence would not exist, but it does. Also He is not present, because absence exists on par with presence. Therefore, He cannot be described by presence or absence.

¹¹⁵² ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī 1996, p.54.

¹¹⁵³ Ohlander 2008, pp.257-258.

¹¹⁵⁴ ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, p.24; my emphasis.

Otherwise, an opposite should emerge from its opposite, because absence requires His creation of presence, while presence is the opposite of absence. Ditto in the case of absence. Then, it is not possible that an opposite emerges from its opposite, and that God creates His analogous. As it is said, “He has no match.”¹¹⁵⁵

On the other hand, Sufis rarely explain this dialectical logic of paradoxical apophasis in explicit, propositional terms in the way Rūmī does above. Such explanation would undermine the performative power of the paradox, and go against its very apophatic *raison d’être* to negate propositional discourse on God in the first place. Hence paradoxes might irrupt unexpectedly in a discourse on the divine essence in order to express God’s transcendence of all binaries. Rūmī’s *Dīvān-i Shams*, in which his selfhood has already been negated in that of Shams Tabrīzī (d.1248), provides exquisite examples of the paradox of the divine essence as well as human apotheosis. Paradoxes of the divine essence appear in the *Maṣnavī* as well—they irrupt unexpectedly, such as in the following couplets:

O you whose attributes are those of the sun of gnosis,
While the sun of the heavens is confined to a single attribute.

Now you become the sun, now the sea,
Now mount Qaf, now the ‘Anqa.

*In your essence, you are neither this nor that,
O greater than all that can be imagined, and more than all
“more!”*

...

Both the one who asserts your incomparability, and the one who asserts your immanence are
Bewildered by you, O you who, being without image, have
countless forms!¹¹⁵⁶

The rule-following employment of X-not-X statements or phrases negate the propositional discourse on God, indicating His unknowability beyond incomparability and imminence. Such paradoxical apophaticism of the divine

¹¹⁵⁵ Rūmī 1348/1969, p.219. Arberry’s translation does not have this passage as he did not have access to the manuscripts *Furūzān-far had*.

¹¹⁵⁶ Rūmī 2015, Vol.2, #53-55, 57; my emphasis. For an alternative translation, see Cooper 1999, pp.428-429. (Cooper translates “*mushabbih*” as “pantheist,” and “*muwahḥid*” as “absolute Unitarian.”)

essence via dialectical negations of propositional discourse can by no means be confined to Ibn al-‘Arabī, as its seeds were already sown by al-Kharrāz, al-Ḥallāj and al-Junayd. Yet Ibn al-‘Arabī’s school plays an undeniable role in the momentum that paradoxical apophaticism gained in the thirteenth century. The symmetrical binaries that Ibn al-‘Arabī subverted in favor of divine unknowability were intensively employed by Sufis who were familiar with his work. His son-in-law, Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d.1274), for example, adopts the same symmetrical approach to the *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* binary. The divine unknowability engenders the paradox of the veil, with the balance of *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*: “there is nothing in existence to be described by nondelimitation without having a face toward delimitation. ... In the same vein, there is nothing in existence to be ruled by delimitation without having a face toward nondelimitation.”¹¹⁵⁷ The divine unknowability is not the result of His necessary dissimilarity from creation, as Philosophers would argue. Conversely, God is so unknowably transcendent that one cannot really know whether He is dissimilar or not. As opposed to the convictions of the Mu‘tazilites, Philosophers, and Ismā‘īlīs, the divine unknowability cancels discourse not through negative speech, but through the balanced insufficiency of negation and affirmation. Al-Qūnawī writes:

Given that there can be no real conformity between man’s discursive intellection of God and the latter’s true nature, it follows that all the judgements derived through man’s reasoning and which consist in attributing things to God by way of negation or affirmation [*salban aw ithbātan*], ultimately pertain to nothing more than this intellection itself, i.e. the determinate concept arrived at through the operation of the intellect.¹¹⁵⁸

Ibn al-‘Arabī and al-Qūnawī were not unique in approaching this self-cancellation of positive and negative discourse on God as a self-projection of human judgment to an unknowable infinity. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111) had already claimed that our discourse on God in fact returns back to us. In the act of naming, the name returns to the one who gives the name, not to the named. The name contains nothing essential of the named, but it represents the judgment of the one who gives the name. The discourse on the named does not really touch to it.

¹¹⁵⁷ Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī 2003, p.66. I used Chittick’s translation with minor modifications. See Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī [undated], #13, p.22.

¹¹⁵⁸ Ṣadr al-dīn al-Qūnawī in Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī and Ṣadr al-dīn al-Qūnawī 1995, p.54. I followed Todd’s translation; see Ṣadr al-dīn al-Qūnawī in Todd 2014, pp.211-212.

Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.1230), among others, pronounces the same reversive approach to naming the unnamable in his *Conference*:

If they talk about Him—either good or bad,
Whatever they say on Him is rather on themselves.¹¹⁵⁹

For Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, God’s transcendence of discursivity, very much like in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought, follows His transcendence of created binaries. Quoting al-Kharrāz, whom Ibn al-‘Arabī himself cited, al-Qūnawī depicts the divine essence in his *Key to the Arcane* as the prime coincidence of the opposites [*jam’ bayna ḍiddayn*].¹¹⁶⁰ The human soul, once perfected, becomes a mirror of the divine coincidence of the opposites—an embodied paradox: “hidden-manifest, lofty-lowly, created-preeternal” and so forth.

The intensely philosophical vocabulary in al-Qūnawī’s labors gives way to a moving love letter with his associate Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī (d.1289), yet preserving the paradoxical apophaticism of the divine essence. ‘Irāqī claims that “love” is the essential name of God. He uses *‘ishq* and *ḥubb* interchangeably in this context: “embodied love” and “compassionate love” are both expressions of the divine ipseity—“a reality purified of all entification.”¹¹⁶¹ All forms of love, faith, and desire emanate from this excessive essence, and manifest it through the never-lifting veils of creation, or “entifications” [*ta’ayyun*] in technical terms developed by Ibn al-‘Arabī. It is the paradox of the veil that is played out on this divine essence, as ‘Irāqī writes eloquently: “He Himself is His own veil, for He is hidden by the very intensity of His manifestation and occulted by the very potency of His Light.”¹¹⁶² The paradox of the veil is a popular way of breaking the superiority of divine incomparability over imminence in favor of their symmetry. In ‘Irāqī’s *Flashes*, the popular paradox of the veil is performed in the *language of love*:

How high is Love, too high for us to circle the Ka’ba of its Majesty
on the strength of mere understanding, mere words; too exalted
for us to gaze upon its real beauty with eye unveiled and vision
direct:

*Removed is Love above man's aspiration,
above the tales of union and separation;*

¹¹⁵⁹ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #102.

¹¹⁶⁰ al-Qūnawī 193?, MS.236.

¹¹⁶¹ ‘Irāqī 1982, introduction, p.72.

¹¹⁶² ‘Irāqī 1982, #13, p.97.

*for that which transcends the imagination
escapes all metaphor and explication.*¹¹⁶³

Love transcends human language and understanding: it cannot be defined, or grasped by reason or by mystical vision. The binaries of creation only come into existence after the entification of the divine attributes that emanate from the apophatic essence. Hence Love is beyond all binaries—“Love upon Its mighty Throne is purified of all entification, in the sanctuary of Its Reality *too holy to be touched by inwardness or outwardness.*”¹¹⁶⁴ Instead, the entification of Love, by looking at itself through the mirror of “lover” and “beloved,” creates the binaries. The divine essence transcends these binaries such as “hidden-manifest,” “lover-beloved.” It is X-not-X phrases through which ‘Irāqī negates propositional discourse on the divine essence:

How could anything else veil Him? For veils belong only to the limited, and He has no limits. All you behold in the world of form and meaning is His Form-but He is unbound by any form. ...

*Hidden, manifest,
both at once:
You are not this, not that
yet both at once.*¹¹⁶⁵

At the end of the century, ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d.1330)’s disciple Dāwūd al-Qaysarī (d.1350) followed ‘Irāqī’s apophatic approach to Love/God in his Arabic *Treatise on the Gnosis of True Love [Risālah fī Ma’rifat al-Maḥabbat al-Ḥaqīqiyyah]*. Indeed, the two Arabic couplets that al-Qaysarī quotes are the same as ‘Irāqī’s above quoted couplets:

Essential Love [*al-muḥabbah al-dhātiyyah*] arises from God’s comprehension of His ipseity and the perfections of His ipseity through His ipseity. This rank is higher than that of Knowledge. This Love is in the rank of “Exclusive Unity” [*aḥadiyyah*]. This rank has no plurality in it in any sense, no multiplicity in it in any sort—so there is no name, no description, no attribute of it added to the ipseity. The entification of the ipseity of the Exclusive Unity [*‘ayn al-dhāt al-aḥadiyyah*] is never separate from her [the ipseity]. No

¹¹⁶³ ‘Irāqī 1982, prologue, pp.70-71; my emphasis.

¹¹⁶⁴ ‘Irāqī 1982, #1, p.73; my emphasis.

¹¹⁶⁵ ‘Irāqī 1982, #13, pp.97-98; my emphasis.

intellect or thought can comprehend her reality. No eyes or beholders can grasp Her. None can encompass Her. None can encircle the reality of her rank. Hence it is said:

*Removed is Love above man's concerns,
above the tales of union and separation;*

*for that which transcends the imagination
escapes all metaphor and explication.*¹¹⁶⁶

Qaysarī adopts the paradox of the veil in the vocabulary of love, with the balanced transgression of *tashbīh* and *tanzīh*, and negation and affirmation. This is a significant move, considering Qaysarī's headship at the first Ottoman university at Iznik, and influential role as a key commentator of Ibn al-'Arabī's dense works. Not only paradoxical apophaticism, but also the language of love that 'Irāqī and Qaysarī adopt became a pivotal dimension of Ottoman Sufi heritage. Many Sufis in modern Turkey in the Ottoman lineage still follow al-'Irāqī's formulation: "there is no god but Love."¹¹⁶⁷

Summary: Dialectical Logic and Its Repertoire

Thirteenth century Sufism witnesses an intensive performance of X-not-X statements on the nature of the divine essence. In addition to the figures introduced above, many Sufis of the time adopted such paradoxes to develop apophatic positions on the divine essence. Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥabashī (d.1221), 'Umar Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d.1235), Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (fl.1262), Bint al-Nafīs (d.1288), 'Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d.1291), Sa'd al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d.ca.1299), 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī (d.1330), Āmulī (d.1385) are just some of these figures. Due to the prominence of Ibn al-'Arabī's followers or associates on this list, it is worth asking whether Ibn al-'Arabī was the decisive reason of this fondness of paradoxes. Sufis of the previous centuries already resorted to paradoxes intensively on the divine essence, yet the cosmology laid out by Ibn al-'Arabī *systematizes the paradoxes and their dialectical logic* developed by the earlier masters. Al-Niffarī's paradox of the veil, al-Kharrāz's divine coincidence of opposites, al-Ḥallāj's theory of unity between man and God, al-Biṣṭāmī's

¹¹⁶⁶ al-Qaysarī 1997, pp.138-139.

¹¹⁶⁷ Schimmel 1975, p.137.

One of the most famous representatives modern Sufi music, Mercan Dede employs the theme of "there is no god but Love" together with X-not-X statements in his song "Captive" [*Tutsak*] in the best seller album, *800*.

paradoxical human apotheosis are now the wheels of a tremendous dialectical apophatic juggernaut.¹¹⁶⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabī lays out the dialectical logic behind the appeal to a variety of paradoxes, making it immediately available to his followers and readers. In this system, *the binaries that construct the specific discourse on God are carefully matched and united in order to perform the unsayability and unknowability of the divine essence through the self-negation of the discourse.* Such statements embody a self-negating theological discourse—they systematically and powerfully demonstrate that the excessive object of the discourse cannot be contained within its own limits. This failure of discursivity before the unknowability of its excessive object is indicated by a paradoxical employment of the binaries that sustain that discourse. *The paradox not only states the unsayability and unknowability, but also performs it through negating its own act of saying on knowing.* Hence it is praise in its self-negation: X-not-X phrases dwell predominantly within the contexts of praise or prayer, which intensify their performativity. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī’s paradoxes powerfully manifest the multi-dimensional performativity of the paradoxes on the divine essence:

“Glory be to Him who is *high in His lowness, low in His highness, nonmanifest in His manifestation, and manifest in His nonmanifestation.*”

It is He that is He, and the oneness of all things derives from Him.
“Nothing is like Him, and He is the Seeing, the Hearing” [Q.42:11].

...

The heart knows only the temporal,
the lips speak only words—
How can I know Thee in my heart,
how can I call Thee with my tongue?

Glory be to your Lord, the Lord of inaccessibility, above what they describe!¹¹⁶⁹

¹¹⁶⁸ Al-Niffarī was mostly forgotten until he was reclaimed as a Sufi master by Ibn al-‘Arabī and his circle. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s circle plays also a significant role in the transmission of al-Kharrāz’s work, *Book of Truthfulness [Kitāb al-Ṣidq]*. Indeed, as far as we know, only one copy of the book has survived, that by the hand of the well-known pupil of Ibn al-‘Arabī, Ismā‘īl ibn Sawdakīn (d.1248). (al-Kharrāz 1937, p.83 (Arabic text).) For Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reclaim of al-Biṣṭāmī, see Ernst 1993, pp.1-14.

¹¹⁶⁹ Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī in Chittick 1992, p.41; my emphasis.

Discursivity is canceled in the balance of affirmation and negation; unknowability and unsayability are performed through this self-cancellation of the theological discourse. Still, the performative dimensions of paradoxical apophaticism cannot be limited to these relatively theoretical, panegyric self-negations. Depending on the normative institutions that regulate the discourse, and the repertoire of terms and binaries that sustain it, the paradoxical apophatic act may gain or lose unique performative dimensions. The healing power of paradoxes in thirteenth century Kubrāwī Sufism is an excellent example of this contextual specificity of apophatic performances on the divine essence.

Healing with Paradoxes on Divine Unity: Performativity in Paradoxical Apophaticism

Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d.899) explained that remedy and sickness will turn into their opposites if one is not truthful [*ṣādiq*] in her trust in God [*tawakkul*]. One should not hope for a cure nor fear sickness, but rather turn one's eyes to "*the Lord of sickness and cure.*" If the cure is desired for itself, and mistaken for the real object of desire, then it turns into poison. The remedy proves to be one's sickness, and many die of the remedy. "Many have sought to be healed, and have hoped to be helped by the very thing which has proved their undoing, or have feared to be harmed by the very thing that may have saved them."¹¹⁷⁰

Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī (d.1238)'s Persian hagiography narrates a parallel paradoxical incident in which the shaykh caught a terrible and painful eye infection when he was in Kayseri, in Central Anatolia. Without letting his doctors and disciples know, he went to the Baṭṭal Mosque for the afternoon prayer. Kāmil Tabrīzī (fl.ea.13th CE), apparently a lunatic who had become Awḥad's disciple after he was warned in a dream,¹¹⁷¹ filled the mosque with ten to fifteen quintals of melons. Awḥad ate all of the melons that ten person could barely finish. When his doctors and disciples arrived at the mosque, they began crying and grieving, because melon was medically notorious for being the worst substance for his eye disease.¹¹⁷² Quite undisturbed, Awḥad ignored the protests

¹¹⁷⁰ al-Kharrāz 1937, p.38 (Arabic text); p.31 (English, with slight modification of mine).

¹¹⁷¹ Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī 1969, #47, pp.191-192.

¹¹⁷² According to his late-twelfth century hagiography, Aḥmad-i Jām (d.1141) advised a novice the consumption of melons to cure ear-ache. Interestingly enough, like the doctors and disciples of Awḥad al-Dīn, the novice had assumed that eating melons would only worsen his illness. "I thought that if I were to eat melon for lunch, my ear would grow worse and I would perish." But he heeds the advice of Aḥmad-i Jām, and needless to add, he "was purged of that malady and never had any ear-ache again." (Aḥmad-i Jām 2004, p.325.)

of his doctors and disciples, put a slice of melon on each eye, wrapped them carefully, and rested for a while in the mosque. When he removed the wraps, the obstinate illness was already cured, and the infection had miraculously disappeared. In Awḥad's own words, he had made "*the quintessence of remedy from the substance of disease*" [*madda-yi dard rā 'ayn-i davā sāzīm*].¹¹⁷³

Al-Kharrāz's replacement of the cure and disease, and Kirmānī's self-treatment with the opposite of the remedy recalls a wider paradoxical theme that embraces theology and Sufi practice. Accordingly, the realization of the paradox of the divine essence is a key component of human perfection. The practice of actively invoking the coincidence of the opposites in the unknowable divine unity helps the healing of the soul in the same paradoxical way Kirmānī was healed by the very substance of disease. The performance of the divine paradox has an irreducible transformative and therapeutic aspect. The Kubrāwī and Naqshbandī Sufi lines, both of which inculcate the profession of faith "*there is no god but God*" as their invocation [*dhikr*], pointedly call this performative dimension of the paradoxical apophaticism "healing with opposites." The idea that paradoxes on the divine essence heal the soul has a distinct Persian lineage, and an orientation towards love mysticism. It can be traced back to the two disciples of Abu 'Alī al-Fārmadhī (d.1084): Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d.1126) and Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bustī (d.af.1077).

For Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, the first half of the profession of faith, i.e., the negation, is not only of all discourses on the divine, but also of one's selfhood. Through the move of negation, one removes all discursive assertions, at the theological level, from the beloved, and annihilates all states of selfhood in the beloved. As contradictory binaries [*azdad*], these states are the source of all maladies of the soul. The negation "there is no" in the declaration of faith [*takhlīl*], hence, frees the wayfarer from the created binaries, and transports to the beloved, which is the realm of paradoxes. In Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's words:

Once the lover comes in himself to the (real) self from the beloved, his way to the (real) self starts from her and leads to her. Since his way to the self starts from her and leads to her, he will not be

Rūmī's earliest hagiographer, Sipahsālār (d.1312) narrates the popular report that Bisṭāmī (d.848) did not eat melon in his entire life, because he did not know the prophetic tradition, i.e., how the Prophet was eating a melon. (Sipahsālār 2004, p.136.)

For a contemporary Sufi medical perspective on melon, see Moinuddin al-Chishtiyya 1991, p.60.

¹¹⁷³ Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī 1969, #68, pp.265-266; my emphasis.

subject to those states. What could the states of *separation and union* do here? How could *acceptance and refusal* tie him down? When could *contraction and expansion*, and *sorrow and delight* circumambulate around the pavilion of his empire? [Thus he is beyond all these states].¹¹⁷⁴

The movement beyond the negation of binaries is the paradoxical yet unending quest “from and in” the divine beloved. This is the “secret depth” of the second half of the declaration of faith, “but God [*illā Allāh*],” i.e., the affirmation of the divine as well as the transcendent self. Once the threshold of the realm of negating all binaries is transcended, the lover enters the realm of affirmation through paradoxes. The beacon of the experiential realm of paradoxes is itself a visionary paradox: the “*black light*” [*nūr-a siyāh*]. It is a paradox as only the beloved can affirm herself—no kataphatic discourse is possible on the beloved. The affirmation in, hence the completion of, the declaration of faith, is a move within the realm of paradoxes. As a mystical performance, the paradoxes nevertheless carry the lover to maturity—to the *healing* of the soul through going beyond the binaries:

And with ease we got over spiritual sickness and defect.
Know, that *black light* is beyond the mystery of the negation [*lā*].
We passed beyond even that black light,
*and now neither this nor that remains.*¹¹⁷⁵

This popular poem in Aḥmad al-Ghazālī’s *Inspirations* actually belongs to Abū al-Ḥasan al-Bustī, and it is also cited by later mystics in the paradoxical line, including Aḥmad al-Ghazālī’s ill-fated student ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī (d.1131), and the Kubrāwī master Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī (d.1256).¹¹⁷⁶ The poem indicates the healing flight to the realm of paradoxes beyond the realm of negation marked by black light. On the same topic, al-Bustī wrote a short treatise entitled *On the Explication of the Reality of “There is no god but God”* [*Dar Bayān-i Haqīqat-a “lā ilāha illā Allāh”*]. The treatise narrates the perfection of the soul through the ascent from the negation “there is no,” to the paradoxical transcendence of the binary of negation and affirmation in the word “but God.”¹¹⁷⁷ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī follows the same paradoxical interpretation of the

¹¹⁷⁴ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī [undated], #19, pp.13-14; my emphases. For Pourjavady’s translation, see Aḥmad al-Ghazālī 1986, pp.38-39.

¹¹⁷⁵ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī [undated], #19, p.14. For Pourjavady’s translation, see Aḥmad al-Ghazālī 1986, p.39.

¹¹⁷⁶ Papan-Matin 2010, p.160.

¹¹⁷⁷ See Pourjavady 1992, p.496.

profession of faith, yet with a language of love mysticism. Like al-Bustī, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī argues that this move “from and in” the beloved through paradoxes does not cater to an ontological unification between the lover and the beloved, or an epistemological access to the ipseity of the beloved. On the contrary, the lover is defined by inability before the beloved, and “when the lover thinks he is closer to her and considers her to be closer to himself, he is (actually) farther away (from her).”¹¹⁷⁸ Yet it is not in vain that one negates the created binaries and plunges into endless paradoxes. The path of love of the unknowable, unattainable beloved is paved with paradoxes, which negate the artificial binaries and asymptotically draw the lover closer to the beloved. Again, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī employs terms of healing to express this quest in paradoxes: “a patient is in need of medicine, but the medicine has no need of the patient, because the patient suffers deficiency when he does not take the medicine while the medicine is free from the patient. ... What loss to the idol if it has no idolater?”¹¹⁷⁹ His exposition of the paradox in the *takhlīl* is especially detailed, and associated with a complex cosmology and the struggle of good and evil in his *Excursus Regarding the Expression of Unity [al-Tajrīd fī Kalimat al-Tawḥīd]*. Neither the expression “there is no god,” nor the subsequent apophatic “affirmation” of His pure, inaccessible transcendence help alone: it is the utterance of their unity, the paradox that is healing:

“There is no god” is a poison, and “but God” is the remedy. This is like somebody who drinks only the poison without drinking the remedy—he will perish. In the same way, if somebody drinks the poison of “there is no god” and does not drink the remedy of “but God,” he will perish.¹¹⁸⁰

Not only the binary of affirmation and negation in the profession of faith, but also the theme of healing with paradoxes, and even the “black light” as the marker of the threshold appears in ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt’s theology as well.¹¹⁸¹ Again, the move from the invocation of the negation “there is no god” to the affirmation “but God” marks not only God’s transcendence of binaries, but also human apotheosis through self-annihilation. One cannot be said to possess a

¹¹⁷⁸ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī [undated], #36, p.19. For Pourjavady’s translation, see Aḥmad al-Ghazālī 1986, p.51.

¹¹⁷⁹ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī [undated], #36, pp.19-20. For Pourjavady’s translation, see Aḥmad al-Ghazālī 1986, p.52.

¹¹⁸⁰ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī 2012, Ch.5, p.55

¹¹⁸¹ Papan-Matin 2010, pp.158-161.

soul unless one passes beyond the level of “there is no god” [*lā ilāha*] and reaches the level of “but God” [*illā Allāh*]. This idea of being caught up in the realm of negation was exactly the starting point for the negativist emphasis of the Kubrāwī Sufis, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī (d.1219) and Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī (fl.ea.13th CE). In contrast, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt and others emphasize the balance. As ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt puts it:

whole world is caught up in the realm of negation [*lā ilāha*],
wherein a hundred thousand souls have been bereft of their soul.
On this Path, only one who reaches affirmation [*illā Allāh*]
possesses a soul; one barred from this degree possesses none of
the soul’s perfections.¹¹⁸²

Here, the realm of affirmation is not that of the kataphatic discourse on God, but the negation of both the kataphatic and apophatic discourse on God in the “unthinkable conjunction of opposites”—in paradoxes.¹¹⁸³ Binaries vanish here, but not in vain. “The people of insight learn a lesson from the coincidence of opposites,” as ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt is told in a dream by the inhabitants of the canopies of the unseen.¹¹⁸⁴ The paradox of the divine essence not only embodies a theological position which keeps divine unknowability beyond the “black light,” but also performs the treatment and perfection the soul as a transformative speech-act.

Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d.1221)’s description of the invocation “there is no god but God” as a remedy to the maladies of the soul fits perfectly into this institutionalized Sufi context. Invocation, or literally, “anamnesis” [*dhikr*] is forgetting the remembrance of all-but God, and performing the speech act “there is no god but God.” This is a healing coincidence of the opposites. The negation removes all binaries, and the affirmation indicates the paradoxical nature of the divine essence though a dialectical logic which breaks propositional discourse. What is affirmed is not kataphatic discourse on the divine essence, but its paradoxical unknowability, and the balanced incapacity of both negative and positive discourse before the divine excess. The paradoxical poem Kubrā cites at the end of the passage, unsurprisingly, belongs to al-Ḥallāj:

[“There is no god but God”] is an electuary composed of negation
and affirmation. With negation, corrupt substances disappear,
those in which are engendered the malady of the heart, the

¹¹⁸² ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt in Lewisohn 1999, p.306.

¹¹⁸³ See Bowering 1999, p.227.

¹¹⁸⁴ Papan-Matin 2010, p.77.

fettering of the spirit, and the rise in potency of the self along with the fostering of its attributes. ... Through the affirmation “but God,” soundness of the heart results, as well as the heart’s safety from the vile character traits that come from disorder in its essential temperament. A rebalancing of the heart’s temperament by means of its light occurs. ... The state of remembering is exchanged for the state of being remembered, and the state of being remembered is exchanged for the state of remembering. He who remembers becomes annihilated in remembrance, and the one remembered remains, standing in as a vicegerent for the one who remembers. Thus, when you seek the one who remembers, you find the one remembered, and when you seek the one remembered, you find the one who remembers. “And when you behold me, you behold him, and when you behold him, you behold me.”¹¹⁸⁵

In the thirteenth century, the inheritors of this performative paradoxical apophaticism on the divine unity were Kubrāwī Sufis and their associates. In Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.1229)’s *Conference of the Birds*, for example, divine unknowability leads to paradoxes that indicate the balanced incapacity of negative and positive discourse by removing all binaries. Incomparability and imminence as well as positive and negative language are balanced in the paradoxical unknowability of the divine essence:

When you seek Him in hiddenness, He is manifest,
When you seek Him manifest, He is hidden.

He is hidden when you seek Him manifest,
Manifest, when you seek Him hidden.

When you seek Him in both,
He is beyond both of them.

You haven’t lost anything—do not seek.

¹¹⁸⁵ For the Arabic text, see Kubrā in Mole 1963, pp.18-19. For an impeccable translation to English, see Kubrā in Zargar 2013, p.128.

For Ismā‘īl Ḥaqqī Bursawī (d.1724)’s Ottoman commentary on the section, see Kubrā 1980, pp.58-62. Bursawī’s creative reading of Kubrā is firmly situated on the background of Ibn al-‘Arabī as well as Turkish Sufism, as his quotation from Yunus Emre (d.ca.1320) clearly indicates.

Whatever you say isn't that—don't say.

Whatever you say, whatever you know—that's *you*.
Recognize who you are—you are a hundred times beyond.

Know Him with *Him*—not with *you*.
His path to Him begins from Him—not from your reason.

Descriptions of describers don't reach Him,
It's not in everyone's capacity.

Failure to describe Him goes hand in hand with His gnosis,
For, He is neither utterable nor describable.

...

He is so transcendent to knowledge, and beyond vision that
He is traceless in His eminence.

*One cannot find a trace of Him, except tracelessness,
Or a remedy except leaving the soul.*

No one, conscious or ecstatic, has a share from Him,
Except this transcendence.

Even if you seek Him in every atom, in this and the next world,
Whatever you find or say is your understanding—God is
beyond.¹¹⁸⁶

This section on divine unknowability and ineffability occupies pages of the *Conference*, and sets the stage of the entire allegory. In these pages, discourse on the divine essence is negated in favor of a paradoxical approach wherein divine incomparability and imminence are equally incapacious. In the following couplets, 'Aṭṭār connects this move beyond the binaries to the profession of faith, "there is no god but God." The move from negation to affirmation marks the departure from propositional discourse with its binaries, and entering the realm of paradoxes, in line with al-Bustī, 'Ayn al-Quḍāt, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, and Najm al-Dīn Kubrā:

Whoever failed to find this pearl in this ocean

¹¹⁸⁶ 'Aṭṭār [undated], #98-105; 107-110.

*Became “there is no,” and has found nothing of tracelessness,
except “there is no.”*

That which can be described—how can it be He?
How on earth can one chat about Him so easily?

He cannot be indicated—don’t utter a word.
He cannot be expressed—don’t converse.

Neither indication is allowed, nor a signal.
No one has knowledge about Him, nor a signal.¹¹⁸⁷

Daadbeh and Melvin-Koushki aptly summarize various theories on ‘Aṭṭār’s spiritual lineage, none of which are conclusive. Jāmī’s *Nafahāt* seems to mistake the Kubrāwī shaykh Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī (d.1219) with Majd al-Dīn Khuwārazmī, who is praised in the introduction of ‘Aṭṭār’s hagiography.¹¹⁸⁸ Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī’s name does not appear in any of ‘Aṭṭār’s authentic works, hence the evidence for a Kubrāwī link appears rather weak.¹¹⁸⁹ On the other hand, ‘Aṭṭār’s performative paradoxical apophaticism on the declaration of faith [*takhlīl*], shared with Persian Kubrāwīs of his time, at least demonstrates ‘Aṭṭār’s acquaintance, if not association, with Kubrāwī Sufis of the time. These convergences can be extended to textual¹¹⁹⁰ and doctrinal overlaps, such as the “annihilation of annihilation” [*fanā’ al-fanā’*] found in the works of Kubrāwī masters,¹¹⁹¹ and in ‘Aṭṭār’s *Conference*.¹¹⁹² For ‘Aṭṭār, the station of annihilation in annihilation marks the passing of the seventh and last valley of the soul, “the valley of destitution and nothingness” [*vādi-ye faqr-u fanā’*] where the binaries of theology, logic, and discourse are transcended in favor of paradoxes and their

¹¹⁸⁷ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #123-126; my emphasis.

¹¹⁸⁸ See Lewisohn and C. Shackle 2006, pp.9-10.

¹¹⁸⁹ Daadbeh and Melvin-Koushki 2015. For ‘Aṭṭār’s link to Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī via a certain Imām Aḥmad Khuwārī, a disciple of Majd al-Dīn, see Lewisohn and Shackle 2006, p.xix; Landolt 2006, p.10.

¹¹⁹⁰ Both Dāya Rāzī and ‘Aṭṭār, for example, use the imagery of a moth diving into a candle flame to depict the erasure of the ego before ultimate reality. (See Ridgeon 2014, pp.143-144.)

¹¹⁹¹ Dāya Rāzī 1958, #18, p.169; Dāya Rāzī 1982, p.302. For Sayyid ‘Alī al-Hamadānī (d.1385) on annihilation of annihilation, see Hanif 2000, pp.344-345. For Lāhījī (d.1506), see Corbin 1994, p.118. For ‘Azīz Nasafī, see Ridgeon 2014, p.139.

¹¹⁹² ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #4282, 4291.

dialectical subversions. For Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī, the station of annihilation of annihilation indicates the same threshold, and is symbolized by the now-familiar “black light.” The black light is the union of opposites, hence discursive reasoning cannot access its paradoxical meaning, or move beyond it.¹¹⁹³ Dāya Rāzī connects the profession of faith to the performative shift from the negation of the self to the therapeutic affirmation of the paradox. The profession of faith, “there is no god but God,” is the best invocation, as it performs the healing of the self simultaneously with this apophatic theology. Accordingly, the malady of forgetfulness of the soul has the reverse structure of the *takhlīl*—it is composed of the negation of remembering God, and affirmation of remembering all-but-God. The invocation “there is no god but God” is its opposite, thus a perfect cure—“a potion mixed like oxymel out of the vinegar of negation and the sugar of affirmation.” By “there is no god,” everything one can imagine or conceive is negated, while the second part, “but God” affirms His majestic presence.¹¹⁹⁴ The invocation of the divine *takhlīl* is “the cure through the opposites” [*‘ilāj bi-azdād-hā*—a performance that transforms the human soul. “The scissors of negation” in “there is no god” severs all attachments, and the beauty of divine might becomes manifested with the affirmation of paradoxical unknowability in “but God.” This is the paradoxical, performative, and experiential interpretation of the *takhlīl*, and the hidden meaning of the cryptic statement of the Sufi master Yūsuf ibn Ḥusayn al-Rāzī (d.916) that “none says ‘God’ but God.”¹¹⁹⁵ This is quite parallel to the ineffability of the profession of faith in the exchange of letters between two Kubrāwī Sufis, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī (d.1219) and Sharaf al-Dīn

¹¹⁹³ Papan-Matin 2010, p.168.

¹¹⁹⁴

[The words, “there is no god but God”] contain both negation and affirmation, and the disease of forgetfulness can be repulsed by the medicine of negation and affirmation. For forgetfulness is likewise composed of negation and affirmation-negation of the remembrance of God and affirmation of the remembrance of other than God. A potion mixed like oxymel out of the vinegar of negation and the sugar of affirmation is therefore needed to eliminate the bilious matter of forgetfulness. By “there is no god” [*lā ilāha*], other than God is negated, and by “but God” [*illā Allāh*], His majestic presence is affirmed. When one pursues this invocation [*zīkr*] and persists in it, the attachments of the spirit to other than God will be gradually severed by the scissors of *lā ilāha*, and the beauty of the monarch of *illā Allāh* will become manifest and emerge from the veil of might. (Dāya Rāzī 1958, pp.148-149; Dāya Rāzī 1982, pp.269-270.)

¹¹⁹⁵ Dāya Rāzī 1958, p.150; Dāya Rāzī 1982, p.270.) For further on Dāya Rāzī’s reading of the profession of faith, see Waley 1999, pp.532-533.

Balkhī (fl.ea.13th CE) that I discusses above in the chapter on philosophical apophaticism.

‘Azīz Nasafī (fl.13th CE) is yet another Persian mystic, who established links with the Kubrāwīyyah. At a relatively young age, he associated with Najm al-Dīn Kubrā’s prominent student, Sa’d al-Dīn Ḥammūyah (d.1252), whom he served in Khurāsān.¹¹⁹⁶ While Nasafī’s relation to the Kubrāwīs and Ismā’īlīs is a complex one, his writings bear the mark of the former group on his paradoxical approach to the divine essence. Nasafī connects the binary of negation and affirmation in the profession of faith to the performance of human apotheosis. The opening of Nasafī’s *Unveiling of Realities* [*Kashf al-Ḥaqā’iq*] sets the stage of wayfaring with reference to the profession of faith, with a striking similarity to Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī’s word choice:

For the People of the Truth, the wayfarer is the individual who negates and affirms while wayfaring is negation and affirmation, in other words, negating the self and affirming the Truth Most High. This is the meaning of “there is no god but God.”¹¹⁹⁷

Other writings of Nasafī, such as the popular *Furthest Goal* [*Maqṣad al-Aqṣā*] reverberate with the same Persian Kubrāwī theme of the symmetrical binary of negation and affirmation in the profession of faith with transformative power on the human soul and a key role in wayfaring.¹¹⁹⁸ Hence Nasafī’s approach to the symmetry of negative and positive language is closely connected with those of the Kubrāwī masters of the century.¹¹⁹⁹

The symmetrical incapacity of positive and negative discourse is coupled with the symmetry of divine incomparability and imminence.¹²⁰⁰ On the one hand,

¹¹⁹⁶ See Ridgeon in ‘Azīz Nasafī 2002, p.7.

¹¹⁹⁷ ‘Azīz Nasafī 2002, p.191

¹¹⁹⁸ “Renunciation and gnosis of God is the testament of Islam, and the testament of Islam is affirmation and negation. Negation is the renunciation of idols and affirmation is the gnosis of God. ... Negation is not witnessing the self, and affirmation is witnessing God.” (‘Azīz Nasafī 2002, pp.58-59.)

¹¹⁹⁹ Against the protests of the Kāzarūnī master Awḥad al-Dīn al-Balyānī (d.ca.1284), whom I discussed under Ismā’īlī apophaticism, ‘Azīz Nasafī employs the phrase “annihilation of annihilation” like the Kubrāwī Sufis of his time. (See Ridgeon 2014, p.139.)

¹²⁰⁰

Nasafī’s ... perspective reflects a common theological position among Sufis of his time, which was to balance God’s similarity ... with His utter incomparability. This view is frequently attributed to Ibn ‘Arabī, whose

following full *tanzīh*, Nasafī asserts the unknowability of the divine essence as a “Sufi principle.” Accordingly, “the Sufis say that there is no road from man to God, because the nature of God is illimitable and infinite, without beginning or end or even direction.”¹²⁰¹ He repeats the idea in *The Book of the Descent* [*Kitāb al-tanzīl*].¹²⁰² On the other hand, along with this unknowability and hiddenness comes divine proximity, manifestness, and imminence, i.e., divine *tashbīh*: “since the nature of God is infinitely subtle, nothing can ever veil or conceal it, for the more subtle a thing is the greater is its capacity for penetration.”¹²⁰³ The simultaneous pursuit of divine incomparability and imminence is coupled with a symmetrical distance to the negative and positive discourse on the divine essence. Nasafī negates propositional discourse on the divine essence in favor of a dialectical logic that operates via the transcendence of all binaries:

[Sufis assert that] He is infinite and illimitable, by which they mean not only without beginning or end, but also without determinate position of time, place, or direction. The nature of God, according to them, is an infinite and illimitable light, a boundless and fathomless ocean... There is no single atom of existent beings which God does not pervade, comprise, and comprehend. God is always near to man, but man is always far from God, because he is not aware of His proximity.¹²⁰⁴

The markers of paradoxical apophaticism, (i) the symmetry of divine incomparability and imminence, (ii) the symmetry of negative and positive discourse, (iii) the divine unknowability that transcends these binaries and produces paradoxes that negate propositional logic via its dialectical logic—all are present in Nasafī’s corpus. Moreover, the connection of the binary of

enigmatic phrase “He/not he” is mirrored by Nasafī’s own comment that, “It is correct if they say, ‘It is we who were, are and will be,’ and it is also correct if they say, ‘It is not we who were, are and will be.’” ... This Sufi stance posits a God that is “closer than the jugular vein” (Q.50:16) and one that at the same time is remote and unknowable. (Ridgeon 2014, p.136.)

¹²⁰¹ ‘Azīz Nasafī in Rippin and Knappert, p.171.

¹²⁰²

The incomparable [*munnaẓa*] essence and holy face of the Truth [*ḥaqq*] is so great that an individual’s reason cannot encompass it. Rather [the Truth’s] exalted self is higher than that anyone may discover It as It really is. ... The extremity of man’s knowledge is that point where he knows that he cannot know God as God really is. (‘Azīz Nasafī in Ridgeon 2014, pp.135-136.)

¹²⁰³ ‘Azīz Nasafī in Rippin and Knappert, p.172.

¹²⁰⁴ ‘Azīz Nasafī in Rippin and Knappert, p.172.

negation and affirmation to the perfection of the human soul in Nasafī's thought adds to the invocation of the profession of faith a performative dimension that was promoted primarily by the Persian Kubrāwī masters of Nasafī's time.

The performative paradoxical apophaticism on the profession of faith, shared by Kubrāwīs of the thirteenth century, takes complex forms in the following centuries. Muḥammad Pārsā (d.1420), the follower of Bahā' al-Dīn al-Naqshband (d.1389) from Bukhārā, and a key figure in the organization of the Naqshbandīyyah, quotes almost verbatim the words of Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī on the binary in the profession of faith, and attributes them to his own master. Pārsā even adopts Kubrā's and Dāya Rāzī's concept of "*cure through the opposites*" [*'ilāj bi-azdād-hā*]*—*a performance associated with the declaration of faith [*takhīl*], wherein all binaries are negated, and the paradox of the ineffable essence is dialectically indicated. Pārsā reports from the master al-Naqshband:

The finest invocation is the profession of faith, i.e., "there is no god but God." The form of this invocation is composed of negation and affirmation. In reality, only this word can be the path to the Supreme Majesty—glorious and transcendent He is. The veils before the wayfarers are due to forgetfulness. The truth of the veil is the reification of the worldly forms in their hearts. In this reification, the Real is negated, and all-but-Him is affirmed. Yet, according to the principle of "*healing with oppositions*" in the declaration of faith, there is a negation of all-but-God and an affirmation of the Real—glorious and transcendent He is.

The lineage of al-Naqshband that Pārsā introduces not only overlaps with that of the Kubrāwīyyah, but it also follows the same invocation "there is no god but God" with the Kubrāwīs, at least from the time of Yūsuf al-Hamadānī (d.1140).¹²⁰⁵ Yet the convergences go beyond the lineages and invocation preferences, and expand to the performative apophysis of the divine essence. Most prominently Pārsā's description of the realm of paradox clearly follows that of Dāya Rāzī and 'Aṭṭār. Pārsā calls the threshold of the ascent from the realm of negation of all binaries to the realm of paradoxes, "annihilation of annihilation," like Dāya Rāzī and 'Aṭṭār. Again, it is the performance of the invocation of the profession of faith that breaks the binaries of negation and affirmation, and

¹²⁰⁵ Yūsuf al-Hamadānī 2007, p.27. The *Litany of the Lovers* [*Awṛād al-Aḥbāb*], written by Abū al-Mafākhīr Yaḥyā (d.1335), a grandson of the Kubrāwī master Sayf al-Dīn Bākharzī (d.1231) through Burhān al-Dīn Aḥmad (d.1296), also underlines the importance of the declaration of faith as the Kubrāwī *dhikr*. (See DeWeese 1985, pp.34-36.)

leads to the gates of divine paradoxes. Here propositional discourse ends and dialectics rules. At that threshold, in his words:

The wayfarer is annihilated from his intellection, and from his soul.
And he is annihilated even from that annihilation. In this quintessence of annihilation [*'ayn-a fanā'*], his tongue actually begins to speak, while his body is serene and meek. Perplexity and tracelessness is in this quintessence of annihilation.

*Nobody acquires a trace from you,
This is the trace of the traceless!*¹²⁰⁶

The paradoxical poem on divine tracelessness [*bī-nishānī*] that Pārsā adds in this context is impossible to distinguish from the one that 'Aṭṭār uttered on the divine unknowability. It is not just Pārsā who inherits the performative paradoxical apophaticism on the profession of faith. Shams al-Dīn Lāhījī (d.1506) represents an outstanding case of incorporating 'Aṭṭār within the threshold the divine paradox, “the black light.” Lāhījī, the prominent master of the Nurbakhshiyah branch of the Kubrāwiyyah in Shīrāz, describes black light as the final visionary marker before losing one’s consciousness, in the way al-Bustī, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī and 'Ayn al-Quḍāt did.¹²⁰⁷ He also repeats the phrase, “only God knows God”—the catchword for divine unknowability from al-Kharrāz, al-Junayd, and Yūsuf ibn Ḥusayn al-Rāzī (d.916) to Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī, Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī, Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, and 'Azīz Nasafī.¹²⁰⁸ Moreover, Lāhījī is clearly influenced by 'Aṭṭār when mentioning the self-negation of the wayfarer (and binaries) in order to approach the affirmation (of the paradox) of God. Al-Lāhījī calls this station “the seventy valley of destitution and nothingness”—the exact name 'Aṭṭār employs in the *Conference*.¹²⁰⁹

Summary: Performative Paradoxical Apophaticism in Kubrāwiyyah

Lāhījī employs the paradox of black light and other themes of performative paradoxical apophaticism in his commentary on Maḥmūd Shabistarī (d.1320)'s *Rose Garden of Mystery*. While Corbin finds a general paradoxical pattern on dark matter or black light that transcends time constraints and religious boundaries, Shabistarī actually lacks not only the performative dimension of the profession of faith for the perfection of the wayfarer, but also the connection

¹²⁰⁶ Muḥammad Pārsā 1975, p.40.

¹²⁰⁷ Lāhījī in Corbin 1994, p.112.

¹²⁰⁸ Lāhījī in Corbin 1994, p.118.

¹²⁰⁹ Lāhījī in Corbin 1994, p.118.

between the binary in the profession of faith and the paradox of the divine essence. Similarly, Ibn al-'Arabī also employs the theme of the dark light of God in an exquisite paradoxical context that underlines divine unknowability, as well as the symmetry of negative and positive discourse before the coincidence of divine incomparability and imminence.¹²¹⁰ While the theme of black light fits perfectly into Ibn al-'Arabī's paradoxical apophaticism, he connects it neither to the performative invocation that heals the wayfarer, nor to the binary in the profession of faith. Bint al-Nafīs (d.1288) interprets this darkness in her teacher's work quite apophatically, yet the Kubrāwī connection with the profession of faith, or with the performative invocation is absent in her commentary on Ibn al-'Arabī's *Contemplations*.¹²¹¹ In contrast to Lāhījī's effort to push Shabistarī to the same performative paradoxical apophaticism with the Kubrāwī masters of thirteenth century, Shabistarī's paradoxes follow the more theoretical line of Ibn al-'Arabī, which has other performative dimensions.

1210

Then I entered a darkness and I was told, "Cast off your clothes and throw away the water and the stones, for you have found [what you were looking for]." I discarded everything I had with me, without seeing where, and I remained [just as I am]. He said to me, "Now you are you."

Then He said to me, "Do you see how excellent this darkness is, how intense its brightness and how clear its light! This darkness is the place from which the lights rise, the source from which the fountains of secrets spring forth and the [original] matter of the elements. From this darkness I have brought you into being, to it I make you return and I shall not remove you from it."

Then He showed me an opening like the eye of a needle. I went out towards it and I saw a beautiful radiance and a dazzling light. He said to me, "Have you seen how intense is the darkness of this light? Stretch out your hand and you will not see it." I stretched it out and, indeed, I did not see it. He said to me, "This is My light, in which none but Me can see himself."

Then He said to me, "Return to your darkness, for you are far from your kind." "There is no one but you in this darkness and I have brought into being from it no one but you; from it I have taken you." "I have created from light everything that exists except for you, who have been created from darkness."

"They have not valued God as they ought.' If He were in the light, then they would appreciate Him properly. You are truly My servant." "If you want to see Me, lift the veils from My face." (Ibn al-'Arabī 2001, #2, pp.33-34. For the Arabic text, see Ibn al-'Arabī in Ibn al-'Arabī and Bint al-Nafīs 2004, p.83.)

¹²¹¹ Bint al-Nafīs in Ibn al-'Arabī and Bint al-Nafīs 2004, p.84-87.

Rather few thirteenth century Sufis adopted the profession of faith as their exclusive *dhikr*, and even less so they saw a performative paradox in it. Kubrāwīs and the Khwājagān often quoted a prophetic report according to which the best of invocations is the profession of faith, “there is no God but God.” But there were also alternative prophetic reports in circulation. Even before the rise of institutionalized Sufism, a scholarly authority no less than al-Bayhaqī (d.1066) reported a prophetic tradition according to which “the best prayer [*afḍal al-du‘ā*] is ‘there is no god but God,’ and the best invocation [*afḍal al-dhikr*] is ‘thanks to God’ [*al-ḥamd li-llāh*].”¹²¹² Thus, many Sufis who adopted paradoxical approaches to the divine essence do not develop performative connections with the binary of negation and affirmation in the profession of faith. For example, Bahā’ al-Dīn Valad (d.1231), like his paradoxographer son Rūmī (d.1273), enjoyed intensively employing paradoxes, including on the divine essence. Yet, for him it is neither the profession of faith, nor the coincidence of the negation and affirmation, but simply invocation of the name “God” that heals the wayfarer.¹²¹³ Bahā’ al-Dīn Valad was depicted as a student of Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, and in the lineage of Aḥmad al-Ghazālī—both associations were probably forged as early as the thirteenth century. Similar connections with the Kubrāwī masters were forged for Rūmī as well. Yet Rūmī’s paradoxes are also easy to distinguish from the Kubrāwī performative apophaticism, as Rūmī preferred the invocation “God,” and even called himself “godly” [*Allāhī*], at least according to the early report of Aḥmad Aflākī (d.1360).¹²¹⁴ Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī’s hagiography narrates that indeed he praised and inculcated the invocation “there is no god but God”¹²¹⁵—a report supported by a number of his quatrains.¹²¹⁶ Yet he does not find a binary to negate in the *takhīl*—the invocation of the profession of faith is a transformative performance for the human soul that does not have apophatic theological dimensions. When negating the discourse on divine essence, Awḥad employs other paradoxical binaries from a panoramic theological, mystical, poetical, and mundane array, such as “Ka‘ba-temple,”

¹²¹² al-Bayhaqī 1358/1939, p.107.

¹²¹³ Bahā’ al-Dīn Valad 2008, p.36. The reader should be cautious about the translation style of Barks and Moyné, which does not closely follow the original Persian text.

¹²¹⁴ “Our *dhikr* is ‘Allāh! Allāh! Allāh!’ We are *Allāhīs*.” (Waley 1999, p.533.)

Chittick wants to connect the binary in the *takhīl* to Rūmī’s thought as well, but the textual evidence that he gives has little to do with the Kubrāwī paradox described here. See Chittick 2005, p.82.

¹²¹⁵ See Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī 1969, #29, p.93.

¹²¹⁶ Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī 1999, #42, p.84; #43 p.85; #1237, p.317; #1514, pp.370-371.

“wise-fool,” “sober-drunken,” “acquaintance-stranger.”¹²¹⁷ In the Mu‘tabirūn lineage of Andalusia, Ibn Barraĵān (d.1141) inculcated a loose mixture of “God” and “there is no god but God,” prefiguring the invocation practices of the North African Shādhiliyyah, which was not yet fixed as a formal litany.¹²¹⁸ In the absence of institutionalized Sufism, Ibn Barraĵān does not connect the profession of faith to performance of invocation with a specifically paradoxical lens. For Ibn al-‘Arabī’s companion Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥabashī (d.1221), the main invocation is “God.”¹²¹⁹ The Shādhilī master Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī (d.1309) admonishes his disciples not to stray from the all-embracing name “God,” or “He,”¹²²⁰ even though he does not hesitate to cite the *ḥadīth* that instead praises the *takhlīl*.¹²²¹ In brief, there is no performative paradox in the *takhlīl* among western mystics that we find in the Kubrāwī performance of invocation.

Such comparisons indicate the contextual nature of the specific discourse on the divine essence, as well as the specificity of the apophatic performance. The paradoxical apophaticism of ‘Irāqī is, indeed, connected to the profession of faith, but quite differently than the Kubrāwī negation and affirmation. By replacing the name “God” with “Love,” ‘Irāqī transforms the declaration of the profession of faith from “there is no god but God” into “there is no god but Love.”¹²²² He employs the *takhlīl* to express the paradox of love, lover and beloved, instead of finding a negation and affirmation in the *takhlīl*. Unsurprisingly, the binaries

¹²¹⁷ See e.g. Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī 1999, #1516, p.371.

¹²¹⁸

The most sublime invocation is to say *Allāh, Allāh* with a conscious presence of heart, then to repeat *There is no god but God*, and then return to *Allāh, Allāh, Allāh, There is no god but God*, and to do so over and over again. And if you wish, one can invoke *Allāh, Allāh, Allāh, the Forbearing [al-Ḥalīm], the Noble [al-Karīm]. Allāh, Allāh, the Exalted, the Majestic...* thereby pairing up the name [Allāh] with all the names with a witnessing hear and a present remembrance. That is his most beneficial remembrance and the noblest of moments. Repeating *there is no god but God* purifies the heart, whereas repeating *Allāh Allāh* returns the invocation to a cleansed heart and a purified inmost consciousness [*sirr*]. And the same goes for repeating all the names with the name *Allāh*.” (Ibn Barraĵān 2015, p.14; with my minor modifications. Also see Ibn Barraĵān in Casewit 2014, pp.400-401.)

¹²¹⁹ al-Ḥabashī 1994.

¹²²⁰ al-Iskandarī in Koury Denner 1986, p.121

¹²²¹ al-Iskandarī in Koury Denner 1986, pp.175-176. He emphasizes that one should not to feel enmity towards those who rather use the *takhlīl*. (al-Iskandarī in Koury Denner 1986, p.135.)

¹²²² See Schimmel 1975, p.137.

‘Irāqī employs in order to negate the discourse on Love is different than the “there is no” and “but” of Kubrāwī masters. Instead, he employs well-known binaries taken from Persian poetry, mysticism, and philosophy, similar to Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī. On the other hand, for the Kubrāwī master ‘Alā’ al-Dawlah al-Simnānī (d.1336), like other Kubrāwīs of his time, one had to follow the invocation “there is no god but God,” because no tongue was pure enough for the invocation of the highest name [*al-ism al-a‘lā*], “God.”¹²²³ The profession of faith, however, is composed of a binary the performance of which will lead the wayfarer to perfection.¹²²⁴ The name “God” is already removed from the discursive field for al-Simnānī—an apophatic and kataphatic repertoire is already present in the theological discourse itself. The binaries to be broken by a dialectical logic is pre-given by the inculcation of the invocation by the normative Sufi tradition, or the theological milieu. The paradoxes to be employed and their performative dimensions will be obviously different for Rūmī and ‘Irāqī on the one hand, the Kubrāwī masters on the other. Practical and institutional normative divergences evidently shaped the nomenclature of the paradoxes in negating propositional discourses on divine essence.

The balance of incomparability and imminence before divine unknowability, and the symmetry of negative and positive discourse before the paradoxical transcendence were key strategies of paradoxical apophaticism in thirteenth century Sufism. By connecting the binary of negation and affirmation to the daily practice of invocation, many Kubrāwī Sufis added a clear performative aspect that did not exist in more theoretical paradoxical approaches to divine incomparability and imminence. The paradox of the divine essence heals only by being uttered, however silently. The utterance manifests the paradox, hence the fundamental problem, of the divine essence, which, in turn, solves all problems of the soul just by being uttered in the correct, institutionalized, ritual context. Kubrāwī Sufis make “the quintessence of all remedies from the cause of all maladies,” like Awḥad’s paradoxical self-healing with melons, and the wine maiden of Abū Nuwās (d.813):

Don’t get the wrong impression of
Her who brought about both
The illness of the healthy and
*The cure of the illness.*¹²²⁵

¹²²³ Elias 1991, p.241; 228, 239.

¹²²⁴ Elias 1995, p.129.

¹²²⁵ Ibn Rashīq in Cowell and Ibn Rashīq 1982, p.72; my emphasis.

D. Summary: Paradoxical Apophaticism in Sufism

Among medieval Sufis, paradoxical apophaticism on the divine nature follows a loosely-defined set of strategies. (i) It has a markedly balanced take on the binary of divine incomparability and imminence, while the vast majority of theologians and Philosophers hold the former superior. Scholars of religion have depicted this dialectic as the only path of apophaticism.¹²²⁶ However, the dialectic of divine incomparability and imminence is the hallmark of paradoxical apophaticism, not that of other apophatic approaches to the divine essence. (ii) A symmetrical approach to discourse on the divine essence is a key dimension of this path, while most of the Mu'tazilites, Philosophers and Ismā'īlīs prefer negative speech over the positive one. (iii) Paradoxical apophaticism employs a dialectical logic that negates propositional discourse on divine essence and performs divine trans-discursivity by uniting the irreconcilable opposites that constitute propositional discourse. It performs the divine unknowability and unsayability by self-negation of its own discursive variables. Yet, the case of 'Irāqī and Qaysarī who replace the name "God" with "Love," or that of Kubrāwī Sufism indicate the context-specificity of the apophatic paradoxical performances. The repertoire of terms and binaries, along with their nomenclature define the discursive space; the apophatic act should be performed within this field to negate that discourse. Depending on the normative institutions and practices that regulate the discourse, the apophatic act has diverse performative dimensions. Apophatic paradox is a rule-following, discourse-dependent performance—far from being an infinite or pure negation presented in its popular post-modern depictions.¹²²⁷

Do these intense performances of paradoxical apophaticism corroborate the common associations of Sufism with paradoxes, at least within the scope of the divine ipseity? Al-Junayd, al-Ḥallāj and al-Kharrāz had already pointed out that "God" is a term that essentially signifies a paradox. Later Sufis like Ibn al-'Arabī and al-Qūnawī, most notably, pursue the claim that the divine essence is in itself the ultimate coincidence of opposites [*jam' al-aḍḍād*].¹²²⁸ Yet, the overview of paradoxes in poetry, literature, philosophy and theology indicate their currency beyond Sufism. The field of theology, even with reference to the specific question of the divine nature, was full of paradoxical positions, such as the

¹²²⁶ Cf. e.g. Sells 1994, pp.207-208.

¹²²⁷ Cf. e.g. Franke and Woods 2013, p.1444.

¹²²⁸ Ibn al-'Arabī 1428/2007u, p.342. Also see Chittick 1989, p.59.

Kullābite doctrine, and the negative causality of Philosophers. What is peculiar to the apophatic paradoxes of Sufis was their performative dimension largely absent in other theological paradoxes. The speech-act of self-negation indicates divine unknowability and divine transcendence that is beyond all conceptions of incomparability. In their own self-negation, X-not-X statements perform divine unknowability and unsayability—whatever we say positively or negatively about God is doomed to be self-defeating. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (fl.ca.1262), for example, directly problematizes the discursivity of divine essence, and negates both positive and negative discourse via paradox:

“He is the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Nonmanifest.”¹²²⁹

Because of hiddenness
He is totally apparent,
Because of apparentness
He is totally hidden.

...

*Since you call Him manifest and hidden,
Know for certain that He is neither this nor that!*¹²³⁰

God is neither X nor not-X precisely because both can be the subject of theological discourse. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī indicates the symmetrical incapacity of positive and negative discourse on God through paradoxes on the divine essence. With its dialectical logic, paradox negates the propositional discourse on God on the basis of the balanced incapacity of negative and positive statements before the divine unknowability. The divine essence is neither X nor not-X exactly because it transcends propositional discourse. Paradoxes simultaneously perform the incapacity of propositional discourse, logical binaries, and human understanding, and play a fundamental role in the attainment of the soul’s perfection. The connection of apophatic performance to human apotheosis renders paradoxes an important dimension of Sufi wayfaring.

Yet one should avoid extending paradox-philia to the category of Sufism in general. We have seen the sway of paradoxes beyond Sufism. In most contexts Sufis saw such statements as self-contradictions—we saw how Ibn Sabʿīn criticized al-Ghazālī for uniting the opposites in his ambidextrous scholarship. Paradoxes were welcomed in limited fields such as the relationship between divine essence and divine attributes, the nature of divine attributes itself, and

¹²²⁹ Q.57:3.

¹²³⁰ Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī in Chittick 1992, pp.52-53; my emphasis.

human perfection. Second, we have examples of Sufis not only distanced themselves and their schools from paradoxical apophaticism on the divine essence, but actively censured them. Such intriguing counterexamples come from al-Qushayrī (d.1072)'s and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d.1505)'s major works on Sufism. Al-Suyūṭī's *Affirmation of the Sublime Truth* quotes the entire portion on the divine essence by al-Ḥallāj, but carefully censors the X-not-X statements. Al-Ḥallāj's own work, as well as its version in al-Kalābādhī entail the statements "*He is hidden in His manifestation, and manifest in His concealment. Hence He is the Manifest-Hidden, the Proximate-Distant.*" First, al-Qushayrī cuts out the sentence "*He is hidden in His manifestation, and manifest in His concealment.*" He also tampers with the paradox "*He is the Manifest-Hidden,*" by adding a conjunction between the two terms, converting it into the well-known Qur'ānic "*He is the Manifest, and the Hidden.*"¹²³¹ Only the paradoxical "*Proximate-Distant*" remains intact. Al-Suyūṭī goes further. He had access to al-Kalābādhī's faithful quotation from al-Ḥallāj, and his extended exposition and subtle defense of al-Ḥallāj might be informed by direct familiarity with his work. Yet al-Suyūṭī is careful to remove all of the paradoxes in the otherwise deeply negative theological section. He not only removes the phrase "*He is hidden in His manifestation, and manifest in His concealment*" as al-Qushayrī did, but also the binary "*Proximate-Distant.*" It is only the Qur'ānic transcendent discourse that remains after al-Suyūṭī's removals and modifications: "*He is the First, and the Last, and the Manifest, and the Hidden.*"¹²³² Al-Suyūṭī undermines the paradoxical emphasis of the passage, and shifts it to the affirmation of the sacred, Qur'ānic, transcendent discourse.

Al-Qushayrī and al-Suyūṭī's careful censure of paradoxical statements might have been intended to deflect the accusation of departing from daily speech for a convoluted and baffling language. The threat of such accusations was real: al-Suyūṭī himself was one of those who narrated the complaints of theologians to Abū al-'Abbās Ibn 'Aṭā' (d.922) that Sufis strayed from ordinary speech, and used tangled words.¹²³³ Yet the move of al-Qushayrī, al-Suyūṭī and many Sufis away from paradoxical apophaticism cannot be explained merely by such external factors. As we will see below, their gesture towards the Qur'ānic transcendent discourse indicates an alternative theological approach that affirms the sacred

¹²³¹ al-Qushayrī 1409/1989, p.28. For the English translation, see al-Qushayrī 2007, pp.6-7.

¹²³² al-Suyūṭī 1934, p.52.

¹²³³ al-Suyūṭī 1934, p.34.

scripture *amodally*, or *without asking "how" [bilā kayfa]*, instead of appealing to paradoxes to remove God from human discursive spaces.

CHAPTER 7. AGAINST DISCOURSE: *BILĀ KAYFA* APOPHATICISM IN SUFISM

Since its emergence as a systematic discipline in the ninth century, the scholarship on prophetic traditions depicted itself as the heir of a mainstream negative theological tradition, which cancels itself in favor of the unknowability of the divine nature and the incomprehensibility of the sacred (Qur'ānic and prophetic) discourse on it. The main features of this tradition were as follows: (i) the conviction that the Qur'ān is the uncreated, eternal word of God. In other words, the scripture was the transcendent discourse. (ii) This premise was fundamental in canceling out human discursive constructs, since they cannot grasp the meaning of a transcendent discourse on God's nature, specifically in the case of His anthropomorphic depictions. (iii) Any interpretive inquiry is doomed to fail before the unknowable divine nature, and the transcendent discourse on it. Theological discourses nullify themselves in favor of a non-cognitive position, where neither the divine ipseity, nor the meaning of the transcendent discourse on it can be known. This non-cognitive, anti-interpretive position played an important and rather exceptional role in the canonization of Sufism in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and the rise of Sufi orders in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.

A. The Background: Anti-Interpretivism

Introduction: "Bilā Kayfa" as a Theological Concept

*Createdness: the Qur'ān does not join human beings in it.*¹²³⁴

The previous chapters have displayed a rich variety of apophatic approaches on the nature of the divine essence. These approaches embodied self-negating theologies: they were discursive constructs that ended up canceling all forms of discursive access to their very subject—the divine essence. The most widespread self-cancellation of discourse on divine nature, on the other hand, is another approach to Muslim theology that has been associated with strict literalism. Known in the literature as the principle of accepting the literal reading of scripture "without [asking] how," *bilā kayfa* circulates widely in contemporary scholarship. Yet, studies devoted to the principle are surprisingly rare.¹²³⁵ The

¹²³⁴ al-Bayhaqī 1358/1939, p.221.

¹²³⁵ Most recent works devoted to the topic are Abrahamov 1995, Shihadeh 2006, W. Williams 2002, W. Williams 2009, Ali-Shah 2012.

phrase entered the scholarship with I. Goldziher (d.1921)¹²³⁶ and J. Schacht (d.1969) as “*balkafa*,” having later appeared in diverse forms like “*balkafiya*,” “*bi-lā kayf*,” and “*bilā kayfa*,” all being different transliterations of the same Arabic phrase which can mean “without howness,” “amodally,” or “without asking the reason why,” depending on the context.

The unquestioning acceptance and affirmation of scripture’s literal meaning at the expense of theological discourse as an apophatic, self-negating discursive construct is in stark contrast with the post-modern depictions of apophysis in terms of intellectual rigor, and critical thinking. Associating intellectually conservative or dogmatic theological positions with apophaticism also goes against the paradigm that links it with mysticism or wisdom traditions. After all, in Goldziher’s words, *bilā kayfa* does not go beyond a “primitive conception of God,” as it only demands “blind belief in the literalness of the text.”¹²³⁷ On the other hand, various scholarly works depict *bilā kayfa* with a clear negative theological bent, describing it as “apophatic assertion,” or “amodal affirmation.” Indeed, the only phrase that appears under the term “apophatic theology” in the index of the *Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* is “*bilā kayfa*.”¹²³⁸

The prominence of *bilā kayfa* as bowing before the incomprehensible and unknowable is a general dogmatic theological gesture that grows out of its sacred textual sources, and pervades modern Islam. Very much like Mālik ibn Anas (d.796) himself, many scholars associate *bilā kayfa* with the problem of anthropomorphism. Accordingly, the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qur’ān should not be interpreted to mean something else, but should be accepted as they appear, because their meaning is known only to God. In other words, *bilā kayfa* marks the self-cancelation of theological discourse, and the ultimate unknowability of the meaning of the sacred sources when they address the divine nature. Instead of understanding the sacred sources literally, it marks one’s inability to understand, hence interpret, them. Such an apophatic response to anthropomorphism has been dominant in Sunnī theology, for many scholars. A recently published doctoral dissertation on evangelical missiology in Arab Muslim contexts recommends the prospective missionaries appeal to *bilā kayfa* if they want to be theologically palpable in terms of anthropomorphism:

¹²³⁶ E.g. Goldziher 1917, p.113.

¹²³⁷ E.g. Goldziher, 1917, p.113.

¹²³⁸ Winter 2008, p.326.

The Ḥanbalite and Ash‘arite resorting to accepting revealed (Qur‘ānic) truth without understanding how [*bilā kayfa*] can be applied to Muslim objections to Christian theological difficulties such as the Trinity or sonship of Christ. We should explain that in as much as these doctrines have a basis in the scripture we must accept them as true, even when we cannot really understand how [*bilā kayfa*].¹²³⁹

The author claims that Muslim theologians appealed to *bilā kayfa* in settling the problems that emerge from God’s apparently anthropomorphic connections with creation, such as His “establishment on the throne” [*istiwā’ alā al-‘arsh*] in various verses of the Qur‘ān. Hence the core Christian doctrines that are prone to similar problems, such as the suffering and crucifixion of God, can be transmitted to Arab Muslims in the same way. “The hypostatic union of Christ’s two natures is a *bilā kayfa*.”¹²⁴⁰

Is the *bilā kayfa* anti-interpretive position so widespread among contemporary scholars? The famous Egyptian Ṣalafī, Sayyid Quṭb (d.1966) rather preferred to interpret the apparently anthropomorphic reports of the Qur‘ān.¹²⁴¹ On the other hand, the *bilā kayfa* anti-interpretivism is appealed to in the contemporary traditionist attitudes not only towards anthropomorphism, but more broadly towards the divine nature and the divine attributes. Jihadist ideologies have nothing to do with the nature of God, or any question of classical Islamic theology.¹²⁴² But neo-Ḥanbalī movements that nourish jihadi ideologies, such as Wahhābism,¹²⁴³ do apply *bilā kayfa* on divine nature. Following Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328)’s tripartite rubric on God’s unity, later Ṣalafīs differentiate the unity of God’s lordship [*tawḥīd al-rubūbiyyah*], the unity of God’s divinity [*tawḥīd al-ulūhiyyah*], and the unity of divine names and attributes [*tawḥīd al-asmā’ wa al-ṣifāt*]. They accept all divine names that are given in the scripture and the prophetic traditions, without further interpretation, however anthropomorphic they might appear. This acceptance is not literalism, but indicates the unknowability of its subject and the limited capacity of discourse. Thus many Ṣalafī scholars appeal to *bilā kayfa* in favor of unknowability and anti-

¹²³⁹ Harlan 2013, p.315.

¹²⁴⁰ Harlan 2013, p.167.

¹²⁴¹ See Quṭb in Renard 2014, pp.31-32.

¹²⁴² The “creed and path” [*‘aqīdah wa manhāj*] of the terrorist group called “Islamic State” (IS), for example, has no reference to divine nature or divine attributes. See Bunzel 2015, pp.38-42.

¹²⁴³ Abou El Fadl 2003, pp.49-62.

interpretivism—affirming that the divine attributes are “utterly unlike those of any creature, and that one should not inquire into their precise nature.”¹²⁴⁴ In this neo-Ḥanbalī context, *bilā kayfa* is employed not only in eschewing anthropomorphism on divine ipseity, but also on the nature of divine attributes. The Ḥanbalī scholar Ibn Badrān al-Dimashqī (d.1927), for example, writes that “those curious about the nature of the divine attributes should reverently recognize that such matters are necessarily veiled from the workings of reason. In addition, no questions like ‘why?’ or ‘how?’ [*kayf?*] may apply in this context.”¹²⁴⁵

Ibn Taymīyyah already appealed to *bilā kayfa* on how divine names apply to God. Theologians in particular adopted *bilā kayfa* positions on diverse themes by suspending the ordinary meanings of scriptural statements, or declaring their unknowability, when they relate to God.¹²⁴⁶ Hence, pre-modern Muslim scholars could discuss not only the divine essence and attributes, but also other theological issues with a *bilā kayfa* anti-interpretive attitude. Scripturalist approaches appealed to this principle especially in relation to questions that were seen to transcend the realm of reason, such as the question of destiny. Another Ḥanbalī jurist of Ibn Taymīyyah’s times, al-Ṭūfī (d.1316), for example, accepted the scriptural account of destiny *prima facie*, as any discursive inquiry can be easily, and rationally, falsified in this transcendent field:

[T]he problem of destiny is one of the *divine mysteries*, the nature and reality of which no human being has a route to realize, except by the will of God ... [One has to] revert to what revealed religion stipulates, namely having faith [*īmān*] and acquiescent assent [*taslīm*] in a heart that is sound and unadulterated by fallacies ... Even Abū ‘Abd Allāh [Fakhr al-Dīn] al-Rāzī [(d.1209)], despite his great learning in *Kalām* and his knowledge of the methods of proof and refutation ... said, “if it is said, ‘what then is to be done?’ One should say, ‘what should be done is to abandon the effort’.”¹²⁴⁷

Al-Rāzī’s reported claim that “what should be done is to abandon doing anything” [*al-ḥīlah tark al-ḥīlah*] concerning the discourse on the destiny

¹²⁴⁴ Lav 2012, pp.42-43.

¹²⁴⁵ El-Bizri 2008, p.126.

¹²⁴⁶ Shihadeh 2006, p.4.

¹²⁴⁷ al-Ṭūfī in Shihadeh 2006, pp.6-7; my emphasis and minor modifications. I translated *īmān* as “faith” instead of “belief.”

demonstrates that al-Ṭūfī and al-Rāzī situate *bilā kayfa* within another theological question: our ultimate fate after death. Ibn Ḥanbal (d.855)'s *Creed III*, when introducing the question of destiny, had employed the exact phrase that al-Ṭūfī later used: "it is necessary to have faith in it and acquiescent assent in it."¹²⁴⁸ In other words, scholars employed broad terms like "divine mystery," "faith" and "acquiescent assent" in adopting *bilā kayfa* anti-interpretive, non-cognitive positions, even if they did not explicitly use the formula.

This brief observation suggests that Muslim traditionists of different generations, Malik (d.796), al-Ṭūfī (d.1316) and Ibn Badrān (d.1927), and modern western Islamicists appeal to *bilā kayfa* on a variety of questions no less than the nature of divine names and attributes, destiny, the problem of Qur'ānic verses with anthropomorphic passages, or the nature of the divine essence itself. Goldziher employed *bilā kayfa* as a theologically conservative term that was applied specifically by some traditionists, and only concerning the problem of Qur'ānic verses with anthropomorphic elements. Similar anti-interpretive positions were applied on diverse theological questions, not only on the anthropomorphic depictions of the divine essence, but also on the divine attributes, and the afterlife. Yet, two aspects of this anti-interpretive, non-cognitive position should be highlighted for theoretical clarity. First, it marks the unknowability of the divine nature, and the inaccessibility of the meaning of the sacred discourse, instead of following a literal interpretation. Second, the non-cognitive, anti-interpretive position applies to only to some, not all, theological questions, specifically those within the field of metaphysics. Both of these nuances are generally neglected in reductive depictions of Islamic theology. Depictions over the last centuries of *bilā kayfa* as a general anti-rational Islamic doctrine of submission to the literal reading, irrespective of the theological question under scrutiny, still haunt the scholarship. Recently, an objectivist student of philosophy described *bilā kayfa* as a general, immoral principle of Islam as it demands unquestioning submission to the arbitrary will of its despotic God:

If God slays thousands of human beings for worshipping a golden calf instead of Him ... then this is good simply because He wills it. God's will be done—or, alternatively, *Allāhu Akbar*, God is great, *bilā kayfa*, without inquiring how, as Islam states.¹²⁴⁹

The mistake in such quick connections between theology and violence is two-fold. First, the *bilā kayfa* anti-interpretive position that the Ṣalafo-Wāhhabī

¹²⁴⁸ W. Williams 2002, p.459.

¹²⁴⁹ Berstein 2012, p.40.

scholars reclaim is a non-cognitive one. It focuses on the unknowability of the interpretation of the sacred sources concerning the divine nature, divine attributes, the verses with anthropomorphic appearances, or the enigmatic disjointed letters [*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭa'āt*] in the Qur'ān, instead of their literal interpretation. Secondly, the *bilā kayfa* anti-interpretivism has not been appealed to in *all* theological questions, but specifically in metaphysics. The theological question discussed here is a rather new field—the determination of what is good and evil [*al-taḥṣīn wa al-taqbīh*], or broadly, ethics. The author is critical of the position that supposedly “Islam,” in its essence, states—the determination of good and evil just with an unquestioning submission to the literal reading. However, the term *bilā kayfa*, as opposed to the author’s sweeping generalization, did not even appear in the context of *al-taḥṣīn wa al-taqbīh* in Islamic theologies. Ethics has rather been an actively interpretive field, even in its most conservative sense. The continuities with the representations of Islam in the last centuries are striking in such uncontextual and politicized appeals to the phrase *bilā kayfa*.

On the other hand, the term *bilā kayfa* was not the only term to mark anti-interpretive, self-canceling discourses. Rather, theologians had a variety of terms that were employed in defense of non-cognitive positions. Theologians appealed to the terms *tawfiḍ* [“delegation”] and *taslīm* [“acquiescent assent”] in suspending the ordinary meanings of terms, and hence discursive constructs or interpretation, concerning sacred reports on God. Instead of *bilā kayfa*, alternative formulae for negating modalities [*kayfiyyah*], ineffectualism [*ta'tīl*], or comparability [*tashbīh*], and affirming [*ithbāt*] the sacred reports without interpretation [*ta'wīl*] were used to express non-cognitive positions on different theological questions. Al-Māturīdī (d.944) appealed to *tawaqquf*, literally, “stoppage,” or “discontinuation,” which indicated suspending judgment and interpretation where human knowledge reached its limits.¹²⁵⁰ Al-Ṭūfī informs us of another metaphor to indicate a similar position: he rather grumbled that one of the Qur'ānic verses, Q.21:23 is known among Sunnī scholars as “the verse of mace” [*āyat al-dabbūs*]—a phrase that indicates transcendence of discursive fields regarding its content.¹²⁵¹ Al-Bayhaqī (d.1066) cited this verse, which states that “God does what He wills” as a corroboration for the impossibility of knowing God’s modality.¹²⁵² Other terms that were appealed to in the exposition of such

¹²⁵⁰ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.122.

¹²⁵¹ E.g. Q.21:23. See Shihadeh 2006, p.7, 11, 22.

¹²⁵² Abrahamov 1995, p.368.

positions described the report in question as a “divine mystery” [*sirr*] that only God knows, or adding the phrase “as He deserves” [*yalīqu bihi*] after an apparently anthropomorphic description to indicate the discursive inaccessibility of its meaning. Also the phrase “I do not know” [*lā adrī*] acquired among the critics of traditionism something near the status of slogan to avoid any discursive construction.¹²⁵³ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111)’s *Saving Believers from Speculative Theology* [*Iljām al-‘awām ‘an ‘ilm al-kalām*]¹²⁵⁴ introduced seven different ways of approaching the corporeal descriptions of God, all of which directly or roughly correspond to taking *bilā kayfa* positions.¹²⁵⁵ Neither *bilā kayfa* positions were applied indiscriminately to all theological questions, nor was the term *bilā kayfa* explicitly employed when such positions were adopted.

Hence, studying the apophatic dimensions of *bilā kayfa* positions regarding the divine essence poses challenges that demand careful contextualization. First, terminological difficulties: the term “*bilā kayfa*” does not appear in various theological discussions, even if the specific positions adopt similar non-cognitive, anti-interpretive positions that cancel themselves in favor of the unknowability of their object. Second, *bilā kayfa* positions might be easily confused if the theological question is not specifically defined and contextualized. The non-interpretive position marked by *bilā kayfa* did not apply to all theological question, as opposed to rather reductive or hostile depictions of Islamic theology. A final difficulty is related to the diverse meanings of *bilā kayfa* in historical context, especially in the first six centuries of Islam. During this period, *bilā kayfa* could indicate two different anti-interpretive positions: anthropomorphism in the larger near eastern tradition, or non-cognitive approaches to the divine essence that are self-negating and non-anthropomorphic.

Divine Nature Uninterpreted: Between Anthropomorphism and Apophaticism

The idea that God cannot be understood via human conceptual and modal thinking goes back to the Qur’ān and the earliest prophetic reports. We have seen how ‘Alīd traditions that adopt a negative reading of the divine attributes

¹²⁵³ Dickinson 2001, p.8; Dickinson 1992, p.13.

¹²⁵⁴ A more literal translation of the title would be “*Saving the Common Folk from Scholastic Theology*.” However I chose the more general term “Believers” instead of “Common Folk,” because the book is addressing not only to laypersons but also to scholars of the Islamic sciences, including jurists [*fuqahā’*], theologians [*mutakallimūn*], exegetes [*mufasssirrūn*], *ḥadīth* scholars [*muḥadīththūn*], grammarians [*nuḥāt*], and the like. See Shu’ayb 2011, pp.163-164.

¹²⁵⁵ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, 2008, pp.23-24.

proliferated under Ismā‘īlī rule as a corporate project wherein even Sunnī traditionists like Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Quḍā‘ī (d.1062) played their part. The *Ṣaḥīfat al-Sajjādiyyah* and *Nahj al-Balāghah* contain not only negations of the knowability of the divine essence or the applicability of the divine attributes, but they also deny that any modality or human category applies to God. A famous supplication of the grandson of ‘Alī (d.661), Zayn al-‘Ābidīn (d.712) denies the accessibility of the modality, or literally, “howness” of God:

It is Thou
before whose selfness [*dhātiyyah*] imaginations fall short,
before whose howness [*kayfiyyah*] understandings have no
capacity,¹²⁵⁶
and the place of whose whereness [*ayniyyah*] eyes perceive
not.¹²⁵⁷

The scholars of the eighth century appealed to such non-discursive positions in the face of questions that concerned anthropomorphic depictions of God. The Qur’ānic description of God’s “establishment,” or “sitting” on a “throne” was one of the topics where early exegetes, traditionists, and jurists preferred to cancel discursive thought in favor of unknowability. The most famous report of the archetypal *bilā kayfa* apophaticism comes from the early jurist Mālik ibn Anas (d.796). Accordingly, asked about the meaning of the verse Q.20:5, which mentions of God as established on a throne, Mālik famously defended the inapplicability of modalities:

God’s establishment on the throne [*istiwā’*] is known [*ma’lūm*],
but its modality is unknown [*al-kayf majhūl*]. The belief in the
istiwā’ is obligatory [*al-īmān bihi wājib*], and the inquiry about it is
an innovation [*al-sū‘āl ‘anhu bid’ah*].¹²⁵⁸

As the repugnant term “innovation” indicates, Mālik saw the endeavor to use discursive modes in approaching the revelation as inauthentic and theologically problematic. In line with this depiction, later scholars like Ibn al-Jawzī (d.1201) and Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328) would trace his approach back to the early companions of the Prophet. The doxographer al-Shahrastānī (d.1153), on the other hand, extrapolated the position to a wide group of scholars of the next

¹²⁵⁶ W. C. Chittick’s translation says “incapacity,” which should be a typo.

¹²⁵⁷ ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn 1988, Supplications, #47.18. The dense appeal to terms with philosophical significance indicates that the supplication might be added a few centuries after Zayn al-‘Ābidīn passed away.

¹²⁵⁸ Imām Mālik in Abrahamov 1995, p.336.

generation. Accordingly, Mālik’s position dispensed with any interpretive inquiry, which eventually could not escape human terms, modal categories and hence, comparability and knowability. His position was followed by the later traditionists like Ibn Ḥanbal (d.855), Sufyān al-Thawrī (d.778), Dāwūd al-Iṣfahānī (d.883) and his Zāhirī School, and more recently, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Sa‘īd al-Kīlānī [i.e., Ibn Kullāb (d.855)], Abū ‘Abbās al-Qalānisī (d.970) and al-Muḥāsibī (d.857).¹²⁵⁹ Sufi masters like Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī (d.1182) described the eponyms of the four Sunnī legal schools and the Shī‘ī school as proponents of an amodal, *bilā kayfa* approach to the divine nature, who fell neither into anthropomorphism nor ineffectualism.¹²⁶⁰

Such monolithic descriptions of a homogeneous block of *Ahl al-Sunnah*, however, overlooked major differences between various early positions concerning anthropomorphism. Later scholars like al-Shahrastānī, Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī, Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Taymīyyah underplayed the prominence of the transcendent anthropomorphism in some earlier traditionists, particularly in association with Ibn Ḥanbal (d.855). Ibn Ḥanbal himself never employed the term “*bilā kayfa*,” and rather seemed to accept the literal appearance of the sacred sources in favor of a transcendent anthropomorphism in the ancient near eastern type. Such anthropomorphism, which depicted God as a divine anthropos with a “body unlike bodies” and too holy for human eyes, was a key near eastern heritage that the monotheistic faith originating in the area inherited in different forms.¹²⁶¹ Some of these clearly anthropomorphic strands were recorded, with a fascinating variety, by the doxographers like al-Ash‘arī (d.936). Yet, the literal acceptance the anthropomorphic depictions of God could be neither separated easily from the more overt forms of anthropomorphism, nor categorized as an apophatic position that defends divine unknowability.

At least from the ninth century onwards, the phrase “*bilā kayfa*” could be called upon for more agnostic, self-canceling discursive positions as well as for transcendent anthropomorphism. Ibn ‘Uyaynah (d.814), or al-Dāraqūṭnī (d.995) for example, affirmed the reports on the vision of God literally, without further interpretation.¹²⁶² Similarly, Ibn ‘Uyaynah accepted the reports that described God as surprised and laughing [*yu‘ajjib wa yaḍḥak*]. Asked about these

¹²⁵⁹ al-Shahrastānī in Renards 2014, p.146.

¹²⁶⁰ Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī 1904, pp.19-20.

¹²⁶¹ See W. Williams 2009.

¹²⁶² al-Dāraqūṭnī 2005, p.116.

depictions, Ibn ‘Uyaynah appealed to *bilā kayfa*, which means in this context the literal acceptance of anthropomorphism rather than *bilā kayfa* apophatic unknowability: “they are revealed in this way; we acknowledge them, and transmit them without asking how [*nuḥaddith bihā bilā kayfa*].”¹²⁶³ Hence the presence of the term did not always mean the negation of knowability and modality, nor did it guarantee non-anthropomorphism. Yet, those traditionists who did not appeal to the term “*bilā kayfa*” were particularly prone to accept the sacred reports on the vision of God, or His the throne, or form [*ṣūrah*] literally, i.e., without further interpretation. Many Mu‘tazilites painted all traditionists with the same brush, describing them with pejorative phrases like the “Riff-Raff” [*Ḥashwiyyah*] or the “Weeds” [*nābitah*, plural: *nawābit*]. Yet, a closer look reveals that there were actually two prominent views among them: one accepting the anthropomorphic depictions of God literally, the other the inaccessibility of the real meanings of anthropomorphic depictions, by negating modality. According to the Mu‘tazilite polymath al-Jāḥiẓ (d.869), one of the differences between the recently grown group called “Weeds” and the larger Sunnīs [*ahl al-Sunnah*] was that the former succumbed to anthropomorphism precisely because they refused to follow the principle of *bilā kayfa*. A careful observer of the Inquisition [*Miḥnah*] process (833-848), al-Jāḥiẓ compared the wider *Ahl al-Sunnah*, with the group of “the Weeds:”

One group among them [*ahl al-Sunnah*] asserted that God will be seen, without adding any explanation. If it feared being suspected of anthropomorphism [*tashbīh*], it explained, “He will be seen *bilā kayfa*,” thus avoiding corporeality [*tajsīm*] and attributing God a form [*taṣwīr*]. But the Weeds sprouted, and the secessionist group insisted: He is a body; and it ascribed form and limits to Him and declared anyone who believes in the beatific vision without *tajsīm* and *taṣwīr* to be a heretic.¹²⁶⁴

The ‘Abbāsīd Inquisition was directed not only towards those who ascribed the Qur’ān an uncreated nature, but also those who adopted transcendent anthropomorphism. Both Ibn Ḥanbal and Bishr Ibn al-Wālid (d.852), who professed the former were also accused of the latter. Abū al-‘Arab al-Tamīmī (d.944), in his *Book of Inquisitions* [*Kitāb al-Miḥan*], reports on a letter from al-Ma’mūn (r.813-833) wherein al-Ma’mūn stipulates

¹²⁶³ al-Dāraqūṭnī 2005, 119.

¹²⁶⁴ al-Jāḥiẓ in W. Williams 2002, p.452; with my minor modification.

not only the doctrine of the created Qur'ān but also denial of *rū'yah* [beatific vision], and of the denial of locating God in a place [*makān*] or on His throne—that is, those issues that anthropomorphists used in argument to support their position. Al-Wāthiq (r.842-847), al-Ma'mūn's second successor as caliph who continued the Inquisition, forbade the profession of belief in the beatific vision.¹²⁶⁵

Reviewing the reports of the interrogations also shows that they were specifically cited for corporealist views, even if the *Miḥnah* is only associated with the oppression of the traditionist claims for the uncreatedness of the divine word. In opposing the createdness of the Qur'ān, which was defended both by Mu'tazilites and Jahmites among others, these traditionists were not exactly defending that the Qur'ān was eternal and uncreated. Instead, their position was theological as it was concerned more with divine nature than that of the Qur'ān: they were defending the Qur'ān as God's personal speech, a view that was usually accompanied by a more general transcendent anthropomorphism and ran counter to the notion of stripping God of His attributes [*ta'tīl*]. As God's personal speech, the Qur'ān was perceived as an expression of the essence of God and was associated with God much more closely than any part of his creation.¹²⁶⁶ In other words, the traditionists wanted to keep the otherness of the divine word on par with the divine nature itself. This position not only removed the divine word from the human realm, but it also made the transcendent discourse the complete, unrivalled expression of the divine essence. Both of these gestures were theologically fundamental for transcendent anthropomorphism of the ninth century. Their desire to remove the Qur'ān from the interpretive realm was seen as lowbrow literalism and anti-intellectualism, while their insistence on the Qur'ān as the personal expression of the divine essence was associated with anthropomorphism.

A key figure in this period, Ibn Ḥanbal has been depicted as a central figure within the general lens of *bilā kayfa* non-cognitivism. But he does not seem to have applied the term.¹²⁶⁷ Instead, he had no reservations about attributing a

¹²⁶⁵ W. Williams 2002, p.451.

¹²⁶⁶ Hinds 2012.

¹²⁶⁷ "It was probably Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal who tried to break the deadlock by saying they were to be taken *bilā kayfa*, 'without (asking) how'." (Watt 1994, p.16.) Yet I find Williams' revisions in the depiction of Ibn Ḥanbal more convincing.

form [*ṣūrah*] to God.¹²⁶⁸ He not only acknowledged the soundness of the report on the Prophet's vision of God "in the form of a young man, beardless [*amrad*] with short curly hair [*ja'd*] and clothed in a green garment," but also made belief in it obligatory. He committed to taking this "prophetic report of the young man" [*ḥadīth al-shābb*] *prima facie* [*'alā zāhirihi*], without disputing it, or qualifying with "*bilā kayfa*."¹²⁶⁹ On the other hand, far from being a simple literalist, he did not shy away from interpreting the seemingly anti-anthropomorphic descriptions of God allegorically [*ta'wīl*], while he accepted the literal meaning of anthropomorphic verses and prophetic reports without interpretation or qualification.¹²⁷⁰ The *Creed I*, that Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn 'Awf (fl.9th CE) claims Ibn Ḥanbal dictated to him, probably contains the latter's authentic ideas, which have a clear transcendent anthropomorphic bent. Accordingly, Ibn Ḥanbal took straightforward anthropomorphic positions in much debated issues such as the vision of God, or His speech:

The people of paradise will see God with the eyes. ... God speaks to human beings, and there is no interpreter between Him and them. The messenger of God has a basin, whose vessels are more in number than the stars in the sky.¹²⁷¹

He claimed that the vision of God will be via the mediation of the standard human organs, and His speech can be directly heard by human beings in this world. The last sentence is curious, as it accepts a popular divine saying [*ḥadīth qudsī*] on the afterlife without further explanation.¹²⁷² In other words, Ibn Ḥanbal

¹²⁶⁸ W. Williams 2002, p.443.

¹²⁶⁹ W. Williams 2002, pp.445-447.

¹²⁷⁰ W. Williams 2002, pp.449-450.

¹²⁷¹ Ibn 'Awf in Watt 1994, p.31. Cf. Ibn al-Jawzī 2013, pp.306-307, 312-313.

¹²⁷² This famous anthropomorphist *ḥadīth* widely circulated among traditionists, including the canonical collections such as the *Saḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī, and the *Sunan* of al-Nasā'ī:

One day when he-the Prophet- was still among us, he took a nap, then he raised his head, smiling. We said to him: "Why are you smiling, O Messenger of Allāh?" He said: "Just now this chapter [*ṣūrah*] was revealed to me: In the Name of Allāh, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Verily, We have granted you (O Muḥammad) *al-Kawthar*. Therefore turn in prayer to your Lord and sacrifice (to Him only). For he who hates you, he will be cut off." Then he said: "Do you know what *al-Kawthar* is?" We said: "Allāh and His Messenger know best." He said: "It is a river that my Lord has promised me in Paradise. Its vessels are more than the number of the stars. My community will come to me, then a man among them will be pulled away and I will say: 'O Lord, he is one of my community' and He will say to me: 'You do not know what he did after you were gone'."

adopts an anti-interpretive approach not only to the Qur'ān, but also to the sacred reports, *even if the meaning of such sacred words are not known*:

Ḥadīths are sound and preserved. *We submit to them even if we do not know their interpretation.* We do not discuss them or argue about them, and we do not interpret them, but we relate them as they have come (to us).¹²⁷³

In oscillating between literal acceptance of a transcendently anthropomorphic God and the admission of the unknown, incomprehensible surface of the eternal word, Ibn Ḥanbal demonstrates that anthropomorphism and *bilā kayfa* apophaticism could not be easily separated in the formative period of Islamic thought. The same ambivalence, even more clearly, can be observed in al-Ash'arī's approach to the anthropomorphic depictions of God. He employs the phrase "*bilā kayfa*" after such anthropomorphic depictions, but it can mean unquestioning acceptance of the literal Qur'ānic readings, instead of their unknowability:

God is on His throne; as He said: "The Merciful on the throne is seated" [Q.20:5]. God has two hands *amodally*; as He said: "(what) I created with my two hands" [Q.38:75], and: "Nay, His two hands are spread out (in bounty)" [Q.5:64]. God has two eyes *amodally*; as He said: "Which sailed before Our eyes" [Q.54:14]. God has a face; as He said: "the face of your Lord endures, full of majesty and honor" [Q.55.27].¹²⁷⁴

Al-Ash'arī also declared that God will be seen by our eyes on the day of resurrection,¹²⁷⁵ and he accepted the reports on the afterlife, such as the basin and bridge as realities that should be accepted without further comment.¹²⁷⁶ Accordingly, the Sunnīs "do not say 'how?' or 'why?'" on these metaphysical questions.¹²⁷⁷ It is ambiguous whether "*bilā kayfa*" expresses the unquestioning acceptance of transcendent anthropomorphism or an apophaticism that emerges from the unknowability or inaccessibility of such sacred discourses.

Al-Ash'arī's *Creed* had strong similarities with the Ḥanbalite creeds of his time,¹²⁷⁸ which more clearly embraced the simultaneous corporeality and

¹²⁷³ Ibn 'Awf in Watt 1994, p.30; my emphasis.

¹²⁷⁴ al-Ash'arī in Watt 1994, p.41. For the original Arabic, see al-Ash'arī 1950, Vol.1, p.320.

¹²⁷⁵ al-Ash'arī in Watt 1994, p.43.

¹²⁷⁶ al-Ash'arī in Watt 1994, p.44.

¹²⁷⁷ al-Ash'arī in Watt 1994, p.44.

¹²⁷⁸ Watt 1994, p.41.

otherness of God in transcendent anthropomorphism. The popular Ḥanbalite Creed, which was written probably after the ninth century, clearly defended such a theological position:

God is hearing undoubtedly, and seeing undoubtedly. He is knowing and not ignorant, generous and not mean, forbearing and not hasty, remembering and not forgetting, awake and not sleeping, near (with His favor) and not neglectful. He moves and speaks and considers (or observes); He sees and laughs; He rejoices and loves and dislikes; He shows loathing and good pleasure; He is angry and displeased; He is merciful and pardons; He impoverishes and enriches and is inaccessible. He descends every night to the lowest heaven as He wills. "There is nothing like Him, and He is the hearing and seeing" [Q.42:11].¹²⁷⁹

In stunning contrast to the vast majority of theological schools, such traditionists employed the verse Q.42:11 in defense of transcendent anthropomorphism, instead of divine otherness and transcendence. Indeed, a review of the exegetical history of this verse indicates that it was actually first employed by the advocates of transcendent anthropomorphism in support of their position.¹²⁸⁰ Similarly, Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d.938) cited this verse after affirming that God is established on His throne without adding further comment other than a list of prominent traditionists who defended the position.¹²⁸¹ Eventually, the notorious advocates of transcendent anthropomorphism, Muqātil (d.767) and Dāwūd al-Jawāribī (fl.1.8th - ea.9th CE), who affirmed that God is composed of flesh and blood, and has organs, also cited Q.42:11 in support.¹²⁸² Al-Muqātil, as opposed to his popular depictions as an "extreme" or radical anthropomorphist, squarely fit into his context.¹²⁸³ Ibn Karrām (d.869)'s opposition to the Mu'tazilite interpretation of the Qur'ānic verses to fend off anthropomorphism relied on a similar inclination he shared with Ibn Ḥanbal and al-Ash'arī.¹²⁸⁴ The verse Q.42:11 was still used in the service of transcendent anthropomorphism when Ibn al-Jawzī (d.1201) wrote his influential critiques of anthropomorphism within Ḥanbalism. Hence the famous Andalusian theologian Muḥammad ibn Sa'dūn, better known as Abū 'Amir al-Qurashī (d.1130), was not an exceptional figure in

¹²⁷⁹ Watt 1994, p.37.

¹²⁸⁰ W. Williams 2009, p.34.

¹²⁸¹ See Dickinson 1992, p.43.

¹²⁸² W. Williams 2009.

¹²⁸³ See Sirry 2012; Abrahamov in al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm 1996.

¹²⁸⁴ See Madelung 1988, p.41.

arguing for an anthropomorphic reading of Q.42:11, in line with this traditionalist anthropomorphism:

*The [anti-anthropomorphist] heretics cite in evidence the Qur'ān verse "Nothing is like Him," but the meaning of that verse is only that nothing can be compared to God in His divinity. In form, however, God is like you or me.*¹²⁸⁵

There were, then, at least three different hermeneutical takes on the apparent anthropomorphism in the sacred sources in the ninth century. One way was to follow allegorical readings to respond anthropomorphism. Early Ibādīs like al-Fazārī, as well as dialectical theologians and philosophers widely adopted such positions. Transcendent anthropomorphism would be removed discursively, via interpretive responses to the sacred sources.

Second, one could accept the anthropomorphic verses as they are, with their literal meaning. This position, "transcendent anthropomorphism" as some scholars call it, fit into the larger ancient near eastern theological models in general, and embraced both divine otherness and corporeality wherein God is a super anthropos that has a body unlike bodies.¹²⁸⁶ In this context, *bilā kayfa* resists the description of "traditional agnosticism about anthropomorphism," as defended in the contemporary scholarship.¹²⁸⁷ Instead of an agnosticism that shies away from interpretation and declares unknowability of the meaning of verses with anthropomorphic appearance, we have their literal acceptance mixed with divine otherness. While the Shī'ite theologians more readily adopted the Hellenistic emphasis of late antiquity on divine otherness by the ninth century, Sunnism had rather a strong anthropomorphist strand in the ancient near eastern tradition well into the twelfth century.¹²⁸⁸ While many of these scholars criticized the blatant ascriptions of human attributes to God,¹²⁸⁹ they adopted a transcendent anthropomorphism wherein God has *a body unlike bodies*. Transcendent anthropomorphism could attack divine comparability [*tashbīh*], yet it did not hesitate to describe God as a super anthropos. Such

¹²⁸⁵ W. Williams 2009, p.35; my emphasis.

¹²⁸⁶ See W. Williams 2009.

¹²⁸⁷ Renard 2014, p.42.

¹²⁸⁸ W. Williams 2009, pp.22-23.

¹²⁸⁹ For example Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d.938) himself penned a critique of *al-Mujassimah*—those who ascribed God human attributes and comparability. Dickinson 1992, p.58; Dickinson 2001, p.36, fn.97.

anthropomorphist literalism expressed itself sometimes in association with phrases such as “*bilā kayfa*.”

The third way was to follow the apophatic non-cognitivism of *bilā kayfa*: i.e., to confirm the forms of scriptural theological statements with the unknowability of their meaning, and the modalities of their referents. In other words, scholars in this line abandoned hermeneutical inquiry as it entails the discursive accessibility of the divine discourse, hence attributes and ipseity. Not everybody who explicitly employed the phrase “*bilā kayfa*” adopted non-cognitive positions instead of anthropomorphism. Similarly, not everybody who adopted non-cognitive positions on the divine nature employed the phrase “*bilā kayfa*,” as there was a rich variety of concepts that played that role.

The ultimate authority and otherness of the divine word played a fundamental role in the amodal, or, *bilā kayfa* apophaticism, very much like in the transcendent anthropomorphism.¹²⁹⁰ It was not always easy to distinguish the latter two positions both of which abandoned hermeneutical inquiry in reverence to the sacred form of the scripture. Eventually, even anthropomorphists denounced others for making God a comparable entity, i.e., of *tashbīh*. Ibn Ḥanbal accused the Jahmites, who adopted a negative theology of divine attributes, of *tashbīh*. Accordingly, their negation of divine attributes from God was based on an assumed comparability of the divine oneness. Ibn Qudāmah (d.1223), in the same vein, accused Abū al-Wafā’ ‘Alī ibn ‘Aqīl al-Baghdādī (d.1119) of heresy [*zandaqah*] as the latter denied that the divine voice will be literally heard by the believers, and interpreted the divine word as a burst, and a crack in the air. Ibn Qudāmah accuses Ibn ‘Aqīl of anthropocentric thinking as the latter’s negation was based on a transposition from human voice [*kalām*] to the divine. According to the traditionists in the transcendent anthropomorphist line, God’s speech would be rather heard in the afterlife. Ibn Ḥanbal said: “I heard ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad al-Muḥāribī (d.810), who had it on the authority of Sulaymān ibn Mihrān al-A’mash (d.765), on the authority of Abū al-Ḍuhā, on the authority of Masrūq (d.682), on the authority of

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Religion is only the book of God, the reported sayings [of early Muslims], the standard practices [*sunan*], and sound narratives from reliable persons about recognized, sound, valid reports [sc. *ḥadīth*], where these confirm one another. That [all] goes back to the Messenger of God, his companions, the Followers, the Followers of the Followers, and after them the recognized imāms [scholars]. (Watt 1994, p.39.)

‘Abd Allāh ibn Anīs al-Juhanī (d.673), say: ‘When God gives utterance to revelation [*wahy*], people of heaven hear His voice.’¹²⁹¹ Abū Naṣr al-Sijzī (d.1052) supported the claim, arguing that its chain of transmission is a valid one. From the anthropomorphist perspective, negating hearing, speech, and similar acts from God could not escape from making God comparable. Hence apophaticism based on amodality, and anthropomorphism based on literalism made similar critiques of interpretivism. Also both anti-interpretivist positions had a central emphasis on transcendent discourse as the expression of the divine essence.

In the post-*Miḥnah* period, we find among the followers of both Abū Ḥanīfah and Ibn Ḥanbal those who defend a form apophaticism associated with amodality that cancels theological discourse. This was quite unexpected on the both sides. First, Ibn Ḥanbal himself, as opposed to his later depictions, was much closer to literal reading of anthropomorphic depictions of God than he was of declaring the unknowability of these depictions. Second, al-Ma’mūn, we are told, “excelled in jurisprudence according to the school of Abū Ḥanīfah (d.767),” and the latter scholar, at least part of his career, had taught that the Qur’ān had been created.¹²⁹² We observe a gradual distancing from transcendent anthropomorphism among the students of Ibn Ḥanbal, and the quick popularization of the uncreated, transcendent depictions of the divine word among the students of Abū Ḥanīfah. In the following centuries, both camps would widely adopt an apophaticism wherein the amodal acceptance of the unknowability of the uncreated, transcendent discourse cancels human discursive activities on the divine ipseity.

Ḥanafism and Bilā Kayfa Apophaticism in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries

The spread of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism is widely testified in the post-*Miḥnah* period theology, particularly among Ḥanafīs. The *Testimony* [*Waṣīyyah*], attributed to Abū Ḥanīfah, but written probably in the late ninth century, adopts such a strategy concerning the vision God in the afterlife:

¹²⁹¹ See Ibn Qudāmah in Renards 2014, p.197.

¹²⁹² Hinds 2012.

We confess that the meeting [*liqā'*] of Allāh with the inhabitants of Paradise will be *a reality, without modality, comparison or description* [*bilā kayfiyyah wa lā tashbīh wa lā jihah*].¹²⁹³

The *Testimony* also accepts the Qur'ānic depiction of God as sitting on a throne, but underlines that this transcendent discourse should not be understood in human terms as He transcends [*ta'ālā*] these depictions.¹²⁹⁴ The Ḥanafī scholar al-Ṭaḥāwī (d.933), who lived mainly in Egypt, exemplifies the key aspects of this rising form of apophaticism at the expense of both anthropomorphism and discursive inquiries. The first and indispensable aspects of this *bilā kayfa* apophaticism is its emphasis on the divine nature, hence otherness, of the sacred scripture. In al-Ṭaḥāwī's words:

the Qur'ān is the Speech of God; it proceeded from Him *amodally* as words; He sent it down upon His servant by revelation; the believers truly counted it true in accordance with that (description); they were certain that it was truly the Speech of God. It is not created like the speech of the creature. ... *Human speech does not resemble it. Whoever attributes to God any of the characteristics belonging to humanity is an unbeliever.*¹²⁹⁵

Its uncreated nature transcendentalizes the scripture and its meaning. Therefore, the meaning of consimilar [*mutashābih*] verses and sacred reports cannot be accessed by creation—only God knows them. The sacred sources cancel all efforts for discursive access as they embody the transcendent discourse:

The vision (of God) is a reality for the people of Paradise, *without comprehension or modality*. (It is) as the book of God expresses it, “faces on that day bright, looking to their Lord” [Q.75:22-23]; and *the interpretation of this is according to what God intended and knew*. Every sound *ḥadīth* reported from the Messenger of God is as he said, and *its meaning is what he intended*. We (refrain from) introducing anything (false) into that by interpreting it according to our own ideas or imagining it to be according to our fancies. *Only he is safe in his religion who submits to God and His messenger and refers back the knowledge of what is doubtful to*

¹²⁹³ For the Arabic text, with the commentary of the Anatolian jurist, Akmal al-Dīn al-Bābartī (or Bayburtī) (d.1384), see Abū Ḥanīfah and al-Bābartī 2009, pp.132-136. For alternative English translations, see Wensinck 2008, p.130; Watt 1994, p.60.

¹²⁹⁴ Abū Ḥanīfah in Abū Ḥanīfah and al-Bābartī 2009, p.87. For English, see Wensinck 2008, p.127.

¹²⁹⁵ al-Ṭaḥāwī in Watt 1994, p.50; my emphasis.

*the knower of it [i.e., does not interpret but admits that only God knows the interpretation].*¹²⁹⁶

The divine discourse itself is incomprehensible when it addresses the divine ipseity. When the divine discourse gives us an anthropomorphic image, its hidden meaning remains rather unknowable to us, like the divine ipseity itself. In al-Ṭaḥāwī's words, the transcendent discourse is simultaneously clear and incomprehensible:

*The throne and the footstool are a reality, as God made clear in His glorious book. He is independent of the throne and what is below it; He comprehends everything above it, and has made His creation unable to comprehend (that).*¹²⁹⁷

Al-Ṭaḥāwī's theological position depicts scripture as the transcendent discourse that cannot be comprehended or further elaborated by human discourse. Human discourse retreats from the scriptural fields that transcend its limits. These fields are the human destiny after death, the nature of the divine essence, and its relationship with the attributes. Nobody has discursive access to these fields—hence there is no possibility to understand the mystery of the transcendent discourse on these topics. One can neither negate the attributes expressed in the incomprehensible transcendent discourse, nor assume that they are anthropomorphic, comparable, or comprehensible. As a self-negating theological gesture, al-Ṭaḥāwī challenges all interpretive and discursive inquiries on the divine nature and its relationship with the divine attributes:

*He who does not guard (both) against denial (of God's attributes) and assimilation (of them to human attributes, or anthropomorphism) [tashbīh] is mistaken and has not attained purity of conception [tanzīh]. For our Lord is characterized by the attributes of oneness and the properties of uniqueness; none of the creation has what is characteristic of Him. God is exalted above limits, ends, elements, members, instruments; the six directions do not comprise Him as they do all creatures.*¹²⁹⁸

“Negation,” “denial,” or “ineffectualism,” expressed in terms like “nafy,” “salb,” or “ta’ṭīl,” are simultaneously rejected with terms that indicate divine comparability, incarnation, or anthropomorphism, such as “tashbīh,” and “tajsīm.” Al-Ṭaḥāwī's *bilā kayfa* non-cognitive position cancels both positive and

¹²⁹⁶ al-Ṭaḥāwī in Watt 1994, pp.49-50; my emphases.

¹²⁹⁷ al-Ṭaḥāwī in Watt 1994, p.52; with my minor modifications; my emphases.

¹²⁹⁸ al-Ṭaḥāwī in Watt 1994, p.50.

negative discursive constructs in favor of the incomprehensibility of the transcendent discourse on the unknowable divine ipseity.

Not only the later Ḥanafī creeds, such as the *Greatest Insight II* [*Fiqh al-Akbar II*], but also Abū Muṭīʿ al-Makḥūl al-Nasafī (d.930)'s *Refutation* [*Kitāb al-Radd ʿalā Ahl al-Bidaʿ wa al-Ahwāʿ*], al-Māturīdī (d.944)'s *Book of Unity* [*Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*], and al-Ḥakīm al-Samarqandī (d.953)'s *Book of the Greatest Abode* [*Kitāb al-Sawād al-Aʿzam*] demonstrate that it was eastern Iranian and Central Asian Ḥanafism where the *bilā kayfa* attained such self-canceling apophatic dimensions early on. Especially the *Book of the Greatest Abode*, very much like al-Māturīdī's later *Book of Unity*, showed a clear break from, and even explicit condemnation of, Karrāmī anthropomorphism on the divine nature. Still we find parallels: for example, al-Samarqandī argues that all attributes of God, including the essential ones and those that express actions are uncreated and unchangeable. He also considers divine contentment [*riḍā*] and anger [*ghaḍab*] among these attributes. (The Mālikī-Ashʿarī theologian of his time, al-Bāqillānī (d.1013), who inclined towards transcendent anthropomorphism as we will discuss below, saw contentment and anger as essential attributes of God as well.) Still, al-Samarqandī's approach to the divine essence was strongly negativist as it removes all modalities from God. In line with the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism of al-Ṭahāwī, he depicted the Qurʾān as the transcendent discourse, the meaning of which cannot be accessed, hence interpreted:

One must not ascribe to God location, nor speak of His presence, nor of His coming and going, nor describe Him by anything resembling created things. This is because the perfection of faith is that one should know, and strive to know, God, but not to know in Him modality [*kayfiyyah*]. ... As for the verses in which God has mentioned coming and arrival, and the Tradition from the Prophet concerning the descent of God and suchlike, he must believe in it but not explain it; for he who explains it enters into the doctrine of ineffectualism [*taʿṭīl*] and becomes a heretic. If you explain coming, going, eye, hand, self, etc., you become an anthropomorphist. If you see an ambiguous verse or tradition, leave it to God, and do not (try to) explain it, that you may escape giving a wrong explanation.¹²⁹⁹

Al-Samarqandī (d.953)'s *Book of the Greatest Abode*, written in early tenth century Transoxania, served as a "public text" that expressed the theological

¹²⁹⁹ al-Ḥakīm al-Samarqandī in al-ʿOmar 1974, #46-47, pp.167-169.

consensus of the “greatest mass.” It played a crucial role as it was designed as the fixed, official catechism under the Sāmānid rule. By the end of the century, it was translated into Persian under Nūḥ ibn Maṣṣūr (r.976-997).

Al-Māturīdī’s *Book of Unity*, written in the last decade of his life, follows the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism of earlier Ḥanafīs. The work embodies “the oldest theological summa extant from Islamic civilization,”¹³⁰⁰ and also plays a significant role in drastically changing the Ḥanafī outlook on various theological questions, yet giving the deceptive appearance of a continuity. Al-Māturīdī indicates that the attributes apply to God in a way that is unknown to us. For that reason, he employs them in a way that simultaneously affirms the transcendent discourse amodally, and negates comparability as well as knowability. His phrases like “God is Knower unlike Knowers” [*‘Alīm lā ka-al-‘ulamā’*]¹³⁰¹ affirm the transcendent discourse, with clear proof of rational demonstration, but also indicate that neither the nature of the divine essence nor how divine attributes relate to the essence are knowable, describable, or open to human discourse.

Rudolph argues that for al-Māturīdī, in line with Ḥanafī rationalism, and similar to the Mu‘tazilite position, the divine essence is knowable. He claims that “the Ḥanafites had always held a rationalistic position on this issue and claimed that God was knowable by natural means.”¹³⁰² He focuses on al-Māturīdī’s appeal to creation as a “witness” to its invisible creator [*dalālat al-shāhid ‘alā al-ghā’ib*]. In conclusion, he asserts that “al-Māturīdī teaches the possibility of rational knowledge of God. Thus al-Māturīdī positions himself contrary to other Sunnī doctrines such as those of the Ash‘arites, and outwardly would seem to take his place alongside the Mu‘tazilite theologians.”¹³⁰³

Such an evaluation harbors at least two mistakes. First, Rudolph’s categorization of the Ash‘arites, as we saw, does not seem correct. Early Ash‘arites were prone to anthropomorphist depictions and the knowability of God in line with earlier traditionists. Even if they refrained from accepting reason or creation as a “witness” to God, they held that God was known, with all His anthropomorphic depictions. On the other hand, in the eleventh century Ash‘arites begin to accept

¹³⁰⁰ Rudolph 2015, p.189.

¹³⁰¹ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.106.

¹³⁰² Rudolph 2015, p.265.

¹³⁰³ Rudolph 2015, p.268.

reason and nature as legitimate means to derive knowledge about God, in contrast to Rudolph's suggestion that "the possibility of rational knowledge of God" was in opposition to Ash'arism. Notwithstanding their differences, later Ash'arites defend divine knowability as well, as I demonstrated in the third chapter.

Second, Rudolph's depiction of al-Māturīdī as a defender of divine knowability does not accurately reflect his approach to the divine essence. It is correct that al-Māturīdī describes creation as containing accessible signs of its creator, and that reason provides us a variety of strong arguments that there should be a creator and rational agent that governs creation. Philosophers provided similar arguments as well, but they explicitly defended divine unknowability. In other words, "signs," analogy from creation, or the witnessing of the visible to what is beyond, are only gestures towards, or indicators of, the invisible creator, rather than direct claims that He can be known, or comprehended by the human mind. Instead, al-Māturīdī provides important evidence that he thinks otherwise. Most clearly, concerning the divine ipseity and its relationship of attributes, al-Māturīdī follows the principle of "stoppage" [*waqf*], i.e., stopping short of comprehension. As a critical metaphysician, he appeals to this principle whenever he thinks that reason cannot progress: "God probes the believers with stoppage concerning that which is received about the promise and threat (in the afterlife) [*al-wa'd wa al-wa'id*], about the disjointed letters [*ḥurūf al-muqaṭa'āt*], and issues like those, where man is tested [*miḥnah*] with belief as there is stoppage and no certain knowledge."¹³⁰⁴ As there is no clear, demonstrable proof in such metaphysical topics—opposite arguments can be defended on similar grounds. Scholars should rather admit their incapacity to reach a final, certain knowledge in such issues, and be rather prudent beyond their reach. Such prudence is expressed by *bilā kayfa*, concerning the verses on the "vision" of God, or His "establishment" on a "throne." Stoppage dictates that these scriptural truths actually transcend the human mind, and one should negate all similitudes and comparisons in relation to God, and defer the final interpretation to Him. The intended meaning of such verses cannot be known, except as a negation of what we can actually comprehend.

The divine nature, with its relationship to the divine attributes, is one of the fields where al-Māturīdī appeals to stoppage. Al-Māturīdī adopts the Kullābite formula that the essential attributes of God are neither Him nor other than Him.

¹³⁰⁴ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.138.

This very formula, accordingly, entails the unknowability of the way in which these attributes relate to the divine essence. We can discursively and rationally prove that the universe has a creator, who cannot lack knowledge, speech, or power. But this does not mean that we actually know the way in which He is so. Al-Māturīdī associates the Kullābite formula with rational prudence—the stoppage: “To say: *it is neither Him, nor other than Him*. This means to stop short of knowledge, and it is true as it is confirmed for [divine] knowledge and power [in addition to speech].”¹³⁰⁵ Al-Māturīdī’s description of the essential names of God is a strongly negative theological one. “God,” “One,” and “All-Merciful,” according to al-Māturīdī, are among His essential names, which express the same essence in different forms. Unlike the attributes, which differ in their meaning,¹³⁰⁶ the essential names of God differ only in expression, but not in their meaning, insofar as “He transcends the words through which He could be understood.”¹³⁰⁷ These essential names themselves, on the other hand, resist being understood in positive terms. In al-Māturīdī’s description of “oneness,” the philosophical rigor of which is evident,¹³⁰⁸ it is anything but knowable:

“One” [*wāḥid*] has four meanings: 1. The totality that cannot be doubled. 2. The part that cannot be halved. 3. That which is in-between them, insofar as it carries the [former] two aspects: it is larger than that which cannot be halved, but smaller than that which cannot be doubled, as there is nothing beyond a totality. 4. That through which the other three [definitions of “one”] exist [*qāma bihi*]. *He; and He is not He; Hidden from He* [*huwa; wa lā huwa huwa, akhfā min huwa*]. *Of whom the tongue is muted* [*inkharasa*]. *About whom declaration dries up. From whom estimations* [*awhām*] *recede. In whom understandings are perplexed—He is God, the lord of both worlds.*¹³⁰⁹

“He; and He is not He” is a strongly apophatic self-negation that we find among Sufis like al-Kalābādhī (d.990), and Ismā‘īlī theologians of eastern Iran contemporary with al-Māturīdī—such as Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sijistānī, the chief of the

¹³⁰⁵ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.122.

¹³⁰⁶ Al-Māturīdī’s position here follows Abū Muṭī‘ al-Makhūl, who maintained that God possesses distinct attributes not identical with His being. See Rudolph 2015, p.279.

¹³⁰⁷ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.129.

¹³⁰⁸ See Rudolph 2015, pp.276-277.

¹³⁰⁹ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.107; my emphasis. For an alternative translation, see Rudolph 2015, pp.275-276.

Ismā'īlī *da'wā* in Khurāsān following Muḥammad al-Nasafī.¹³¹⁰ The analysis of the ways in which “one” is applied also recalls the works of Philosophers like al-Kindī and al-Fārābī. Similarly, al-Māturīdī adds that divine oneness is not a numerical oneness, as he repeats on different occasions such as under the “negation of comparability” [*nafy al-tashbīh*].¹³¹¹ Accordingly, divine oneness can neither be comprehended nor depicted, except as a unique category.

The same unknowability applies in the problems of anthropomorphism for al-Māturīdī. In both issues of God’s “establishment” on the “throne,” and His “vision” in the afterlife, al-Māturīdī is quite consistently following a *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. In the case of the “throne,” for example, he enumerates all interpretations that he finds reasonable, precisely because all of them negate divine comparability. But his eventual position in terms of interpretation is to cancel it, in favor of stoppage:

For us, the principle here is, as God says, “Nothing is like unto Him,” [Q.42:11]—to negate similarity to creation from Himself. We have clarified that He also transcends similarity in His actions and attributes. The verse “The All-Merciful, established on the throne” [*al-Raḥmān ‘alā al-‘arsh istawā’*] [Q.20:5] *should be understood as it is revealed*, and negate from Him similitude to creation. For, revelation came down about this, and proven by reason. Then, we do not go to any interpretation [*la naqṭa’a fī ta’wīlihi ‘alā shay’*], as it is possible to be different than what we have mentioned. It is also possible that it might have an interpretation other than comparing to creation that is unknown to us. We believe in what God willed in it [i.e., negating similitude]. In all such issues that are established in the revelation, such as the vision of God and other issues, one should negate similarity, and believe in it *without affirming* [*ghayri taḥqīq*] *one [interpretation] over another*.

The principle here is that *the person is narrow-fitted* [*yuḍayyiq*] to the issue, as their effort for understanding is [based on] existing creation. As discourse on God must be uplifting from similitude in essence or action, relations regarding Him should not be understood in terms of existents other than Him.¹³¹²

¹³¹⁰ Abū Ya’qūb al-Sijistānī 1965, p.69.

¹³¹¹ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.89.

¹³¹² al-Māturīdī 2003, p.138; my emphases.

Concerning the “vision” of God in the afterlife, al-Māturīdī adopts a similar position. He employs the phrase “*bilā kayfa*” in terms of beatific vision, consistent with his general anti-interpretive approach to the unknowable divine nature.¹³¹³ First, “His vision is real, without comprehension, and without interpretation [*tafsīr*].”¹³¹⁴ The very possibility of vision in the afterlife, for al-Māturīdī is actually the negation of His knowability, as it is a negation of understanding Him [*nafy al-idrāk*]:

“Eyes do not apprehend Him” [Q.103:6]; He is praised via the negation of apprehension [*idrāk*], not with the negation of vision. He also said: “they do not comprehend Him in knowledge” [Q.20:110]. Here is an affirmation of knowledge, and a negation of comprehension [*iḥāṭah*]. The same with apprehension. ... Besides, “apprehension” is to comprehend something limited. God transcends this, and being described by limitation.¹³¹⁵

Al-Māturīdī emphasizes the Qur’ānic distinction between the “apprehension” of God, which is impossible, and His “vision,” which preserves His ultimate unknowability. The distinction was employed by later Ash’arites such as al-Juwaynī (d.1085)¹³¹⁶ and became a key principle for Sufis who adopted *bilā kayfa* approaches to beatific vision in the afterlife.

Eleventh century Māturīdite creeds also preserve the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism of the earlier centuries. An important text for Transoxania’s subsequent Māturīdite theological development, the *Greatest Insight II* [*Fiqh al-Akbar II*], probably written in the late eleventh century extensively employs *bilā kayfa* in a modal affirmation of God’s physical descriptions and cancelation of human understanding and interpretation.¹³¹⁷ From the tenth century onwards, Ḥanafism

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If it is said: how is He seen?

It is said: Without “how” [*bilā kayfa*]. Howness applies to what which has a form [*ṣūrah*]. Rather He is seen without standing or sitting, leaning or relating, connection [*ittiṣāl*] or separation [*infiṣāl*], confrontation or turning, short or long, light or darkness, stillness or movement, tangent or distant, outside or inside—no meaning is taken by estimation [*wahm*], or afforded by reason; He transcends them. (al-Māturīdī 2003, p.151.)

¹³¹⁴ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.141.

¹³¹⁵ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.145.

¹³¹⁶ Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī 1950, pp.181-183.

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rapidly differentiated itself from Karrāmism, and followed an anti-interpretive and non-cognitive approach towards the transcendent discourse on the divine nature.

Tenth to Eleventh Century Ash‘arism: From Anti-Interpretivism to Anti-Anthropomorphism

Imāmī theologians distanced themselves from transcendent anthropomorphism by the ninth century. Ibn Bābawayh (d.991)’s *Epistle on Imāmī Beliefs* [*Risālat al-‘Itiqādat al-Imāmiyyah*], and his student Shaykh al-Mufīd (d.1022)’s “Correction of the Treatise on Beliefs” [*Taṣḥiḥ al-‘Itiqādat*] both strongly underline divine otherness, and criticize the “ignorant” anthropomorphism of the Sunnī traditionists. Ibn Bābawayh’s creed, very much in line with Mu‘tazilite rationalism, begins with a focus on divine otherness. The page that describes God has around thirty Arabic negations in different forms.¹³¹⁸ Ibn Bābawayh immediately begins with criticizing anthropomorphic readings of the Qur’ān and prophetic reports, and interprets them with a focus on divine transcendence. Against al-Bāqillānī (d.1013)’s protests, he reads God’s “face” [Q.28:88] as His religion; His “leg” [*saq*] [Q.68:42] as the unfolding of events; His “side” [*janb*] [Q.39:56] as obedience to Him; His “hands” [Q.5:64] as His blessings in this world and the next, or alternatively, His power, and so on.¹³¹⁹ Ibn Bābawayh adopts a

He is without body, without substance and without accident. He has no limit, no opposite, no rival, none similar to Him. He has a hand, a face and a self, as he mentioned in the Qur’ān. When God mentions in the Qur’ān His “face,” His “hand” and His “self,” these are His attributes *amodally* [*bilā kayfa*]. It is *not said* that His hand is His power or His grace, because that would abolish the attribute; such is the view of the Qadariyyah and the Mu‘tazilah. On the contrary, *His hand is His attribute amodally*, and *His anger and His good pleasure are two amodal attributes*. ... His decree, His predetermination and His will are His attributes from eternity *amodally*. (Watt 1994, pp.63-64. with minor modifications of mine. For an alternative translation, see Wensinck 2008, p.190.)

Besides, the *Fiqh al-Akbar II* adopts this approach to other anthropomorphic descriptions as well:

God’s being near or far is not to be understood in the sense of a shorter or longer distance, but in respect of (a person’s) being honored or not honored. The obedient (person) is near God *amodally* and the disobedient (person) is far from Him *amodally*. Nearness, distance and coming closer apply to a person’s intimate relation with God, as does God’s being near in Paradise, and a person’s standing before Him; all are to be understood *amodally*. (Watt 1994, p.67. For an alternative translation, see Wensinck 2008, p.196.)

¹³¹⁸ Ibn Bābawayh 1993, p.22.

¹³¹⁹ Ibn Bābawayh 1993, p.23. Cf. Shaykh al-Mufīd 1371/1951, pp.28-30.

negative theology of divine attributes, reading all essential attributes as negations of their opposites.¹³²⁰ With a strong rationalism, Ibn Bābawayh is committed to interpretive and discursive solutions to anthropomorphism instead of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism.

The wide variety of cases that the occupied Ibn Bābawayh were also discussed among the Ash'arite theologians of his time. Late tenth century Ash'arism still embodied an anthropomorphist resistance to an apophaticism that stressed the inaccessibility of the divine discourse, and the meaning of its positive descriptions of God. The Mālikī jurist of the Maghrib, Ibn Abī Zayd (d.996) demonstrated the ambivalence of the context wherein Sufi creeds on the divine essence emerged. Ibn Abī Zayd's *Epistle* presented a detailed creed, which, accordingly, addressed a wide audience, including children.¹³²¹ The *Epistle* opened with a group of negations concerning the divine nature, where he declared:

those who describe do not achieve the reality [*kunh*] of his attributes. Those who think do not encompass anything [about Him]; they learn [something] from His signs, but they do not reflect upon the nature of His ipseity [*ma'iyat dhātihī*]. "They do not encompass anything from His knowledge except as He wills" [Q.2:255].¹³²²

Ibn Abī Zayd (d.996) also accepts the Qur'ānic descriptions of God as established on [*fawq*] a throne, and speaking [*kallama*] to Moses "with His Speech, which is an attribute of His ipseity, not one of His creatures. He appeared to the mountain and it became levelled at His majesty. The Qur'ān is the speech of God; it is not a created thing."¹³²³ His friends [*awliyā'*] will look at "His noble face" [*nazar ilā wajhihi al-Karīm*] in the afterlife.¹³²⁴ While his negations on the divine essence were powerful, Ibn Abī Zayd's approach to the problems of anthropomorphism affirmed a literal reading of these sacred reports without further explanation.

For the interpretation of the "footstool" as His knowledge, see Ibn Bābawayh 1993, p.44.

¹³²⁰ Ibn Bābawayh 1993, p.27. His student Shaykh al-Mufid does not follow this negative reading of the divine attributes. See Shaykh al-Mufid 1371/1951, pp.40-41.

¹³²¹ Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī 1997, pp.73-74.

¹³²² Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī 1997, p.75.

¹³²³ Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī 1997, pp.76-77. Also see Watt 1994, 68-69.

¹³²⁴ Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī 1997, p.78.

Ibn Abī Zayd embodies a transitional point in the West between the Mālikī theological literalism and Ash‘arism proper. He never attacked Ash‘arism outright, but he shared a traditional Mālikī distaste for divisive disputation [*jadal*] and futile theological speculation.¹³²⁵ Al-Bāqillānī (d.1013), another Mālikī scholar who presented one of the earliest systematic statements of Ash‘arism, with great importance for later Sunnī theology, embodies a similar negotiation of anthropomorphism with *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. In his famous *Prolegomena* [*Tamhīd*], al-Bāqillānī argues that the Creator should be necessarily dissimilar [*mukhālif*] to creation “in kind [*jjins*] or form [*ṣūrah*].”¹³²⁶ Here al-Bāqillānī explains that God actually does not have a kind, type, shape [*shakl*], and more importantly, form, which anthropomorphists were reluctant to negate. Al-Bāqillānī’s ascriptions of the essential attributes of God are all justified in rational, rather than dogmatic, grounds. He adds a set questions, “what is He” [*mā huwa*], “how is He” [*kayfa huwa*], “where is He” [*ayna huwa*], and “when was He” [*matā kāna*], in order to negate the categories of space, time and form from God.

Yet transcendent anthropomorphist dimensions of al-Bāqillānī’s theology are obvious. Most surprisingly, al-Bāqillānī adds “face,” “eyes” and “hands” to the list of God’s essential attributes. His justification for these anthropomorphic ascriptions are purely dogmatic. He fiercely criticizes the Mu‘tazilites’ claim that God has no face, or hand, even if the transcendent discourse says so. He criticizes al-Nazzām (d.846) as the latter claimed that the prophet did not have a vision [*ra‘a*] or witnessing [*shahādah*] of God. Later he attacks the Mu‘tazilites in general as they negate the vision of God in the afterlife, in contrast to the scriptural and prophetic statements. He criticizes those who interpret God’s “hands” as His power and blessing¹³²⁷—the Imāmī theologians of the time were following this line of interpretation.¹³²⁸ Al-Bāqillānī’s own exposition of the divine “countenance” and “hand” disallows any interpretive inquiry—yet not due to unknowability, but rather anthropomorphist literalism. He does allow the literal vision of God in the afterlife with our physical eyes.¹³²⁹ In line with the Mu‘tazilites and later Ash‘arites, he claims that God can actually be known, and apprehended [*idrāk*].¹³³⁰ More significantly, very much like the earlier Ḥanbalī

¹³²⁵ Casewit 2014, p.48.

¹³²⁶ al-Bāqillānī 1987, p.44.

¹³²⁷ al-Bāqillānī 1987, pp.296-298.

¹³²⁸ Cf Ibn Bābawayh 1993, p.23.

¹³²⁹ al-Bāqillānī 1987, pp.301-303.

¹³³⁰ al-Bāqillānī 1987, pp.304-305.

creeds and Muḥammad ibn Sa’dūn (d.1130), al-Bāqillānī cites Q.42:11 in support of transcendent anthropomorphism—the vision of God.¹³³¹ His appeal to the term “*bilā kayfa*” on the question of the vision of God is done in the service of a literal acceptance of the anthropomorphic verse, rather than apophaticism.¹³³²

Early Ash’arites were closer to transcendent anthropomorphism than they were to *bilā kayfa* unknowability in terms of the divine essence. Al-Shahrastānī (d.1153)’s distinction between the early Ash’arites and the *bilā kayfa* apophatic position is telling. When introducing the *bilā kayfa* non-cognitive approach of those traditionists “who neither accepted interpretation [*ta’wīl*] nor fell into anthropomorphism,” al-Shahrastānī carefully separated them from the followers of al-Ash’arī, who were, like the Karrāmites, called “Attributionists” [*Ṣifātiyyah*].¹³³³ “Attributionists” was the name of a broad, heterogeneous group of theological approaches; only some of them were overtly anthropomorphist, but all of them accepted the reported [*khbarī*] attributes of “two hands,” or “face” of God as they are, without interpretation.¹³³⁴ Briefly, the Ash’arites of the tenth century was as susceptible to transcendent anthropomorphism as the traditionists were. But the later Ash’arites emphasized the importance of interpretivism and reasoning [*‘aql*] much more strongly than al-Bāqillānī who adhered to the sacred reports [*naql*] as sufficient to approach anthropomorphic depictions of God. From the eleventh century onwards, Ash’arite theological texts begin rather with reasoning as the most important source of theological speculation. Hence Ash’arism gets increasingly discursive and interpretive on the issue of the divine nature. ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d.1038)’s *Principles of Theology* [*Uṣūl al-Dīn*] witnesses this change towards discursive, interpretive approaches among the Ash’arites:

... “His ‘establishment’ is among the consimilar verses: *none knows its interpretation except God*” [Q.3:7]. This was what Malik ibn Anas and the Medinan jurists said. ... Among his followers are those who claim that His “establishment on the throne” means His “being above [*fawq*] the throne without touching.” And this is what al-Qalānisī (d.970) said, and ‘Abd Allāh ibn Sa’īd [Ibn Kullāb] (d.855) mentioned in his *Book of Attributes* [*Kitāb al-Ṣifāt*]. For us, the correct way is to interpret [*ta’wīl*] the “throne” in this verse to

¹³³¹ al-Bāqillānī 1987, p.315.

¹³³² See al-Bāqillānī in Renard 2014, p.210.

¹³³³ al-Shahrastānī in Renard 2014, p.146.

¹³³⁴ al-Shahrastānī in Renard 2014, p.145.

mean His “dominion” [*mulk*]; the intention [*irādah*] is that “none except He is established in the dominion.”¹³³⁵

By literally accepting God’s being established *above* the throne, al-Qalānisī and Ibn Kullāb actually joined a still powerful Sunnī transcendent anthropomorphist line. The infamous Qur’ān reciter and doxographer Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Malaṭī (d.987), for example, accepted God’s being above [*fawq*] the throne in literal terms, along with His hand, face, footstool, veil, leg, foot, as well as His laughing, descent, ascent, and arrival, without adding any signifier of amodality. He also denounced anybody or any school of thought—obviously a large and diverse group of approaches—who interpreted these verses in non-corporeal ways as heretics. Despite the strong tradition of anti-interpretivism of early Ash‘arism, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī self-consciously turned toward discursive strategies on the divine essence, disagreeing with the traditionist reading of Q.3:7.

From the early eleventh century onwards, Ash‘arites increasingly adopted rationalistic, interpretive approaches to the divine essence instead of anti-interpretivist anthropomorphism or *bilā kayfa*. Like ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī, Abu Ishāq al-Shīrāzī (d.1083) and Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d.1085) refused the anti-interpretive acceptance of the transcendent discourse on the divine essence. Abu Ishāq al-Shīrāzī directly criticized the position of unknowability that was associated with Malik ibn Anas (d.795), as quoted by ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī. According to Abu Ishāq al-Shīrāzī, “*none knows its interpretation except God,*” is actually an erroneous reading of the verse Q.3:7. The *bilā kayfa* position mistakenly reads the verse as follows: “none knows its interpretation except God. And those firmly rooted in knowledge say, ‘we have faith in it; all is from our Lord’.” For Abu Ishāq al-Shīrāzī, this reading cannot be correct, because “faith [*īmān*] indicates verification [*taṣdīq*], and the verification of something cannot happen when not knowing it.”¹³³⁶ One should rather add the full stop a few words later, and read the verse as “none knows its interpretation except God *and* those who those firmly rooted in knowledge. They say, ‘we have faith in it; all is from our Lord’.” Hence, as Abu Ishāq puts it “the verse [Q.3:7] is a proof [*dalīl*] for interpretation [*ta’wīl*], rather than the negation of interpretation [*nafy al-ta’wīl*]!”¹³³⁷

¹³³⁵ ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī 1346/1928, pp.112-113.

¹³³⁶ Abu Ishāq al-Shīrāzī 1420/1999, p.161.

¹³³⁷ Abu Ishāq al-Shīrāzī 1420/1999, p.161.

Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī was even more inclined to active interpretation than Abu Ishāq al-Shīrāzī. While al-Juwaynī interpreted [*ḥaml*] the “hands” as “divine power,” “eyes” as “vision,” and “face” as “existence,” he supplied it with a long dialectical section, which suggests that the controversy still raged among the Ash‘arites.¹³³⁸ He criticized the “Riff-Raff,” the vulgar among the anthropomorphists [*al-Ḥashwiyyah al-ra‘āyat al-mujassimah*] for their literal understanding of the self-declared allegory [*ḍarb al-mathal*] in Q.24:35: God as the “Light of the heavens and the earth.” Well-known Sunnī scholars of Nīsabūr, where al-Juwaynī himself served as a teacher in the famous Saljūqī Nizāmiyyah *madrasah*, had adopted a literal reading the Light Verse in previous generations. Ibn Khuzaymah (d.924), one of the most prominent Nisābūrī judges of the time, declared:

God has affirmed for Himself a splendid and venerable face, which He declares is eternal and non-perishable. We and all scholars of our path from the Hijaz, the Tihama, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt affirm for God (the) face, which He has affirmed for Himself. We profess it with our tongues and believe it in our hearts, without likening [*ghayr an nushabbihā*] His face to one from His creatures. May our Lord be exalted above our likening Him to His creatures. ... We and all our scholars in all our lands say that *the One we worship has a face. ... And we say that the face of our Lord [radiates] a brilliant, radiant light... The face of our Lord is eternal.*¹³³⁹

The reading that al-Juwaynī criticized was the transcendent anthropomorphist position that adopted a literal “*bilā kayfa*” understanding of a verse that the Qur‘ān described as a metaphor. Such a reading was common not only among the Ḥanbalites as noted by Ibn al-Jawzī (d.1201),¹³⁴⁰ but also the Ash‘arites. Al-Juwaynī, in the same line, introduced a variety of themes such as the “establishment” on the “throne,” “leg” [*saq*]” in Q.68:42, “descent,” and “coming,” insisting on anti-anthropomorphic, interpretive solutions. Only the vision of God in the afterlife remained as a *bilā kayfa* possibility. It was not knowable how the beatific vision will happen, but it remained open as it was not possible to negate it logically. Al-Juwaynī was deliberately inclusive on the vision of God in this world, allowing divergences. Accordingly, divine omnipotence may allow it as another logical possibility, but one can also interpret the verses on the

¹³³⁸ Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī 1950, pp.155-164.

¹³³⁹ Ibn Khuzaymah in W. Williams 2009, p.39; my emphasis.

¹³⁴⁰ Ibn al-Jawzī 2006, p.42, 88, 110.

vision of God, as in the case of Moses, as disallowing it in this world. Al-Juwaynī's tolerance was understandable, because the Ash'arites in his time predominantly adopted non-interpretive approaches to the beatific vision, in opposition to the Mu'tazilite protests.¹³⁴¹ Notwithstanding his tolerance, al-Juwaynī aligned with the latter, discursive, interpretive position that eliminates His "vision" in this world. In this discussion, al-Juwaynī benefited from the Qur'ānic distinction between apprehension [*idrāk*] and vision, in the exact way al-Māturīdī did in his *Book of Unity*.¹³⁴²

From the eleventh century onwards, Ash'arites increasingly appealed to such interpretive approaches to the divine nature. Al-Ghazālī's complaint in the *Decisive Criterion* [*al-Fayṣal al-Tafriqah*] is an excellent witness to this rapid change, and related theological conflicts:

The Ḥanbalite brands the Ash'arite an unbeliever, claiming that the latter deems the prophet to be a liar in the prophet's attribution of God's aboveness [*al-fawq*] and establishment on the throne. The Ash'arite brands the Ḥanbalite an unbeliever, claiming the latter to be an anthropomorphist who deems the prophet to be a liar when the prophet says about God, "nothing is like unto Him" [Q.42:11].¹³⁴³

By the time of al-Ghazālī, Ash'arites were now appealing to Q.42:11 in order to criticize the very position that earlier Ash'arites like al-Bāqillānī (d.1013) adopted by using this very verse. Besides, 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d.1038)'s interpretive divergence from depicting God as "above" the throne had already become their dominant position. At the end of the century, after reviewing various interpretations, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1209) cited the famous Shāfi'ī exegete al-Qaffāl (d.976) with approval, claiming that "the words, 'His throne encompasses the heavens and the earth:' are meant to describe God's greatness and exaltation through images."¹³⁴⁴ In Shams Tabrīzī (d.1248)'s discourses, the Anatolian scholar Asad-i Mutakallim (fl.ca.13th CE) fiercely defended the interpretive position on anthropomorphism.¹³⁴⁵ For Tabrīzī, a typical Ash'arite

¹³⁴¹ "The Ash'arite brands the Mu'tazilite an unbeliever claiming that the Mu'tazilite deems the prophet to be a liar when the latter informs us of the beatific vision, and of God's knowledge, power, and other attributes." (Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in Jackson 2002, p.93.)

¹³⁴² See Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī 1950, pp.165-186.

¹³⁴³ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in Jackson 2002, p.93.

¹³⁴⁴ Renard 2014, p.31.

¹³⁴⁵ Q.57:4, Shams Tabrīzī 2004, pp.156-157; For Asad, see Aflākī 2001, Vol.2, p.255.

[*Sunnī*] theologian would accuse anthropomorphist positions of heresy, and ardently interpret the sacred sources in order to remove all anthropomorphic implications.¹³⁴⁶

Summary

In the tenth and eleventh centuries, Sufi manuals broke out in theologically rich and ambiguous contexts. By that time, Shī'ites at large, Philosophers and Mu'tazilites had already adopted interpretive approaches to the corporeal depictions of God in the sacred sources. Ḥanafism dominantly followed a non-cognitive, anti-interpretive apophatic approach to these depictions, declaring the incomprehensibility of such reports, and the unknowability of the divine nature. Ḥanbalīs, and traditionists at large, were on the anti-interpretive side, oscillating between transcendent anthropomorphism and non-cognitivism. Ash'arites were moving within a wider range of theological positions. We find both anthropomorphist and non-cognitive versions of anti-interpretivism, but also an intensive movement towards interpretivist approaches from the eleventh century onwards. Unlike the Ḥanafīs, non-cognitive Ash'arite positions did not always entail apophaticism, because many Ash'arites defended the discursive knowability of the divine essence, like many Mu'tazilites.

It is in conversation and negotiation with these diverse theological positions that Sufi manuals broke out. These manuals would fundamentally contribute to, and pave the road for, the formalization of Sufism, the inclusion or exclusion of various indigenous mystical or ascetic trends under its banner, and later, the establishment of the Sufi orders [*ṭarīqat*].

B. *Bilā Kayfa* Apophaticism and the Rise of Institutionalized Sufism *Bilā Kayfa Apophaticism among Early Sufis?*

Islam in the tenth century displayed a rich variety of opinions on the nature and accessibility of the divine essence. Among those who admitted the uncreated nature of the Qur'ān as the transcendent discourse, we find three prominent approaches: (i) traditionists and early Ash'arite positions that follow transcendent anthropomorphism by accepting the literal reading of the sacred sources on such issues, (ii) discursive and rationalist paradigms that interpretively eschew anthropomorphism; (iii) *bilā kayfa* apophaticism that

Cf. al-Maybudī 2015, p.402.

¹³⁴⁶ Shams Tabrīzī 2004, p.61.

negates discursive access to divine nature by admitting the inaccessibility of the divine nature and the meaning of the transcendent discourse.

Since its formative period, Sufism associated itself with the latter two positions. Prominent Baghdādī Sufis like Biṣṭāmī (d.848), al-Ḥallāj (d.922), and al-Junayd (d.910) were strong critics of traditionism and its proneness to anthropomorphism. Baṣran Sufism was also quite anti-anthropomorphic, and inclined to interpret the scripture and prophetic reports through that lens. A clear example is the *Book of Exegesis* by Sahl al-Tustarī (d.896), one of the most influential mystics of the formative period, cited by prominent medieval scholars like Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111), Shihāb al-Dīn Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d.1191) and Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-Arabī (d.1240). Here, Tustarī interprets the “vision” of God, even in the afterlife as narrated in Q.19:61, as nearness to Him.¹³⁴⁷ His readings of the “throne” are similarly non-literal,¹³⁴⁸ and the verse “the hand of God is above their hands” [Q.48:10] indicates that “the power [*ḥawl*] of God and His strength [*quwwah*] is above their strength and their action [*ḥarakah*].”¹³⁴⁹ He

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[Q.19:61] “*Gardens of Eden, which the Compassionate One has promised to His servants in the unseen...*” This means the ‘visual’ beholding [*mu’āyana*] of God, in the sense of nearness which He appointed between Him and them, so that the servant sees his heart in the proximity of God, witnessed [*mashhūd*] in the unseen of the unseen [*ghayb al-ghayb*]. The unseen of the unseen is the spiritual self [*nafs al-rūḥ*], the understanding of the intellect [*fahm al-‘aql*], and the discernment of meaning by the heart [*fiṭnat al-murād bi’l-qalb*]. The spiritual self is the seat of the intellect [*‘aql*], which is the seat of the Holy [*al-Quds*]. This Holy is linked with the Throne [*‘arsh*], and is one of the names of the Throne. (al-Tustarī 2011, p.120.)

Similarly, Tustarī interprets divine love in terms of obedience. (Hujvīrī 2001, p.408.) On the two forms of beatific vision in the afterlife, as “*rū’yat al-jannah*” and “*rū’yat al-Ḥaqq*,” see al-Tustarī 2011, p.170 [Q.39:7], p.181 [Q.42:20]. As narrated by Abu Khalaf al-Ṭabarī, Tustarī interpreted *mushāhadah* as servanthood [*‘ubūdiyyah*]. (See Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī 2013b, p.76.)

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[Q.40:15] “*The Exalter of rank, Lord of the Throne, He casts the Spirit of His command...*” That is, He is the Raiser of ranks, and He elevates the ranks of whomever He wills by [granting him] gnosis [*ma’rifah*] of Him. He casts the Spirit of His command...That is, He sends the Revelation from the heavens to the earth by His command. (al-Tustarī 2011, p.176.)

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[Q.48:10] “*...the Hand of God is above their hands...*” That is, the power [*ḥawl*] of God and His strength [*quwwah*] is above their strength and their action [*ḥarakah*]. This is in their saying to the Messenger at the time of the pledge

also argues that neither the divine essence, nor its relationship to His attributes are knowable:

[7:180] “And to God belong the Most Beautiful Names, so invoke Him by them.” Truly behind the names and attributes are attributes which no comprehension can penetrate, for God is a blazing fire and is inaccessible. Yet we have no option but to plunge in [and try to reach Him].¹³⁵⁰

Though they are unknowable, the struggle to understand, and to emulate [*takhalluq*] the divine attributes are key for human perfection. “Good character is connected with the divine attributes [*ṣifāt*] and qualities [*nu’ūt*].”¹³⁵¹ Yet Tustarī underlines that the divine essence is utterly unknowable. The chapter on divine unity [*tawḥīd*] in Qushayrī (d.1072)’s *Epistle [Risālah]* narrates al-Tustarī’s views in this line. Accordingly:

The essence of God may be characterised [*mawṣūfah*] through knowledge [*‘ilm*], not grasped through comprehension [*ghayr mudraka bi’l-iḥāṭah*], nor seen by human eyes [*mar’iyah bi’l-abṣār*] in this world, though it is found [*mawjūdah*] through the realities of faith [*ḥaqā’iq al-īmān*], without any limit [*ḥadd*], comprehending [*iḥāṭah*] or indwelling [*ḥulūl*]. ... He has veiled the creatures from gnosis [*ma’rifah*] of the profundity [*kunh*] of His essence, but He gives them an indication of it [*dallahum ‘alayhi*] by His signs...¹³⁵²

While faithfully transmitting al-Tustarī’s emphasis on divine unknowability, our famous Sufi encyclopedist, al-Qushayrī does something curious. He adds another sentence, ascribing to al-Tustarī the corporeal vision of God in the afterlife: “*in the hereafter eyes will see it manifested in His dominion and omnipotence.*”¹³⁵³ An important difference between al-Tustarī’s own reading of Q.19:61 and his description by al-Qushayrī is the latter’s Ash’arization of the former’s metaphorical, anti-anthropomorphic interpretation of the vision of God. As

[*bay’ah*], ‘We have pledged to you that we will not flee, and we will fight for you.’ There is another possible meaning of the Hand of God is above their hands, which is, the grace [*minnah*] of God is above them in their being guided to take the pledge, and His reward [*thawāb*] for them is above their pledge and their obedience for you. (al-Tustarī 2011, p.197.)

¹³⁵⁰ al-Tustarī 2011, Q.7:180. p.78.

¹³⁵¹ See al-Tustarī 2011, Q.68:4, p.243.

¹³⁵² al-Tustarī 2011, p.xlvii, fn.204; with my minor modification.

¹³⁵³ al-Tustarī 2011 p.xlvii, fn.204; my emphasis.

opposed to the *bilā kayfa* literalism that al-Qushayrī describes, al-Tustarī was rather very much inclined to interpret such verses in anti-anthropomorphic ways. Even the Prophet’s vision of God, for him, was a reference to his primordial adoration in pre-existence during an unfathomable aeon of time.¹³⁵⁴ Still, this was a “witnessing of the unseen within the unseen,” where God’s attributes became manifest via His signs.¹³⁵⁵ In other words, Tustarī was far from adopting the literalist position that al-Qushayrī later ascribed to him.¹³⁵⁶

Al-Tustarī’s adoption of discursive, interpretive strategies in eschewing anthropomorphism instead of their *bilā kayfa* acceptance followed the theological approach of Dhū al-Nūn (d.861). Dhū al-Nūn was clearly inclined to interpret the throne verses in anti-anthropomorphic ways.¹³⁵⁷ Dhū al-Nūn, also, was the first editor of Ja’far al-Ṣādiq (d.765)’s Qur’ānic exegesis, which was strongly pro-interpretation instead of *bilā kayfa* around any descriptions of God. A great polymath and cornerstone for Shī’ite theologies, Ja’far al-Ṣādiq was incorporated into various Sufi lineages, manuals, and encyclopedias. His Qur’ānic exegesis was preserved in al-Sulamī (d.1021)’s *Truths of Qur’ānic Exegesis [al-Ḥaqā’iq fī al-Tafsīr]*, which was a compilation of Sufi exegesis. Authors of Sufi manuals like al-Qushayrī and al-Kharkūshī (d.1016) narrate how strongly Ja’far al-Ṣādiq disagreed with the *bilā kayfa* acceptance of the reports about the “vision” of God (even by the Prophet), His “descent,” or “throne.”¹³⁵⁸ A similarly strong, anti-anthropomorphic Sufi preference for interpretive discourses was also recorded in these popular Sufi manuals.¹³⁵⁹ Indeed, such pro-discourse, interpretive solutions to anthropomorphic reports, instead of their *bilā kayfa*, trans-discursive acceptance, was the dominant position among Baghdādīan Sufis of the late ninth and early tenth century. A plethora of Baghdādīan Sufis, such as

¹³⁵⁴ See Bowering 1980, pp.150-151.

¹³⁵⁵ al-Tustarī 2011, Q.53:13-18. p.213.

¹³⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion, see Bowering 1980, pp.165-175.

¹³⁵⁷

Someone asked Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d.861) about God’s words: “The All-Compassionate established Himself upon the throne.” He answered: “The All-Compassionate asserted His essence, while denying [His location] in a specific place. He exists through His own essence, whereas all other things exist through His command, as He wished [them to be].” (al-Qushayrī 2007, pp.12-13.)

¹³⁵⁸ e.g. al-Qushayrī 2007, p.12; al-Kharkūshī 1999, p.46.

¹³⁵⁹ e.g. al-Qushayrī 2007, pp.12-13.

al-Kharrāz (d.ca.899),¹³⁶⁰ al-Junayd,¹³⁶¹ al-Ḥallāj, Abū ‘Alī al-Rūḍhabārī (d.934),¹³⁶² Ja‘far al-Khuldī (d.959)¹³⁶³ and Abū ‘Uthmān al-Maghribī (d.983) undertook interpretive, discursive, anti-anthropomorphic solutions to the issues of God’s “throne,” “vision,” “descent,” or physical attributes and actions in general.¹³⁶⁴ Such discursive theological anti-anthropomorphism seems particularly strong among Sufis in Baghdād—the seat of the Islamic world and the hub of rich theological debates.

Al-Sulamī’s *Truths of Qur’ānic Exegesis* is an excellent source as it shows how early Sufis adopted interpretive strategies against anthropomorphism. “The Baghdādians” play an important role in al-Sulamī’s compilation in insisting on the anti-anthropomorphic interpretations of verses that could otherwise indicate divine corporeality.¹³⁶⁵ As it testifies, the verses like Q.27:26, Q.85:15 or Q.55:27, which mention of the “throne” or the “face” of God, were interpreted by Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d.933), among others, with an emphasis on divine otherness.¹³⁶⁶ Abū ‘Uthmān al-Maghribī (d.983)’s account of anti-anthropomorphism speaks more generally to tenth century Baghdādian Sufism:

I used to believe in the teaching [that postulated] that God is located in a certain direction. However, when I arrived in Baghdād, this [idea] disappeared from my heart. I then wrote to my companions in Mecca, saying: “I have become Muslim once again.”¹³⁶⁷

¹³⁶⁰ “The true essence of closeness [to God] is when the heart loses the perception of all things and the soul finds rest in God Most High.” (al-Qushayrī 2007, p.13.) Also see al-Kharkūshī, p.44.

¹³⁶¹ See e.g. Hujvīrī 1926, p.360 (For English translations, see Hujvīrī 1911, p.281; Hujvīrī 2001, p.377.); al-Sīrjānī 2012, #108, p.52.

¹³⁶² al-Sīrjānī 2012, p.528.

¹³⁶³ “Someone asked Ja‘far ibn Nuṣayr about the words of God: ‘The All-Compassionate sat himself upon the throne.’ He answered: ‘His knowledge of all things became equal, in that no one thing is closer to Him than the other’.” (al-Qushayrī 2007, p.12.)

¹³⁶⁴ al-Qushayrī 2007, pp.4-13.

¹³⁶⁵ e.g. al-Sulamī 2014, Q.2:115. (البغداديين: القصد توجُّهك والطريقة إليه استقامتك منك بفهمك وعنك بعلمك، ارتبط.) (كل شيء بضده وانفرد بنفسه)

¹³⁶⁶ al-Sulamī 2014, Q.55:27, Q.27:26, Q.85:15, Q.75:23; al-Wāsiṭī in Silvers 2002, p.21.

Silvers’ reading does not differentiate *bilā kayfa* apophaticism from al-Wāsiṭī’s interpretive anti-anthropomorphism.

¹³⁶⁷ al-Qushayrī 2007, pp.8-9; Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī 2013a, #18, p.20.

Even if vision and unveiling play fundamental roles in Sufi epistemology, many early Sufis chose to interpret the sacred reports on the vision of God in anti-anthropomorphic, metaphysical ways instead of accepting them literally. The author of an early Sufi manual, al-Kharkūshī (d.1016) of Nīsabūr explains that many scholars understood the vision of God in non-corporal, non-literal ways. Accordingly, there were Sufis who said that “the reality of gnosis is the witnessing of the Real with the innermost heart [*sirr*], without any means, without modality [*bilā wāsiṭah wa lā kayfa*], and without similarity.”¹³⁶⁸ As al-Sarrāj (d.977) reports, al-Nūrī (d.908) negated the knowability of God, and the applicability of any attributes we ascribe to Him. He also held the vision of God to be an impossibility because the distinction between creation and its Creator is decisive. The content of direct vision is rather the realities of faith in the unseen [*Ḥaqā’iq al-īmān bi al-ghayb*], and such witnessing belongs to the heart [*qalb*], instead of the eye.¹³⁶⁹ Al-Shiblī (d.946) similarly interprets “throne” and “footstool” as high cosmological levels that can be visited by the heart through attaining higher levels on the Sufi path.¹³⁷⁰

Only in the second half of the tenth century, when Sufi manuals emerged, do we begin to observe deviations from interpretivism among Sufis, under the influence of early Ash’arism. One of the best known Sufis of his time, and a student of al-Ash’arī (d.936), Ibn Khafīf (d.982) is credited with bringing Baghdādīan Sufism to Shīrāz. In his *Major Creed* cited by Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328), as well as in his *Minor Creed*, Ibn Khafīf adopts al-Ash’arī’s anti-interpretive position on the divine nature.¹³⁷¹ Ibn Khafīf’s creeds were essentially the same articles of belief as those of al-Ash’arī and conservative Ḥanbalites of his time, such as al-Barbahārī (d.940) and Ibn Baṭṭa (d.997), at times using precisely the same traditional wordings.¹³⁷² Ibn Khafīf underlined that the “two hands” of God was not an allegorical reference to His power, but one of His attributes. His

¹³⁶⁸ al-Kharkūshī 1999, p.46.

¹³⁶⁹ al-Sarrāj 1914, p.38 (Arabic text).

¹³⁷⁰ al-Shiblī in Avery 2014, pp.23-24; 56, 73, 96, 103.

¹³⁷¹ Bell and Al Shafie in al-Daylamī 2005, pp.xxx-xxxi.

¹³⁷² Al-Qushayrī says that Ibn Khafīf studied with the great Ḥanbalī Sufi master, and a close friend of al-Ḥallāj (d.922), Ibn ‘Aṭā’ al-Ādamī (d.922), which is historically unrealistic. (al-Qushayrī 2007, p.70.) At another point, Ibn Khafīf reports from al-Ādamī through the narration of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Aḥmad al-Sufi, which is more likely to represent the indirect connection between al-Ādamī and Ibn Khafīf. (al-Qushayrī 2007, p.56).

“descent,” similarly, was an attribute of God. Ibn Khafif did not qualify these short maxims with any marker of amodality, such as *bilā kayfa*.¹³⁷³

Ibn Khafif obviously brought from Baghdād not only Sufism, but also an anti-interpretive, traditionist Ash‘arite approach to the divine essence that was widely seen as anthropomorphist, rather than *bilā kayfa* apophatic. His biographer and pupil, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Daylamī (fl.l.10th-ea.11th CE) seems to have followed such an approach to Gods “hands,” “throne,” and the creation of Adam in His “likeness.”¹³⁷⁴ On the other hand, this anti-interpretivism will also have a decisive influence on Sufi manuals, and later, in the formation of Sufism as orders [*ṭarīqah*].

Anti-Interpretivism during the Formalization of Normative Sufism

Like other authors of Sufi manuals, al-Qushayrī (d.1072), a Shāfi‘ī in law and Ash‘arī in theology, approvingly narrates in his *Epistle* the undeniably anti-anthropomorphic interpretive positions of earlier Sufis on divine unity. Accordingly, these examples “prove that the beliefs of Sufi masters agree with the teachings of the People of the Truth [i.e., Ash‘arites], as far as the fundamentals of religion are concerned.”¹³⁷⁵ But a closer look displays a rather sharp difference between the interpretive positions of earlier Sufis, and his own traditionist Ash‘arite anti-interpretive transcendent anthropomorphism in the *Epistle*. Immediately after reporting rich Sufi interpretations that emphasize divine otherness and dissimilarity, al-Qushayrī presents a “summary” of these Sufi approaches. Surprisingly, his “summary” follows the typical Ash‘arite creeds, and emphasizes the *bilā kayfa* acceptance of anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the transcendent discourse without further interpretation. The stark contrast is evident:

God Most High – praise be to Him – is Existent [*mawjūd*], Eternal, One, Wise, All-Powerful, All-Knowing, Overpowering, Compassionate, Willing, Hearing, Glorious, Exalted, Speaking, Seeing, Proud, Strong, All-Living, Everlasting, and Everlasting Refuge.

He knows by His knowledge; He is powerful by His power; He wills by His will; He sees by His sight; He speaks by His speech; He lives by His life; He is everlasting by His everlastingness. *He has two*

¹³⁷³ Bell and Al Shafie in al-Daylamī 2005, pp.xxxii-xxxiii.

¹³⁷⁴ e.g. al-Daylamī 2005, pp.12-13, 129.

¹³⁷⁵ al-Qushayrī 2007, p.14.

*hands, which are His attributes and with which He creates what He wishes and gives it a specific form. He has a face. The attributes of His essence are unique to Him. One must not say that they are He or that they are not He. They are [His] eternal attributes and [His] everlasting properties. He is unique in His essence. He is not similar to any originated thing, nor is any created being similar to Him. ... About Him one ought not ask “where?”, “in what way?” or “how?”. ... He will be seen [on the Judgement Day], but not by positioning Himself in front of the viewers, while He will see others without applying [His] eyesight. He fashions [creatures] without touching them directly or handling. ... These are the passages that present in brief the principles of the Sufi masters.*¹³⁷⁶

These were certainly *not* the principles of the Sufi masters! Al-Qushayrī’s own Sufism, and its Ash’arite *bilā kayfa* acceptance of corporeal depictions of God without interpreting the transcendent discourse were dramatically different from the intensively interpretive anti-anthropomorphism of the vast majority of earlier Sufis. As in the case of his report on al-Tustarī on the vision of God, here again al-Qushayrī Ash’arized earlier Sufis by depicting them through the lens of anti-interpretivism.

Al-Qushayrī’s semi-official creedal description of the “consensus of Sufis” on the divine nature entailed an even more significant problem of representation. The Ash’arized, anti-interpretive Sufi theology in the *Epistle* was actually different from al-Qushayrī’s own interpretive position. A look at Qushayrī’s *Subtleties of Allusions* [*Laṭā’if al-Ishārāt*] manifests that the creedal opening of his monumental Sufi manual, the *Epistle*, is primarily a showcase for outsiders and Sufi novices.¹³⁷⁷ His exegetical work on the Qur’ān shows us the rather two-layered hermeneutics of al-Qushayrī:

God has classified the discourse for them. From its apparent sense, there is the clarity of its revelation [*tanzīl*] and from its obscure sense [*ghāmid*], there is the problem of its interpretation. The first kind is for the purpose of unfolding the law and guiding the

¹³⁷⁶ al-Qushayrī 2007, pp.14-16; my emphases. For the Arabic text, see al-Qushayrī 1409/1989, pp.38-39.

¹³⁷⁷ At the outset of the *Epistle*, al-Qushayrī declares that the work addresses “to all the Sufi community” [*jamā’at al-ṣūfiyyah*]. (al-Qushayrī 2007, p.1. Also see Yazaki 2014, p.85, 95.)

people of the outwardly manifest. The second kind is for the purpose of protecting secrets from the scrutiny of outsiders.¹³⁷⁸

The *Epistle* gives us the first sense, in the style of the Ḥanbalism and Ash‘arism of his time, with its manifold benefits. Both of the layers, thus including al-Qushayrī’s own deeper and interpretive approach, were uncovered in his *Subtleties*. Here, we find two layers in his approach to God’s “throne:” the first one is a non-cognitive, non-interpretive repetition of the Qur’ānic phrase—a *bilā kayfa* apophatic move harmonious with the *Epistle*. The second is rather a violation of this amodality by an interpretation. Accordingly, the “throne” of God on earth is the hearts of the people of unity [*qulūb ahl al-tawḥīd*].¹³⁷⁹ These all-welcoming hearts are the throne of the All-Merciful, and the locus of divine unveilings [*maḥall naẓar al-Ḥaqq*]. Hence he interprets not only the “throne,” but also “vision” metaphysically in line with earlier Sufis. On the surface, “Sufism,” follows anti-interpretive anthropomorphism as a mainstream Sunnī institution in the eleventh century. Yet the tradition and practice that al-Qushayrī himself follows is that of the sustained, interpretive anti-anthropomorphism of the early Sufi masters and its specific theological commitments.

Another key author of Sufi manuals in the formation period is Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d.996). Despite his unique background and familiarity with the Sālimiyyah movement, al-Makkī adopted a much closer position to the one that al-Qushayrī defended in the *Epistle*. His sizable *Nourishment of the Hearts* [*Qūt al-Qulūb*] defended a *bilā kayfa* apophaticism by considering the sacred scripture as the eternal, divine discourse that cannot be understood, or interpreted when it talks about the divine nature. God is ultimately unknowable: “elevated His essence above hearts and [modes of] thought; it can neither be imagined through the intellect nor depicted through thought lest fanciful supposition [*wahm*] should take hold of it.”¹³⁸⁰ Due to this unknowability, al-Makkī declares that he agrees with the traditionists “on the submission to the reports on the divine attributes and keeping silent on their interpretation.”¹³⁸¹ This resistance to discursive understanding of the divine nature is accompanied by a strong negation of modalities from such descriptions:

¹³⁷⁸ al-Qushayrī 201?, Q.3:7, p.207. Also see al-Qushayrī in Sands 2006, p.15. For the Arabic text, see al-Qushayrī 201?, Q.3:7.

¹³⁷⁹ al-Qushayrī 201?, Q.20:5.

¹³⁸⁰ al-Makkī in al-Tustarī 2011, p.xlvii, fn.204.

¹³⁸¹ al-Makkī 2001, Vol.1, p.414.

God is manifested via His attributes, or via anything else that He pleases, without any limitation, without any number—He is manifested with an attribute however He pleases. He is not restricted by any attribute. Nor is He confined by them in any form. Without manifesting His jealousy [*ghayratihī*]: how can it be rather manifested? With which description can it be manifest? *With negating howness [nafy al-kayfiyyah] and similitude [mithliyyah] that removes categories and substantiation [from Him]. ... Whoever inquires this via reasoning, and interprets them with his own opinion [ra'y] enters into the comparability [tashbīh] of the divine, or departs to His negation and annulment [nafy wa ibtāl].*¹³⁸²

With its strong negativity, the monumental *Nourishment* has clear parallels with the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism of the Ḥanafism of eastern Persia.¹³⁸³ Al-Makkī holds the ultimate inaccessibility of the nature of the divine essence, as well as its relationship with divine attributes. Hence he affirms, though amodally, the divine discourse instead of constructing created, interpretive discourses. Any interpretive inquiry makes the immodest assumption that it can access the meaning of the divine discourse with its created, limited terms and categories. His position is quite consistent concerning various issues related to anthropomorphism, such as the “vision” of God in the afterlife, His “establishment” on the “throne,” or God’s “speech” with Moses. Al-Makkī admits [*taslīm*] and affirms [*ithbāt*] these reports on the divine attributes without interpretation [either *tafsīr* or *ta'wīl*], with a bunch of negations of comparability and howness [*nafy al-tashbīh wa al-takyīf*] that indicate the self-cancellation of theological discourse in favor of the ultimately unknowable transcendent discourse. “It is not interpreted [*ta'wīl*]. ... *We do not compare; we do not describe; we do not assimilate; we do not make known; we do not condition.*”¹³⁸⁴

¹³⁸² al-Makkī 2001, Vol.1, p.414.

¹³⁸³ Al-Makkī also does not share the general Sufi and wider pietist distaste with religious dispensations [*rukhaṣ*]. In this sense, his *Nourishment* approaches to Ḥanafī creeds, such as the early *Waṣiyyah* attributed to Abū Ḥanīfah (d.767). (See al-Makkī 2001, Vol.2, p.608; Abū Ḥanīfah in Wensinck 2008, p.129.) The *Waṣiyyah* originated probably after the death of Abū Ḥanīfah and before the time of Ibn Ḥanbal (d.855). (See Wensinck 2008, pp.185-187.)

¹³⁸⁴ al-Makkī 2001, Vol.3, Ch.34, pp.1270-1271 (*lā yu'awwal ... lā nushabbih wa naṣif, lā numaththil wa nu'arrif, wa lā nukayyif*).

Al-Makkī harshly criticizes not only anthropomorphism, but also negative theologies of divine attributes from the perspective of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. As we have seen, a variety of scholars from diverse backgrounds, such as early Ibādīs, a few Muʿtazilites, prominent Philosophers, and some Imāmī theologians like Ibn Bābawayh (d.991), and a surprising variety of Muslim and Jewish mystics adopted such a negativist position by arguing that the divine attributes should be understood not as affirmations, but as the negations of their deprivation. The *bilā kayfa* critique of such negative reading of the divine attributes, dramatically, is quite similar to the one proposed by the Ismāʿīlī theologians. It points to the ultimate symmetry in language when it concerns the divine nature: negations are not in a more advantaged position than positive discourses on God. In other words, negative discourses, as much as positive discourses, assume the accessibility of their subject. Adopting a negative interpretation is eventually an interpretation, hence it is, ultimately, anthropomorphic. We have seen examples of this critique in Ibn Ḥanbal’s accusation of the Jahmites on comparability [*tashbīh*]. In order to emphasize the amodal affirmation of the inaccessible meaning of the divine attributes, *bilā kayfa* theologians developed a seemingly repetitive approach. This approach was already present in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī’s *Nourishment*:

The prerequisite [*farq*] of the divine unity is the heartfelt belief [*iʿtiqād al-qalb*] that God is one not as a number; the First without the second; existent without any doubt; *present not absent*; *All-Knowing not ignorant*; *All-Powerful not incapable*; *All-Living not lifeless*; Self-Subsistent not ignorant; Mild not crude [*ḥalīm la yasfah*]; All-Hearing All-Seeing; Sovereign no end to His sovereignty; Ancient not in term of time; Last without limitation; ... Last in His Firstness; First in His Lastness; His names and attributes are His uncreated lights, not separated [*munfaṣilah*] from Him; He is the Front of everything; and the Beyond of everything; with all; Closer to everything than their very selves, yet He is not a location for anything, nor is anything a location of Him; *He is established on His throne as he pleases, without howness, without comparison* [*kayfa shāʾ bilā takyīf wa lā tashbīh*].¹³⁸⁵

Redundant as it might appear, the phrases “Present not absent,” “All-Knowing not ignorant,” “All-Powerful not incapable,” “All-Living not lifeless” directly criticize the negative theology of divine attributes. The attribute “All-Knowing”

¹³⁸⁵ al-Makkī 2001, Vol.3. Ch.33, pp.1171-1172. Also see Casewit 2014, p.226-227.

amodally affirmed here is not the opposite of “ignorance.” “All-Knowing” is not not-ignorant. It is rather the non-cognitive, unknown, transcendent discursive term that does not have an opposite. The transcendent discourse on the divine essence cannot be understood by any terms except itself: and these apparently redundant, but rather amodal statements constituted a popular way to transmit this theology of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism.

The section on divine unity in al-Makkī’s *Nourishment* occupies around two full pages, and contains around a hundred Arabic negations.¹³⁸⁶ Radical as it might sound, the creeds of other Sufis were quite consistent with Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī’s love of negations that follows a *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. Al-Kalābādhī (d.990)’s *Doctrines of the Sufis* [*Kitāb al-Ta’arruf*] neatly fits into the philosophically oriented Ḥanafī context of Transoxania under the Sāmānid rule. Indeed, the author of the *Greatest Abode*, al-Ḥakīm al-Samarqandī (d.953) was not only a judge, but also a mystic in the Asian group of Sages [*Ḥukamā’*] that al-Hujvīrī (d.1077) described. The *Greatest Abode* played an important role not only by defining a post-Karrāmī Ḥanafism with its *bilā kayfa* apophaticism, but also by normalizing Sufi themes, wonder-workings, and putting its principles or discourses on stable theological ground. Al-Kalābādhī’s *Doctrines of the Sufis* is written within this stronghold of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. It opens with a negativist description of God strongly critical of anthropomorphism. As the source of creation, God is necessarily dissimilar to anything human faculties can imagine, perceive, or contain. Our descriptions of God do not reach Him, but they return to us: the attributes that we give Him are not His, but our own attributes.¹³⁸⁷ Quoting the great Sufi master al-Ḥallāj (d.922) without explicitly naming him, al-Kalābādhī introduces a long series of negations demonstrating that no worldly category applies to Him.¹³⁸⁸ The pages-long negations devoted to the explication of the divine essence and attributes suggests that in al-Kalābādhī’s view Sufis, while they had disagreements on many other topics, had a unanimous consensus [*ijmā’*] on a strong negative theology of the divine essence emphasizing divine unknowability.

¹³⁸⁶ al-Makkī 2001, Vol.3. Ch.33, pp.1171-1173.

¹³⁸⁷ al-Kalābādhī 1993, p.36. Arberry’s translation has a different sense than that of mine:

Our description of Him as having these attributes in no way is an attribute on Him. Instead, our description is our own attribute, and an account we give of an attribute which exists through Him. (For an English translation, see al-Kalābādhī 1935, p.17.)

¹³⁸⁸ al-Kalābādhī 1993, pp.33-35. For an English translation, see al-Kalābādhī 1935, pp.15-16.

In typical *bilā kayfa* format, al-Kalābādhī affirms “all attributes with which He described Himself,” i.e., the amodal affirmation of the transcendent discourse on the divine attributes.¹³⁸⁹ The transcendent discourse, i.e. the conventional Qur’ānic attributes, are affirmed non-discursively, while al-Kalābādhī makes sure through a long list of negations that God remains utterly unknowable, “not compassed by thoughts, nor covered by veils, nor attained by eyes.”¹³⁹⁰ Neither God, nor the way in which attributes apply to God are knowable. Al-Kalābādhī introduces here a philosophical argument on language that has a fundamental importance in Sufism. Comparing the transcendent “Mentioning,” i.e., the Qur’ān, with our created discourses, he argues that our descriptions “return” back to us—they have nothing to do with the unknowable relationship between the divine essence and attributes:

Our description of Him with these attributes in no way is an attribute to Him. On the contrary, *our description is our attribute* [*waṣfunā ṣifatunā*], a narration [*ḥikāyah*] of an attribute that subsists with Him. Whoever makes their own description an attribute of God, without affirming His attribute in reality, he is a liar against Him in reality, for he mentions of Him without His [Real] description. It cannot be like the Mentioning, insofar as He will be mentioned by other than Him. For *mentioning is an attribute of the mentioner, not an attribute of the mentioned*. The mentioned one becomes so by the mentioning of the mentioner. But the described one does not become so by the description of the describer. ... God has unsullied Himself from their descriptions.¹³⁹¹

God can be described only via His own transcendent discourse; our descriptions of Him are our own attributes instead of belonging to God. Al-Kalābādhī traced the apophatic insight that “human discourse on God returns to itself” back to the reports from Baghdādī Sufis like al-Shiblī (d.946), which widely circulated among the most popular Sufi manuals.¹³⁹² Hence it had repercussions among well-

¹³⁸⁹ al-Kalābādhī 1993, p.31; al-Kalābādhī 1935, p.14.

¹³⁹⁰ al-Kalābādhī 1993, pp.31-33; al-Kalābādhī 1935, pp.14-15 (here I followed Arberry’s translation).

¹³⁹¹ al-Kalābādhī 1993, pp.36-37; al-Kalābādhī 1935, p.17 (Arberry’s translation is defective).

¹³⁹² al-Qushayrī 1409/1989, p.496. For an English translation, see al-Qushayrī 2007, p.310; al-Ṭabarī 2013, p.18 (Arabic text); al-Sīrjānī 2012, p.52 (Arabic text).

known Sufis including Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī,¹³⁹³ ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī (d.1131),¹³⁹⁴ ‘Aṭṭār (d.1230),¹³⁹⁵ and Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240).¹³⁹⁶ Al-Kalābādhī also provided an elaborate, sophisticated discussion on the *bilā kayfa* negative theological implications of the gap between the transcendent discourse and our ordinary, created languages. His non-cognitive approach to the transcendent discourse did not lack a critique of the negative reading of the divine attributes. In the same way as Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, al-Kalābādhī underlined that a divine attribute marks the *bilā kayfa* affirmation of the unknowable, transcendent discourse, not just the negation of “ignorance,” or “incapacity:”

The meaning of the divine attributes is the negation of their opposites, *and* the affirmation that they exist in themselves, and subsist through Him. Neither is the meaning of knowledge only the negation of ignorance, nor is the meaning of power simply the negation of incapacity, but also the affirmation of knowledge and power. If one could become knowing by negating ignorance, or powerful by negating incapacity, then the meaning of negating ignorance and incapacity would be being knowing and powerful.

And so with all attributes.¹³⁹⁷

Al-Kalābādhī argued that all divine attributes mean a negation at the level of human understanding, but also an affirmation at the non-discursive, transcendent level of revelation. “God is All-Knowing” means “God is not ignorant” at our discursive level, and the perfection of divine knowledge remains unknown even if it is affirmed by Qur’ānic transcendent discourse. In other words, we know and logically prove that God cannot be ignorant or impotent, but we do not know the way in which He possesses these qualities.¹³⁹⁸

The description of Sufism in line with *bilā kayfa* apophaticism since the tenth century manuals of al-Kalābādhī and al-Makkī was followed by al-Qushayrī in the next century. Another giant of Sufism followed al-Qushayrī in the next generation. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111)’s monumental *Revivification of Religious Sciences [Iḥyā’ al-‘Ulūm al-Dīn]* is one of the most celebrated texts ever

¹³⁹³ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 1999; Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2007; Shehadi 1964.

¹³⁹⁴ ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī 1962, p.332. Also cited in Ernst 1985, p.65.

¹³⁹⁵ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #102.

¹³⁹⁶ Ibn al-‘Arabī in Chittick 1989, p.60; my emphasis.

¹³⁹⁷ al-Kalābādhī 1993, p.36; al-Kalābādhī 1935, p.17 (Arberry’s translation, again, differs from mine).

¹³⁹⁸ Cf. T. Mayer 2008, pp.269-270.

written in the history of Islam. Penned in the eleven-year period following his retirement in 1095, the *Revivification* is a post-Sufism work of al-Ghazālī. The founders of the great Sufi orders, such as the Ḥanbalite ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d.1166), the Shāfi’ite ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d.1234), and the Ḥanafite Rūmī (d.1273) were clearly familiar with this work. The main model of the *Revivification* was al-Makkī’s *Nourishment*, and the *Revivification* is widely presented as a Sufi work. Yet it is also a deeply Ash’arite work in many ways. It affirms, for example, the occasionalism of the Ash’arite tradition.¹³⁹⁹ The part entitled the *Rules of Beliefs* [*al-Qawā’id al-‘Aqā’id*] presents a strongly early Ash’arite depiction of the divine nature—with the Ash’arite *bilā kayfa* anti-interpretivism, and divine knowability. Yet he does not introduce this part as a distinctly Ash’arite or Sufi creed, but as a more ecumenical set of core beliefs that should be taught to a wide audience, including children.¹⁴⁰⁰

In typical Ash’arite format, Abū Ḥāmid’s creed begins with Qur’ānic verses, mixed with a list of negations from God, including partner, opposite, similitude, beginning, or an end. Then he embarks on a section on “incomparability” [*tanzīh*], which bring a new wave of negations. This emphasis on divine transcendence is followed by the anti-interpretive acceptance of the Qur’ānic passages related to anthropomorphism. Al-Ghazālī denies the accessibility of the transcendent discourse to interpretation:

He is *sitting on the throne* as it appears in His Discourse, and *with the meaning that He intended by “sitting”* [*istiwā’*]. He transcends touching and being placed in space, and from incarnation [*ḥulūl*]. ... He is *nearer to a human being than his jugular vein* [Q.5:16]. Over everything He is a witness, since His nearness does not resemble the nearness of bodies, just as His essence does not resemble the essence of bodies. ... *In His ipseity, God’s existence is known to intellects*. His ipseity will be seen by the eyes in the afterlife as a blessing from Him and a grace to the upright [*abrār*]. He completes His favor with sight of His noble countenance.¹⁴⁰¹

In the following pages of the creed, al-Ghazālī affirms that the attributes of vision, hearing, and speech apply to Him, even if they should not be understood in physical or human terms. Except a vague hint in terms of divine nearness [*qurb*] to physical bodies, al-Ghazālī does not engage in any interpretation, but accepts

¹³⁹⁹ Marmura 2005, pp.149-150.

¹⁴⁰⁰ See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Vol.1, p.93.

¹⁴⁰¹ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, Vol.1, p.89.

the meaning expressed in the transcendent discourse. We know what these attributes are *not*—a long list of negations follow these descriptions—but not what they are. The dissimilarity of the divine nature is amodally followed in canceling all interpretive, discursive inquiries, however anti-anthropomorphist they would be. We can discursively prove and know [*‘ilm*] God’s existence and even His essential nature, but we cannot fully understand [*idrāk*] Him or His discourse.¹⁴⁰²

Al-Ghazālī’s difference from al-Qushayrī, al-Kalābādhī, and al-Makkī is his argument for the essential knowability of God, while the others defended His unknowability. Al-Ghazālī’s position here, as I discussed in the third chapter, did exist among the Ash‘arites and the Mu‘tazilites of his time. Yet, unlike many rationalist Ash‘arites and Mu‘tazilites, he rather follows an anti-interpretive position, leaving the intended meaning of the transcendent discourse to God himself. In other words, al-Ghazālī’s knowability of God is a curious Ash‘arite divergence from Sufism, and his anti-interpretivism is a break with the post-eleventh century, discursive Ash‘arism in favor of the position adopted predominantly by traditionists and prominent authors of Sufi manuals.

Al-Ghazālī’s *bilā kayfa* position regarding the divine nature is not limited to the *Revivification*. His last work on speculative theology that we know to be authentic,¹⁴⁰³ *Saving Believers from Speculative Theology [Iljām al-‘awām ‘an ‘ilm al-kalām]* is in perfect harmony with the approach summarized in the *Revivification*. According to this post-Sufism work of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, the way of the pious ancestors [*madhhab al-ṣalaf*], which is the true path in his view, is to follow one of seven strategies concerning the ambiguous, apparently anthropomorphic, or controversial verses and prophetic reports:

1. *Exoneration [taqdīs]*, i.e., to absolve [*tanzīh*] Him from such bodily descriptions.
2. *Affirmation [taṣdīq]*, i.e., to believe in the sacred discourse, and in its truth with the meaning intended by God.

¹⁴⁰²

[W]hat is paramount is the transcendence of the creator, so that the manner of “determining” by the “divine decree” [*qadar*] remains inexpressible, and hence cannot be read as “determining” in our sense of the term. ... [Al-Ghazālī is] employing it as a metaphor, understanding that divine ordering cannot be comprehended in any human scheme. (Burrell 2008, p.155.)

¹⁴⁰³ Shu‘ayb 2011, pp.153-153.

3. *Confession of one's inability* [*al-i'tirāf bi al-'ajz*], i.e., acknowledging that the intended meaning is beyond the scope of one's knowledge, that the meaning is not of one's business or discursive limits [*ḥarf*].
4. *Silence* [*sukūt*], i.e., not to elaborate on the transcendent meaning, as it is beyond human knowledge.
5. *Abstinence* [*imsāk*], i.e., refraining from any discursive activity, such as playing words, translation, adding or subtracting words.
6. *Restraint* [*kaff*], i.e., reining back one's heart and mind from search [*baḥth*] or reflection [*tafakkur*] on the transcendent intention or meaning.
7. *Yielding to its master* [*taslīm li ahlihi*], i.e., not assuming that its meaning is hidden from the Prophets, and the Saints.¹⁴⁰⁴

Most, if not all, of these normative, traditional positions indicate the importance of adopting non-interpretive, anti-anthropomorphic, but also anti-discursive, *bilā kayfa* positions for al-Ghazālī. *Saving Believers* is replete with examples that exemplify this position. Accordingly, interpretation can certainly give only what the real meaning is not. “If a person is aware of the negation of this [physical, hence] unthinkable reference in relation to the Divinity, then nothing more is required of him if he does.”¹⁴⁰⁵ It is sufficient to know what these verses do not mean. The theological position that al-Ghazālī associates with Sufism towards the end of his life is distinctly and broadly “Sunnī” with its emphasis on the pious ancestors and its non-cognitivism on the divine nature. This non-interpretive Sunnī-Sufi position is expressed in the other key work of post-Sufi al-Ghazālī: the *Decisive Criterion* [*al-Fayṣal al-Tafriqah*]. Al-Ghazālī underlines the essentiality of interpretation for the verses and sacred reports the meaning of which would be absurd if taken literally. Yet, when it comes to God’s “throne” and “footstool,” He insists that these “are solid, real things, and therefore not subject to interpretation.”¹⁴⁰⁶ We do not know or understand them; thus discursive, cognitive, or interpretive human approaches and modalities should not apply to them.

Important authors of Sufi manuals, al-Makkī (d.995), al-Kalābādhī (d.990), al-Kharkūshī (d.1016), al-Qushayrī (d.1072), ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d.1089), Abū

¹⁴⁰⁴ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī [undated], p.42. For the English translation, see Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī 2008, pp.23-24.

¹⁴⁰⁵ See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in Shu‘ayb 2011, p.163.

¹⁴⁰⁶ Sands 2006, p.57. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in Jackson 2002, pp.96-97.

Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111) and Abu Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d.1077) ascribed *bilā kayfa* non-cognitivism to the rising normative, formal Sufism. Yet not all writers of Sufi manuals followed this prominent anti-interpretive theological fashion. The very first Persian Sufi compendium by the Ḥanafī Sufi author of Ghazna, al-Hujvīrī (d.1077) was the most important and suggestive exception in following the interpretivism of earlier Sufis.

Persian Interpretivism

Unlike other Sufi manuals of the formalization period, al-Hujvīrī (d.1077)'s *Unveiling of the Hidden* [*Kashf al-Mahjūb*] insisted on discursive, interpretive approaches to anthropomorphism. Among a long list of negations, al-Hujvīrī affirmed the vision of God [*dīdārash*] in paradise. Yet he immediately added that one should avoid comparison [*tashbīh*], or thinking about such vision as “confrontation or facing” [*muqābala va muvājaha*]. In this non-physical visionary sense, God’s saints [*avliyā’*] can witness [*mushāhadat*] Him in this world.¹⁴⁰⁷ In other sections of the *Unveiling*, al-Hujvīrī interprets the prophetic vision of God in his night journey as happening not via his physical eyes but the “eye of his innermost heart” [*chashm-a sirr*]¹⁴⁰⁸—in line with al-Kharkūshī (d.1016)'s *Refining the Secrets* [*Tahdhīb al-Asrār*], and quoting Sahl al-Tustarī (d.896).¹⁴⁰⁸

Al-Hujvīrī also directly criticizes the anthropomorphic anti-interpretive approach to the divine nature. In one of his discussions on the Sufi auditions [*samā’*], he argues that audition will only increase the perversity of those whose hearts are not ready for the audition:

Another group interpreted “then He established Himself on the throne” [Q.7:54] as an affirmation of spatiality and modality for Him. Others showed “and thy Lord comes, and the angels rank on rank” [Q.89:22] as a proof for His “coming”! As their hearts were a locus of error, hearing the discourse of their sublime Lord didn’t give them any profit. The unifiers [*muvahhidān*], however, when they look at the poet of a poem, they regard the Creator of his nature, and the Designator of his thoughts. They draw the proof for the Agent from the action.¹⁴⁰⁹

¹⁴⁰⁷ Hujvīrī 1926, p.359 (For English translations, see Hujvīrī 1911, pp.279-280; Hujvīrī 2001, p.376.)

¹⁴⁰⁸ Hujvīrī 2001, pp.430-431.

¹⁴⁰⁹ Hujvīrī 2001, pp.508-509.

Here Hujvīrī not only criticizes the anthropomorphist approaches, but he also indicates that the vision of God in this world is a metaphysical, non-corporeal way of moving from creation to the creator. His approach to creation as a sign of the Creator was a popular philosophical proof that circulated not only among Ghaznavid Philosophers and Mu'tazilites, but also Ḥanafī scholars for more than a century. Hujvīrī also reads the "throne" of God in metaphorical terms as the "inward direction of prayer" [*qibla-yi bāṭin*]; the mysteries of divine contemplation [*sirr al-mushāhadat*] emerge from it.¹⁴¹⁰ In other words, the throne, like in earlier Sufism, indicates a high cosmological level that can be visited by visionary wayfaring and purification of one's own soul.

Al-Hujvīrī is definitely not the only Persian Sufi of his time to enthusiastically adopt interpretive, discursive positions towards the anthropomorphic depictions of the divine essence. The Sufi master and theologian Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d.1126)'s less known work devoted to systematical theology is of great importance here. Aḥmad al-Ghazālī is famous for his great poetical work on love theology, the *Inspirations from the World of Pure Spirits* [*Savāniḥ al-'Ushshāq*], the oldest Persian Sufi treatise on love that we know. The *Inspirations* is a rhapsodic series of letters to the radically other, yet excessive, overwhelming, all-consuming Beloved—a perfect paradoxical combination of divine incomparability and imminence. Yet Aḥmad's students also compiled the sessions [*majālis*] he conducted when he was in Baghdād. These discourses became a less-known Arabic book on divine unity entitled *Excursus Regarding the Expression of Unity* [*al-Tajrīd fī Kalimat al-Tawḥīd*]. A powerful text that witnesses Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's oratory skills as an eloquent Sufi preacher, the theology espoused in the *Excursus* is in stark contrast with the Ash'arite position introduced in the *Revivification* of his brother, and the *Epistle* of al-Qushayrī, who was the master of Ali al-Fārmadhī (d.1084)—the joint teacher of the Ghazālī brothers. Very much like the Sufis of Baghdād, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's *Excursus* understands from "divine unity" [*tawḥīd*] the entire path, aims, and states of spiritual progress, and the related practices, instead of a set of doctrinal ideas. In all of his extant discourses, Aḥmad clearly adopts an intensively interpretive position towards the sacred sources. His readings unveil the deeper meanings of the sacred sources that relate to the Sufi path. He does not consider beatific vision possible, as God cannot be an object. God is infinitely veiled from vision, and already, excessively present—only God actually exists. Aḥmad al-Ghazālī's discourses consistently violate the anti-interpretive position. A few of these

¹⁴¹⁰ Hujvīrī 2001, p.397.

discourses explicitly address God’s double fingers, throne, face, vision, or blowing into the soul¹⁴¹¹—literalism in all of them is sharply criticized by Aḥmad on strongly anti-anthropomorphic interpretive grounds. In one of his discourses, he interprets the “double fingers” of God as the binary states through which the soul passes in its progress.¹⁴¹² In another discourse, he proposes another interpretation. Accordingly, the expression might be an allusion [*ishārah*] to the quick transformation of the soul from one state into another, or anything else but its literal sense.¹⁴¹³ He is open to other interpretations as well, because the literal reading of the verse is anthropomorphic. He introduces a rather long list of negations, and cites Q.42:11 in the same session three times to underline divine otherness. The following two pages level further negations that target similar problems, God’s throne, vision and nearness in particular.¹⁴¹⁴

Such interpretive anti-anthropomorphism, as opposed to *bilā kayfa* positions, was very prominent among Persian Sufis of eleventh and twelfth centuries. Sanā’ī (d.1131), another Ghaznavid Sufi and poet was much more direct in his critique of non-interpretivist *bilā kayfa* and anthropomorphism. His influential *maṣnavī*, the *Walled Garden of Truth* [*Ḥadīqat al-ḥaqīqat*] contained an extensive discussion of the anthropomorphic depictions of God. Sanā’ī expounds his interpretive position within the apophatic context of his emphasis on divine otherness, negativity, unknowability, and the inapplicability of modalities to it. Here Sanā’ī goes on to interpret “hand” as His capacity, “face” His subsistence, “coming” His wisdom, “descent” His gift, “two feet” His majesty of chastisement and danger, “two fingers” the pervasiveness of His judgment and power. Associating the divine throne with the heart of the gnostic [*‘arīf*], he criticizes those who attribute “speech,” “throne,” and such corporeal qualities to God: none of them actually apply to God.¹⁴¹⁵

¹⁴¹¹ Q.15:29.

¹⁴¹² Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Ch.42, 2012, pp.104-105.

¹⁴¹³ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Ch.43, pp.105-106.

¹⁴¹⁴ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Ch.43, pp.106-107.

For his metaphorical reading of “seeing” and “hearing” God, see Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Ch.47, 109-111.

¹⁴¹⁵

Every living tongue outstrips throne and globe and dominion; they
are a thousand plus one and a hundred less one.
... Our inability is proof of His completeness; His omnipotence is the
lieutenant of His names.
... Wherever the gnostic is, in whatever condition, the very

The cosmological, visionary interpretation of the throne verse, and the role of the heart as the genuine throne of God, supported by popular prophetic traditions, were the most popular, and interrelated interpretative approaches to the anthropomorphic depictions of the divine nature. Ibn Abī al-Khayr (d.1049),

Throne of God is carpet beneath his sandals.

... No mind finds a way to His manner of being; intellect and soul are unaware of His perfection.

... Imagination's agility fails before the glory of His essence, and understanding is confined at the prospect of describing Him.

... No one can understand Him unaided; His essence one can know only through Him.

Intellect desired the truth of Him but did not fare well; inability to know set out on the road to Him and arrived at knowledge.

... His acts transcend inward and outward, His essence above the why and the how.

Understanding has not made its way to His essence; reason's heart and soul are mere dust on this road .

... When the quality of divine magnificence shows its face to the intellect, it overcomes both intellect and soul.

... No one has articulated the qualities of the Originator known only as He: how much, how, why, what, who or where.

"Hand" is His capacity, "face" His subsistence; "coming" is wisdom and "descent" His gift [Q.48:10, Q.2:109, Q.89:23]:

His "two feet" are the majesty of chastisement and danger, His "two fingers" the pervasiveness of His judgment and power.

... You who are enthralled by form and figure, a slave to "He settled the Throne" [Q.20:5, Q.7:52],

Form is of a piece with time-bound entities, and is unworthy of the might of the Everlasting.

For the same reason that the painter is not the painting, "He settled" exists, but neither throne nor earth exists.

Pronounce "He settled" from the depth of your soul, but do not consider His essence bound by directionality.

Since "He settled" is a Qur'ānic verse, and proclaiming "No place" is an article of faith.

The Throne is like a door knocker: it has no inkling as to the attributes of God.

The term "speech" is inscribed in the Qur'ān, but image and voice and likeness are far removed from Him.

Tradition records that "God descends," but do not conclude that He comes and departs.

Written mention of the throne is meant to ennoble it, and naming the Ka'ba is meant to praise it. (Sanā'ī in Renard 2014, pp.271-276.)

Aḥmad-i Jām (d.1141),¹⁴¹⁶ and the former's hagiographer Ibn Munavvar (d.1202)¹⁴¹⁷ were following such interpretive positions. An interesting anecdote on the prominence of interpretivism as opposed to *bilā kayfa* apophaticism or anthropomorphism comes from Ibn Abī al-Khayr of Miḥnah. Accordingly, the Persian interpretive position on the throne verse was so obvious and simple that the shaykh refused to bother himself explaining it. The shaykh takes such a trivial question as an offense:

When the shaykh was on his way, there was somebody from the populace of Harat, who grasped the reins of his mount and had entered his ministry [*khidmat*]. He asked the shaykh a question on what he would say on the verse "the All-Merciful, established on the Throne" [Q.20:5]. Our shaykh said: in Miḥnah even the crones know that the Lord was there when the throne wasn't!¹⁴¹⁸

On the eve of its institutionalization in the form of orders, Persian Sufism did not experience the invasion of *bilā kayfa* apophatic fashion that we find in Arabic compendia of Sufism. Instead, it was the visionary interpretive approaches of the earlier Sufis that flourished in approaching the divine essence. With properly regulated study and practice, one could, and should, interpret the transcendent discourse on God's ipseity. As 'Ayn al-Quḍāt (d.1131) put it, one could interpret, if not apprehend, God's creation of man in His/his "likeness," His "establishment" on the "throne," and His "descent," once having inhaled the scent of "who has known her self."¹⁴¹⁹

Summary

Sufis of the ninth and tenth centuries were strongly anti-anthropomorphist, with little sympathy for anti-interpretive approaches to the corporeal descriptions of God, even if with a *bilā kayfa* apophatic lens. Their eagerness to interpret such reports, if we consider the power of transcendent anthropomorphism of traditionism during this period, indicates their receptiveness to discursive -

¹⁴¹⁶ Aḥmad-i Jām 2004, p.271, 296.

'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Ābādī (fl.ea.12th CE) and Aḥmad-i Jām (d.1141), the two competing Sufi masters of Nīsabūr reportedly entered a Qur'ānic exegesis contest. Aḥmad-i Jām wrote an exegesis of Q.55, the Chapter of *All-Merciful* [*al-Raḥmān*]. The leitmotif "O which of your Lord's bounties will you and you deny?" is repeated thirty-one times in the chapter, and Aḥmad-i Jām proudly interprets all of them differently. (Aḥmad-i Jām 2004, 1.21, pp.140-141.)

¹⁴¹⁷ Ibn al-Munavvar 1313/1934, pp.36-37.

¹⁴¹⁸ Ibn al-Munavvar 1313/1934, pp.297-298.

¹⁴¹⁹ 'Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī in Papan-Matin 2010, p.218.

rationalist or imaginative- theologies on the divine nature. Both Baghdādīan and Baṣran Sufis from early on had a strong interest in theologically conscious, anti-anthropomorphist exegesis that underlined divine otherness in the strongest terms. Authors of Sufi manuals like al-Sarrāj, al-Kalābādhī, al-Kharkūshī, al-Sīrjānī, Abu Khalaf al-Ṭabarī, al-Qushayrī or al-Hujvīrī devoted pages to Sufi approaches to the divine nature. Even if many of these writers themselves were inclined to *bilā kayfa* apophaticism of their time, none of them could actually find reliable evidence for the earlier Sufis adopting that approach to the divine nature. While al-Qushayrī's "summary" claimed that Sufis affirmed divine face, hands, vision, or throne *bilā kayfa*, he could not present a single shred of evidence for such a position. None of these vast manuals actually provided evidence of earlier Sufis affirming the divine face or hands as they appear in the transcendent discourse, refuting their interpretation.

Unlike Hujvīrī, the Ḥanafī author al-Kalābādhī shared the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism on divine nature with the Shāfi'ī Ash'arite Sufi manuals. Earlier Sufis, with their intensively anti-anthropomorphist interpretive theologies, hardly agreed with such a self-negating theological position. Yet, as al-Qushayrī¹⁴²⁰ vividly showed, the Ash'arite authors were particularly interested in placing earlier Sufis in their *bilā kayfa* apophatic line. Such an endeavor also appears in the *Comfort of the Mystics* [*Salwat al-'arifīn*]. Its compiler, Abu Khalaf al-Ṭabarī (d.1077) was another scholar of Shāfi'ī law and Ash'arite theology who lived in Nīsabūr, the provincial capital and cultural center of Khurāsān. The section on divine unity in the *Comfort of the Mystics*, very much like other Sufi manuals, contains pages of negations, emphasizing divine transcendence and unknowability with examples from a plethora of Sufis. In his presentation, however, Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d.861) accepted a verse on God's throne, Q.20:5, without interpretation and as it is, in the *bilā kayfa* line.¹⁴²¹ Such representation of Dhū al-Nūn was in sharp contrast to the rather widespread reports about his anti-anthropomorphic interpretation of this verse as well as his general theological approach to the divine essence.¹⁴²² Less than ten percent of the entire *Comfort of the Mystics* actually presented Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī's own declarations, which tried to situate the chapters into a theological framework of the Ash'arī School.¹⁴²³ The

¹⁴²⁰ Al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī's biography of al-Qushayrī portrays him as an Ash'arī without mentioning Sufism. See Melchert 2014, p.19.

¹⁴²¹ Abu Khalaf al-Ṭabarī 2013a, p.20.

¹⁴²² See e.g. al-Qushayrī 2007, p.12.

¹⁴²³ See Bowering and Orfali in Abu Khalaf al-Ṭabarī 2013a, pp.1-28.

ascription of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism was integral to this Ash‘arization of earlier Sufis by Abū Khalaf al-Ṭabarī and al-Qushayrī.

Elusive as it was, a difference did exist between the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism of the Arabic Sufi manuals which were describing (and partially establishing the normative) Sufi theological approaches, and the prominence of rather anti-anthropomorphic interpretivism among the late ninth and tenth century Sufis. Which position would prevail among Sufis in the later couple of centuries? The answer was a complex one as both approaches played important roles in the establishment of the Sufi orders.

C. *Bilā Kayfa* Apophaticism in the Formation of Sufi Orders *Ḥanbalī Sufism and the Rise of the Qādiriyyah*

Sunnism of the tenth century had still strong transcendent anthropomorphist strands that accepted the literal reading of physical depictions of God in the scripture or the prophetic reports. Such inclinations were more powerful among traditionalists in the camp of anti-*kalām* theology. A rescript of Caliph al-Rāḍī issued in 935 against the Baghdādī Ḥanbalīs under the leadership of al-Barbahārī (d.940), clearly the leader of the traditionalist block at the time, strongly denounced them for their anthropomorphist traditions, such as the Prophet’s vision of God as white-skinned and dark-haired, or as an adolescent whose hair was shorn.¹⁴²⁴ Al-Barbahārī himself affirming all anthropomorphic depictions of God without qualification, claimed that asking “how,” or “why” concerning the divine attributes means to doubt God Himself.¹⁴²⁵

The leading Sunnī *ḥadīth* scholar of the next generation in the second half of the century was al-Dāraquṭnī (d.995) who, as Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d.1348) reports, hated *kalām*¹⁴²⁶ and fiercely affirmed transcendent anthropomorphism with a *bilā kayfa* discourse. In his *Book of Divine Attributes [Kitāb al-Ṣifāt]* al-Dāraquṭnī affirms virtually all anthropomorphic depictions of God we know:

¹⁴²⁴

You claim that your ugly and disgusting faces are in the image of the Lord of the worlds and that your vile appearance is in His image; you talk of His feet and fingers and legs and gilded shoes and curly hair, and going up to heaven and coming down to the world—may God be raised above what wrongdoers and unbelievers say about Him. (Caliph al-Rāḍī in W. Williams 2002, p.454.)

¹⁴²⁵ Bell and Al Shafie in al-Daylamī 2005, pp.xxxiii-xxxiv.

¹⁴²⁶ Brown 2012.

man's creation in God's image [*ṣūrah*], His having fingers,¹⁴²⁷ laughing,¹⁴²⁸ sitting on a throne and having a footstool,¹⁴²⁹ the similarity [*tashbīh*] of His face to human faces,¹⁴³⁰ His literal descent [*nuzūl*] to the lowest heavens during the night,¹⁴³¹ or His height, which is accordingly about sixty arm-lengths.¹⁴³² Al-Dāraquṭnī insists that these descriptions have no interpretation [*tafsīr*], which means that they should be accepted literally, as they appear, *bilā kayfa*:

These prophetic reports are reliable [*ṣahīḥ*]. ... They are Real [*Ḥaqq*] in our view, without any doubt. But if it is asked: what is the situation about His footstool? How does He laugh? We say: there is no interpretation [*tafsīr*] for these. We have not heard a single interpretation about these.¹⁴³³

Ibn Baṭṭa (d.997)'s position seems to be in line with al-Barbahārī and al-Dāraquṭnī.¹⁴³⁴ Abū Ya'lā (d.1066) was another prominent Ḥanbalī who wrote another pro-transcendent anthropomorphism book of traditions with the same title, *Book of Divine Attributes* [*Kitāb al-Ṣifāt*]. As an influential jurist of Baghdād, Abū Ya'lā was instrumental in the dissemination of Ḥanbalism. Still, the strengthening anti-anthropomorphist *bilā kayfa* trend within Ḥanbalism would be later hardly pleased with his memory. Mentioning of Abū Ya'lā's death in 1066, the historian Ibn al-Athīr (d.1233) added a tellingly bold note: "[Abū Ya'lā's book] gives evidence of unadulterated anthropomorphism, and God is indeed far above all that. Ibn Tamīmī¹⁴³⁵ the Ḥanbalite used to say, 'Abū Ya'lā al-Farrā' has covered the Ḥanbalites in shit that no water can clean off'."¹⁴³⁶ The prominent anti-anthropomorphist Ḥanbalī scholar, Ibn al-Jawzī (d.1201) also narrated the same saying.¹⁴³⁷ Yet the anthropomorphist trend remained quite prominent well into the twelfth century as recorded in Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's *Decisive Criterion*

¹⁴²⁷ al-Dāraquṭnī 2005, pp.88-94.

¹⁴²⁸ al-Dāraquṭnī 2005, pp.73-77.

¹⁴²⁹ al-Dāraquṭnī 2005, p.81.

¹⁴³⁰ al-Dāraquṭnī 2005, pp.96-98.

¹⁴³¹ al-Dāraquṭnī 2005, p.121.

¹⁴³² al-Dāraquṭnī 2005, p.99.

¹⁴³³ al-Dāraquṭnī 2005, p.115; also see *ibid.*, p.116.

¹⁴³⁴ "God closes and opens His hand, He takes and gives, He is on his throne." (Ibn Baṭṭa in al-Daylamī, p.xxxiii.)

¹⁴³⁵ Rizq Allāh ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Tamīmī was a prominent Ḥanbalī scholar of Baghdād. See Ibn al-Jawzī 2006, p.46, fn.13.

¹⁴³⁶ Ibn al-Athīr 2002, p.159.

¹⁴³⁷ See Ibn al-Jawzī 2006, p.46. Also see Ibn al-Jawzī 2006, pp.41-42.

[*al-Fayṣal al-Tafriqah*]¹⁴³⁸ and various works of Ibn al-Jawzī. Especially the latter, the most well-known insider critic of Ḥanbalism, shows that transcendent anthropomorphism was popular during his times:

Abū ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ḥāmid (d.1013), his disciple, Qāḍī Abū Ya‘lā (d.1066), and Ibn al-Zāghūnī (d.1132) who composed books by which they have disgraced the school [Ḥanbalī *madhhab*]. They held the attributes of God to be subject to human understanding and perception. They heard that God, Glorified and Exalted be He, created Adam on his image, upon him be blessing and peace. On that basis, they acknowledged for Him an image and a physical form, a face attributable to His essence, two eyes, a mouth, uvulas, molar teeth, and lights for His face which represent His majestic splendor, two hands, fingers, a palm, a little [pinky] finger, a thumb, a chest, a thigh, two shins, and two feet.¹⁴³⁹

Sufism played an ambivalent role between anthropomorphism and anti-anthropomorphic *bilā kayfa* within this Ḥanbalī context. Al-Barbahārī (d.941) himself is said to have been the disciple of the Baṣran Sufi master Sahl al-Tustarī (d.896).¹⁴⁴⁰ Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī (d.1038), one of the earliest and most celebrated sources on Sufism, was a descendant, and perhaps grandson,¹⁴⁴¹ of Yūsuf al-Banna’ (d.bef.899), who was a member of the Ḥanbalī Sufi school in Iṣfahān. This school promoted anthropomorphism more than amodality at least until the eleventh century. Abū al-Shaykh al-Iṣfahānī (d.979) compiled a large collection of anthropomorphic prophetic traditions, titled the *Book of Majesty* [*Kitāb al-‘Azāmah*].¹⁴⁴² While it might be just a pretext, Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī (d.1038) himself was expelled from the city by Muḥammad ibn Iṣḥāq (d.1005) of the powerful Banū Manda family on the grounds of his anthropomorphism.¹⁴⁴³ Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328) depicted Abū Nu‘aym closer to amodality than anthropomorphism,¹⁴⁴⁴ but this was the former’s general tendency to towards

¹⁴³⁸ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in Jackson 2002, p.93.

¹⁴³⁹ Ibn al-Jawzī 2006, p.42.

¹⁴⁴⁰ Melchert 2014, pp.20-22; Melchert 2001, p.353, 364-366.

¹⁴⁴¹ See Chabbi 2011.

¹⁴⁴² Blankinship 2008, p.52.

¹⁴⁴³ See Knysh 2000, p.128.

¹⁴⁴⁴

According to Ibn Taymīyyah in *al-Fatwā al-Ḥamawīyyah al-kubrā*, Abū Nu‘aym said in his treatise that his path was the path of the followers of the Qur’ān, the

earlier scholars. Abū Nu‘aym’s own work *Mahajjat al-Wāthiqīn* testifies rather to his anti-interpretive, literalist acceptance of the physical depictions of God, and hence, transcendent anthropomorphism. Accordingly:

God is above the heavens, and is seated on His throne; it is not that He simply “rules,” as the Jahmiyyah would interpret His mode of sitting [*istiwā’*], on the basis that God is everywhere. ... The throne of God is a real entity: it is not simply intended to symbolize divine knowledge, as the Jahmiyyah would have it. On the day of judgement, His throne is really placed before His creatures as a judgement seat from which to deliver the verdicts and decrees regarding His subjects.¹⁴⁴⁵

A fellow townsman of Abū Nu‘aym, Abū Maṣū‘ Ma‘mar (d.1027) was another early Sufi author associated with the Ḥanbalī Sufism of Iṣfahān. In the *Manāhij bi Shāhid al-Sunnah wa Nahj al-Mutaṣawwifah*, he lists not only well-known early ascetics and jurists, but also key scholars of anthropomorphic traditionism among second generation Muslims, the Followers [*tābi‘ūn*], whom he deeply revered.¹⁴⁴⁶ The work also acknowledges anthropomorphic depictions of God in the sacred scripture, denying to comment further on the issue.¹⁴⁴⁷

The defining document of Ḥanbalism in the eleventh century was the creed of the ‘Abbāsīd Caliph al-Qādir (r.991-1031), affirmed by his son al-Qā‘im.¹⁴⁴⁸ Expressed in some verses, which originally circulated in Persian, the Ḥanbalī creed was forcefully anthropomorphic:

Our God can be seen; is established on his throne
His speech is eternal; his prophet Arab,

Prophetic *Sunnah*, and the consensus [*ijmā’*] of the Muslim *ummah*. They believe in the soundness of the *ḥadīths* narrated by the Prophet about God’s throne [*al-‘arsh*] and His “being seated upon it” [*al-istiwā’*] upon it, without trying to explicate the manner of this *istiwā’* nor using it as a means of likening God to His creatures [*tashbīh*]. God is distinct from His creatures and they are separate from Him. God is not incarnate in creatures, there is no *ḥulūl*, and He does not enter into them. He is “seated upon His throne” and yet is utterly other than His creatures. (Gharagozlou, Anṣārī and Negahban 2008; with my minor modifications.)

¹⁴⁴⁵ Gharagozlou, Anṣārī and Negahban 2008; with my minor modifications.

¹⁴⁴⁶ Meier 1999, pp.145-146.

¹⁴⁴⁷ Meier 1999, p.154.

¹⁴⁴⁸ Peacock 2010, pp.99-104; Keeler 2007, p.28.

Anyone who says anything other than this is an Ash'arī

Our path [*madhhab*] is the Ḥanbalī *madhhab*.¹⁴⁴⁹

It is within this ambivalent background between anthropomorphism and amodality that Ḥanbalī Sufism reached its apogee with Khwāja 'Abd Allāh Anṣārī (d.1089) in Khurāsān and Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d.1166) in Baghdād. Ḥanbalism was the most powerful school probably in Baghdād in the eleventh century. The Saljūqī vizier Niẓām al-Mulk (d.1092) in his letter to Abu Isḥāq al-Shīrāzī (d.1083), the leading Ash'arite in Baghdād, testified to the dominance of Ḥanbalism in the 'Abbāsīd capital, and its political significance:

The policy of the Sulṭān and fairness require that we do not incline towards one *madhhab* more than another. ... We do not have the power to overcome Baghdād and its surroundings and to alter forcibly [its people's] established customs, for the majority here belong to the *madhhab* of the Imām Ibn Ḥanbal.¹⁴⁵⁰

But Khurāsān was home to Ḥanbalīs as well. Indeed, one of the great Ḥanbalī leaders of Baghdād, al-Sharīf Abū Ja'far (fl.l.11th CE) claimed that the Qādirī-Qā'imī creed "was borne by Khurāsānīs and pilgrims to the ends of the earth."¹⁴⁵¹ The anti-interpretivism of the creed reflected that of al-Anṣārī as well, while his Shāfi'ī student al-Maybudī (d.af.1126) was closer to the position of *bilā kayfa* amodality. Al-Anṣārī strongly defended divine unknowability in all of his extant works. He was also a strong critique of dialectical theology, and even wrote a polemical attack against the Ash'arites. Here he fiercely and categorically opposed the interpretations of God's face, eye, ear, throne, and footstool. He opposes the theologians' claim that "God has no place,"¹⁴⁵² which

¹⁴⁴⁹ Peacock 2010, p.116.

¹⁴⁵⁰ Peacock 2010, pp.104-105.

¹⁴⁵¹ Peacock 2010, p.116.

¹⁴⁵²

[Q.20:5] The All-Merciful sat on the Throne. The sitting of the Lord on the Throne is in the Qur'ān, and I have faith in it. I do not seek interpretation, for interpretation in such topics is rebellion. I accept the outward meaning and surrender to the inner meaning. This is the belief of the Sunnīs, whose path is to accept with the spirit what is not perceived. ... Nonetheless, I know for sure that He is not one who takes up place out of need, for He shows place by argument. The Throne does not elevate God, for God elevates and preserves the Throne. He made the Throne for seekers of God, not recognizers of God. The God-seeker is one thing, the God-recognizer something else. He says to the God-seekers, 'The All-Merciful sat on the Throne.' He says to the God recognizers, "And He is with you" [Q.57:4] on the Throne by Essence, in

may suggest that al-Anṣārī's own understanding of God's establishment is either transcendent anthropomorphist, or unknowable. Al-Anṣārī seems to follow the latter, apophatic position, insofar as he left the interpretation to God Himself when affirmed God's physical appearance to the Prophet:

[Q.7:180] What God showed of Himself, that He is, and such is His attribute. God is the explication of Himself, and Muṣṭafā has face-to-face vision of Him.¹⁴⁵³

Hence Anṣārī is a reluctant exegete with reference to the divine nature, while he is a very active interpreter in other contexts. Anṣārī's canceling of further interpretation is on the verge of literal acceptance. It is his foremost pupil, al-Maybudī (d.af.1126), who pulls al-Anṣārī's image towards a clear *bilā kayfa* apophaticism.¹⁴⁵⁴ For example, immediately after quoting al-Anṣārī's unqualified claim that the Prophet met God face-to-face, al-Maybudī added the following passage that moved his shaykh towards a modality more clearly:

It is not appropriate for someone to affirm attributes for God on his own, nor to declare Him incomparable on his own. Keep your ears fixed on the Book and the Sunnah! Whatever they say, you say that it is that. God said there are attributes, there are names, so you should also say that. Since He did not say that there are not, you should not say that there are not. He did not say "how" He is. If He had said "how" He is, we would say that. God said, "I am." He did not speak of howness. *You should speak of being, but you should not speak of howness.*¹⁴⁵⁵

Al-Anṣārī, with its ups and downs, was a polemical traditionist, whose overt attacks against theologians caused headaches for the rulers. As early as in 1038, when he appeared before the Ghaznavid Sulṭān Mas'ūd, the charge against him was the same as the one against Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī (d.1038):

knowledge everywhere, through companionship with the spirit, and through nearness with the soul. (al-Maybudī 2015, p.402.)

¹⁴⁵³ al-Maybudī 2015, Q.7:180, p.282.

¹⁴⁵⁴ Al-Maybudī played a parallel role in transforming al-Anṣārī into a mainstay of the Sufi school of thought known as the "Religion of Love" [*madhhab-i 'ishq*] in classical Persian poetry. Al-Anṣārī never used the term "passionate love" [*'ishq*], and preferred the Qur'ānic "compassionate love" [*maḥabba*] in describing God's relationship with creation. Al-Maybudī replaced *maḥabba* with *'ishq* all throughout the *Kashf al-Asrār*, which was instrumental in firmly situating al-Anṣārī into the *madhhab-i 'ishq*. See Lewisohn 2014, pp.165-166.

¹⁴⁵⁵ al-Maybudī 2015, Q.7:180, p.282.

anthropomorphism.¹⁴⁵⁶ Life got initially easier for al-Anṣārī with the Saljūqī conquest, but the charge of anthropomorphism against him did persist, even if the Sulṭān Alp Arslan (r.1063-1072) protected him from his detractors.¹⁴⁵⁷ His Shāfi‘ī (and not Ash‘arī) student al-Maybudī, on the other hand, developed a two-layered hermeneutical system, which juxtaposed “a traditionalist commentary containing a literalist interpretation of the text, and a Sufi commentary which often interprets the text allegorically. ... Maybudī’s double-layered theological outlook accentuating the absolute omnipotence and ineffability of God.”¹⁴⁵⁸ Following al-Anṣārī, al-Maybudī emphasized divine unknowability, and insisted that the anthropomorphic expressions in the Qur’ān, such as God’s descent, establishment on the throne, or two hands, should be accepted as they are, without attempting to interpret them. Yet al-Maybudī supplied this literal acceptance of anthropomorphism with another hermeneutical reading which he defined as comprising “the allegories of mystics, allusions of Sufis, and subtle associations of preachers” [*rumūz-i ‘arīfān, ishārāt-i ṣūfiyyān, laṭā’if-i muzakkirān*].¹⁴⁵⁹ From this perspective, the “throne” of God was the heart of His lovers. In contexts other than anthropomorphism, al-Maybudī is a fascinatingly creative exegete. The phrase “In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Ever-Merciful” [*bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*] gets a new, different meaning in each of its appearances.¹⁴⁶⁰ Al-Maybudī also interprets the enigmatic disjointed letters [*hurūf al-muqaṭa‘āt*], which Ḥanafīs considered ultimately unknowable.¹⁴⁶¹ He undertakes these allegorical interpretations, as in the case of the disjointed letters in Q.2:1, in support of Ḥanbalī doctrines, such as the uncreatedness of the letters and sounds of the transcendent discourse.¹⁴⁶² Concerning the depictions of God in human terms, he is a much more reticent exegete, like al-Anṣārī. He insists that the Prophet did see God’s face, which defies discursive explanation—hence to be accepted as it is.¹⁴⁶³ God’s “hand” in

¹⁴⁵⁶ de Laugier de Beauceuil 2011.

¹⁴⁵⁷ Peacock 2010, p.116.

¹⁴⁵⁸ Shihadeh 2007, p.4.

¹⁴⁵⁹ See Keeler 2007, pp.15-16.

¹⁴⁶⁰ This is a key phrase that appears in the opening of all but one chapters of the Qur’ān, and a key dimension of diverse religious practices.

¹⁴⁶¹ al-Māturīdī 2003, p. 138.

¹⁴⁶² Keeler 2007, p.17.

¹⁴⁶³

[Q.2:1] This mystery came to Muḥammad at the moment of face-to-face vision. Moses heard the words but did not see the Speaker, Muḥammad heard the

Q.5:64, similarly, is another point where we observe his double-layered *bilā kayfa* apophatic approach:

a hand of attribute [*yad-i šifāt*], a hand of essence [*yad-i zāt*], the outward meaning of which [should be] accepted, the inner meaning surrendered [to God], and the reality unapprehended [*ḥaqīqat dar nayāfta*], [so that one] desists from the way of [asking] how [*rāh-i chigūnagī*], the exertion [of reason] [*taṣarruf*] and metaphorical interpretation [*ta'wīl*].¹⁴⁶⁴

Al-Maybudī's restriction of the "tethering" of reasoning and its discursive, interpretive methods, is suspended in favor of the non-discursive light of gnosis [*ma'rifat*] of Sufism. But it is not clear whether the cancelation of discourse supports the unquestioning acceptance of literalism in terms of anthropomorphism, or the unknowability and inaccessibility of the divine nature. Al-Maybudī's selective hermeneutical passivity, like that of al-Anṣārī, suggests that his Sufism cannot be easily removed from anthropomorphism to amodal unknowability.

The great Ḥanbalī ascetic and orator 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d.1166) shares the ambivalence of al-Maybudī in terms of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. Al-Jīlānī's anti-interpretivism was clear early in his life. Upon his arrival at Baghdād as a young aspirant, he chose to join to a Ḥanbalī circle to get legal training, instead of coming to the Niẓāmiyyah *madrasah* of the Saljūqīs which was, tellingly, headed by Aḥmad al-Ghazālī at that time. The *Discourses* of al-Jīlānī oscillates between the literal acceptance of anthropomorphic depictions of God and the *bilā kayfa* critique of such anthropomorphism. Delivered in 1150-1151 in Baghdād, al-Jīlānī's *Discourses* strongly emphasize the uncreated nature of the Qur'ān and the importance of the meticulous observance of the letter of the sacred law. His depiction of divine unity, on the other hand, is connected to the progress of the wayfarer on the Sufi path.¹⁴⁶⁵ Hence, instead of a list of dogmatic doctrines on divine nature, we rather find an organic, multi-layered response that ties its realization to the diverse levels of wayfaring. Yet a few convictions consistently appear in these *Discourses*. One of them is the vision of (and nearness to) God

mystery while gazing on the Keeper of the Mystery. ... The spirit was lost in face-to-face vision, and face-to-face vision is far from explication. When a heart finds delight in His grasp and is inundated by face-to-face vision, what will it do with reports? (al-Maybudī 2015, p.12.)

¹⁴⁶⁴ al-Maybudī in Keeler 2007, p.17.

¹⁴⁶⁵ See e.g. 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī 1427/2006, #62, p.257.

and His face in the afterlife. Al-Jīlānī explains that the decisive difference between creation and the Creator does not allow the vision of His face in this world.¹⁴⁶⁶ Yet His nearness, His vision, and His face will be seen: death will remove the veil from the physical eyes [*baṣar*] of the believers,¹⁴⁶⁷ and He will say: “this My face is for you, and My nearness is for you.”¹⁴⁶⁸ Such descriptions, which are found in various *Discourses* of al-Jīlānī,¹⁴⁶⁹ are very close to al-Maybudī’s approach to the vision of God in the afterlife.¹⁴⁷⁰ More characteristically, al-Jīlānī rebukes his audience not to interpret [*ta’wīl*] the anthropomorphic depiction of God as sitting on the throne, but to accept as it is:

The Real qualifies Himself with attributes [*ṣifāt*] He permits to Himself, but you would interpret them, and refuse them as they are? What was good enough for your predecessors, the Companions and the Successors is not good enough for you! *Our Lord is upon the Throne, as He said, without comparison [tashbīh], ineffectualism [ta’ṭīl], or embodiment [tajsīm].*¹⁴⁷¹

Organized around al-Jīlānī’s name by his sons and followers, the Qādirī order had strong associations with Ḥanbalism. As a theological dimension of this parallel, both institutions promulgated the same anti-interpretive approach to the divine nature during the thirteenth century when the order firmly established itself in ‘Iraq and expanded to Syria, Yemen, and Egypt. Al-Jīlānī invested Ibn Qudāmah (d.1223) with a cloak [*khirqah*] in Baghdād around fifty days before his death. Afterwards, Ibn Qudāmah studied under the celebrated Ḥanbalī scholar, Ibn al-Jawzī (d.1201). Ibn Qudāmah, along with Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328), would emerge among the famous Ḥanbalīs in the Qādirī initiatic [*lubs al-khirqah*] lineage that came down to Ibn Rajab (d.1390).¹⁴⁷² The emergence of this Ḥanbalī-Qādirī lineage was initially surprising for two main reasons. First, if we believe Awḥad

¹⁴⁶⁶ ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī 1427/2006, #62, p.248. For an English translation, see ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī 1992, pp.426-427.

¹⁴⁶⁷ ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī 1427/2006, #62, p.255.

¹⁴⁶⁸ ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī 1427/2006, #62, p.261. For an English translation, see ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī 1992, p.449.

¹⁴⁶⁹ See e.g. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī 1427/2006, #21, p.95. For an English translation, see ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī 1992, p.141.

¹⁴⁷⁰ Cf. al-Maybudī 2015, Q.75:22-23, p.661.

¹⁴⁷¹ ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī 1427/2006, #21, p.95. For an English translation, see ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī 1992, p.141.

¹⁴⁷² See Makdisi 1979, pp.115-126.

al-Dīn Kirmānī (d.1238)'s Persian hagiography, Ibn al-Jawzī was actually a devout disciple of Awḥad's own Sufi master, Rukn al-Dīn al-Sujāsī (d.1209).¹⁴⁷³ Al-Sujāsī was a pupil of Quṭb al-Dīn Abharī (d.1181) and his successor as the head of the Daraja Sufi lodge [*ribāṭ*] in Baghdād. If true, his discipleship would make Ibn al-Jawzī closer to Abharīyyah. Second, and more significantly, in the last decades of the twelfth century, Baghdād witnessed a fierce conflict between al-Jīlānī and Ibn al-Jawzī. The intensity of the conflict between the two powerful Ḥanbalīs went so far that Ibn al-Jawzī penned a refutation of al-Jīlānī. Ibn al-Jawzī seems to have taken an active part in the condemnation of al-Jīlānī for harboring in his *madrasah* books of philosophy suspected of heresy. Eventually, the *madrasah* was taken away from al-Jīlānī, and given to Ibn al-Jawzī.¹⁴⁷⁴ The conflict survived after al-Jīlānī's death. In the last years of his life, Ibn al-Jawzī would seriously suffer under the virulent opposition of al-Jīlānī's rapidly expanding community of followers. All of this despite the fact that they shared the Ḥanbalī anti-interpretive position on the anthropomorphism of the divine nature.

The prolific scholar that he was, Ibn al-Jawzī defended *bilā kayfa* apophaticism in a variety of his works. In line with his vision of the Ḥanbalī tradition, one should accept God's "throne," "footstool," "fingers," "vision" etc. "as they are revealed, without explanation [*tafsīr*] or interpretation [*ta'wīl*]." ¹⁴⁷⁵ His non-interpretivism was strongly couched in divine unknowability, instead of anthropomorphism. He argued that one should accept the transcendent discourse without reducing it into metaphor [*ḍarb*] or allegory [*mathal*] and defer the interpretation of the unknowable discourse [*irjā' mā ghāba*] to God Himself.¹⁴⁷⁶ While he could neatly fit into the *bilā kayfa* apophatic position, Ibn al-Jawzī makes a surprising yet clear interpretive move in his *Daf' Shubah al-Tashbīh* in terms of divine actions. Accordingly, there are three hermeneutical approaches to the sacred reports that have an anthropomorphic bent:

The first position is to let them pass as they came without explanation or interpretation *unless it is necessary as in the case of His saying, "Exalted be He: And your Lord comes" [Q.89:22] which means, "when His command comes."* This is the understanding of the pious ancestors. The second method is figurative interpretation, which is a dangerous position, and the

¹⁴⁷³ Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī 1969, #1, pp.13-16.

¹⁴⁷⁴ Laoust 2012b.

¹⁴⁷⁵ Ibn al-Jawzī 2013, pp.286-287, 312-313.

¹⁴⁷⁶ Ibn al-Jawzī 2013, pp.286-287.

third way is speaking about them according to human understanding and perception. This method is pervasive amongst the ignorant transmitters.¹⁴⁷⁷

Ibn al-Jawzī is actually suggesting an actively interpretive response to the ascription of the anthropomorphic action of “coming” to God. Accordingly, “rational sciences” close the door of anti-interpretivism in terms of “coming.” Interpretivism is necessary only in terms of God’s “coming.” Otherwise, he is explicitly critical towards such rationalist interpretive inquiries, as in the case of the “establishment” on a “throne.”¹⁴⁷⁸ While Ibn al-Jawzī had a general anti-interpretive outlook, his partial inclination towards interpretivism might have played a role in his tension with al-Jīlānī.

In general, the non-anthropomorphic, *bilā kayfa*, anti-interpretive position on the divine nature was shared by al-Jīlānī and Ibn al-Jawzī. Hence from Ibn Qudāmah—their immediate pupil—onwards, Ḥanbalism aligned with the rising order of the Qādiriyyah. As Ibn Qudāmah’s *Illuminating Creed* [*Lum‘at al-‘itiqād*]¹⁴⁷⁹ and *Prohibition of the Study of the Books of the Partisans of Theology* [*Taḥrīm al-naẓar fī kutub ahl al-kalām*], and later, Ibn Taymīyyah’s vast corpus indicate, at least since its association with the formalized order of al-Jīlānī, Ḥanbalī Sufism had clearly broken with transcendent anthropomorphism, and aligned with *bilā kayfa* apophaticism.

The Emergence of the Rifā‘iyyah: Bilā Kayfa Apophaticism in Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī

The eponym of the Rifā‘ī order, Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī (d.1182) had very close ties with the other two eponyms, al-Jīlānī and ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d.1234). Aḥmad was the nephew and the foremost pupil of Maṣṣūr al-Baṭā‘ihī (d.1145), who left the leadership [*mashyakhah*] of his convent [*zāwiyah*] in southern ‘Iraq to Aḥmad. Al-Baṭā‘ihī was also the master of the stern ascetic, Ḥammād “the Syrup Merchant” al-Dabbās (d.1131), who taught Sufism to al-Jīlānī and Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d.1168). Abū al-Najīb studied with al-Dabbās until the latter died, and then he established his own Sufi convent [*ribāṭ*] and Shāfi‘īte *madrasah*. ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī, on the other hand, called al-Dabbās “the master of our

¹⁴⁷⁷ Ibn al-Jawzī 2006, pp.94-95, my emphasis; with my minor modifications.

¹⁴⁷⁸ Ibn al-Jawzī 2006, p.44.

¹⁴⁷⁹ Recently, a conservative Suudi legal scholar, Abdul-Raḥmān al-Barrāk (b.1933) wrote a commentary on Ibn Qudāmah’s work, defending the anti-interpretive strategy, which is the most popular view among contemporary Ṣalafī and Wahhābī scholars.

master” in the *Gifts of Gnosis* [*ʿAwārif al-Maʿārif*].¹⁴⁸⁰ Al-Jīlānī studied with al-Dabbās for a few years, and reportedly did not get along well with his fellow students. The circles of the three orders had also overlaps and rivalry in the early formation of these orders. In his hagiography of al-Jīlānī, the *Garden of Mysteries* [*Bahjat al-asrār*], Nūr al-Dīn al-Shaṭṭanawfī (d.1314) depicted al-Rifāʿī as a disciple of al-Jīlānī. Accordingly, when ʿAbd al-Qādir was in Baghdād in 1180, he declared that his foot was on the neck of every saint; al-Rifāʿī, who was in far-off Umm ʿUbaydah, heard this, and testified loudly that he was one of his disciples.¹⁴⁸¹ On the other hand, the biographer of Aḥmad al-Rifāʿī, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Wāsiṭī (d.1343), fiercely challenges this hierarchy, accusing al-Shaṭṭanawfī of being an “indicted liar” [*kadhḥāb al-muttahim*].¹⁴⁸² While their rivalry was real, the orders were still fluid in the thirteenth century. The Wāsiṭī Sufi Aḥmad al-Fārūthī (d.1295), for example, was primarily associated with the Rifāʿiyyah through his father Ibrāhīm and his grandfather ʿUmar, who was a direct disciple of Aḥmad al-Rifāʿī. Yet al-Fārūthī heard *ḥadīth* from ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī, and later, studied the latter’s *Gifts of Gnosis*—one of the most important Sufi manuals ever written. He received a ratification [*ʿijāzah*] to teach the *Gifts of Gnosis*, and the Suhrawardiyyah robe [*khirqah*], both from ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī himself, without actually cutting his ties with the Rifāʿiyyah.

Al-Rifāʿī, in theological terms, is very close to al-Suhrawardī and al-Jīlānī in his *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. He underlines the decisive role of the transcendent discourse itself concerning the divine nature. His brief responses to the questions on His ipseity, attributes, names, and actions are all Qurʾānic verses that emphasize divine incomparability. It is the transcendent discourse in its otherness that dominates the field of divine essence and its relationship with the attributes.¹⁴⁸³ The ultimate meaning of the transcendent discourse is itself unknowable, and delegated to God. In this delegation, al-Rifāʿī explicitly criticizes anthropomorphist, literal understandings of the transcendent discourse on the divine nature:

The path of the God-fearing among the pious ancestors is to absolve God from that which the literal [approach] indicates.

¹⁴⁸⁰ ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī 1939, Ch.44, p.247.

¹⁴⁸¹ Margoliouth 2012.

¹⁴⁸² Trimmingham 1971, p.41.

¹⁴⁸³ Aḥmad al-Rifāʿī 1904, p.19.

Delegation of its intended meaning to the exalted, transcendent Real: therein resides the soundness in religion.¹⁴⁸⁴

Citing “our imām” al-Shāfi‘ī (d.820), al-Rifā‘ī claims that the seeker of gnosis is an anthropomorphist if she stops in her own reasoning, an ineffectualist if she stops in pure negation [*al-‘adam al-ṣirf*], and a genuine monotheist if she stops in admitting her own incapacity to apprehend Him.¹⁴⁸⁵ He continues:

They have purified your beliefs [*‘aqqā’id*] from interpreting the meaning of establishment applied to God as “sitting,” like that of bodies on bodies. It would require His incarnation [*ḥulūl*], and He is beyond that. Lest you attribute upness and downness to Him. And [His] “place,” “hand,” “seeing via organs,” His “descent,” and “coming” and “going...” Everything that came to us through the Book and *Sunnah*, the literal appearance [*ẓāhir*] of which is like this. ... One has to believe in all of them with their literal appearance, remove the knowledge of their intention to Him and His Prophet, and absolve the exalted Creator from the modalities and the attributes of creation. This is the way for the entire community on everything with which He describes Himself in His book, on its interpretation, its recitation, and silence about it. None but God and His Prophet should interpret it. You should take such ambiguous parts in conformity with the meaning of the clear part, because it is the fundamentals of the Book. The ambiguous parts cannot contradict the fundamentals.¹⁴⁸⁶ A man asked Imām Mālik ibn Anas about “the All-Merciful is established on the throne” [Q.20:5]. He said: “His establishment is not unknown. Yet it’s ‘howness’ cannot be comprehended. Faith in it is obligatory, and inquiry about it is innovation.” ... Our imām, al-Shāfi‘ī said:

I have faith in it without anthropomorphism.

I confirm it without imagery [*tamthīl*].

I denounce myself from apprehending it.

I abstain wholeheartedly from delving into its pool.

¹⁴⁸⁴ Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī 1904, p.19.

¹⁴⁸⁵ Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī 1904, p.19.

¹⁴⁸⁶ Cf. Q.3:7.

Imām Abū Ḥanīfah (d.767) said: “Whoever says ‘I don’t know whether God is in the heaven or on earth’ commits blasphemy, because this statement fancies that the Real has a space. Whoever fancies that the Real has a space is an anthropomorphist.”

Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal was asked about God’s “sitting.” He said: “Sitting is as it is reported, not as how human beings consider.”

And his majesty Imām the son of Imām, Imām Ja’far al-Ṣādiq (d.765) said: “whoever assumes that God is in, from, or on something associates Him with another God.”¹⁴⁸⁷

Al-Rifā’ī unites the eponyms of the four Sunnī schools of law, and the Shī’ī school, under the banner of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism, all united against anthropomorphism. His non-cognitive anti-interpretivism can be traced later to one of the greatest Sufis in Yemenī history, Ibn ‘Alwān (d.1266). The biographer of Aḥmad al-Rifā’ī, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Wāsiṭī (d.1343) placed Ibn ‘Alwān in the lineage of Aḥmad al-Badawī (d.1276) and ‘Izz al-Dīn Aḥmad al-Ṣayyād (d.1271); the latter being a successor and grandson of Aḥmad al-Rifā’ī.¹⁴⁸⁸ Ibn ‘Alwān’s *Greatest Unity [al-Tawhīd al-a’zam]* has been one of the most influential sources of Sufi literature in Yemen until the present day.¹⁴⁸⁹ The work begins with a statement of his theological creed that is both intellectual and mystical. The divine oneness is associated with negativity, and unknowability. Human discourse has no way to access the divine essence, and intellect has no understanding of the transcendent discourse when it addresses God. Hence the final interpretation is left to God Himself on the issues of the divine nature, divine attributes, the knowledge of the throne, footstool, and afterlife in general.¹⁴⁹⁰ His approach to the vision of God is similarly anti-interpretive. He will be seen in the way He intended, and in the way He says—beyond human understanding. What is known is that such an encounter will be unlike what we can imagine: talking to Him will be without a tongue, and seeing Him will be without eyes—non-corporeal.¹⁴⁹¹

¹⁴⁸⁷ Aḥmad al-Rifā’ī 1904, pp.19-20.

¹⁴⁸⁸ Having never left Yemen, Ibn ‘Alwān’s connections with these names may be weak. See Aziz 2008.

¹⁴⁸⁹ See Aziz 2011, p.60.

¹⁴⁹⁰ Aziz 2011, p.60, 74, 120-123.

¹⁴⁹¹ Aziz 2011, pp.83-84.

The practices and teachings organized around the figure of al-Rifāʿī rapidly expanded in southern Iraq, and spread to Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Anatolia in the thirteenth century. In al-Rifāʿī's hands, the *bilā kayfa* position becomes the shared heritage of all eponyms of legal schools, both Sunnite and Shīʿite. While al-Rifāʿī's harmonization is more on legal grounds, in favor of a broad depiction of the pious ancestors, ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī appealed to *bilā kayfa* in unifying Ḥanbalism and Ashʿarism. The latter was admittedly a more difficult task to undertake without state sponsorship which al-Rifāʿī lacked.

Suhrawardiyyah and the State-Sponsored “Sunnī Bilā Kayfa” Project

Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d.1168) was a prominent traditionist and a great Sufi master who established various Sufi convents [*ribāṭ*]. He is known to have traveled to Iṣfahān a couple times, where he became a disciple of Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d.1126). Along with Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Abū al-Najīb was also familiar with another influential Sufi master of southern Persia, Ibn Khafīf al-Shīrāzī (d.982). In his anti-interpretivist theology, Abū al-Najīb was closer to Ibn Khafīf than Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, as attested in his citations to Ibn Khafīf's creeds.¹⁴⁹² Abū al-Najīb's *Sufi Etiquette for Novices* [*Ādāb al-Murīdīn*] was of fundamental importance as it vividly witnesses the transmission of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism into the institutionalization of Sufism. The *Sufi Etiquette*, in line with al-Qushayrī and al-Kalābādhī's Sufi manuals, began with a creedal declaration that situates Sufism within the path of pious ancestors. The creed is strongly in line with the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism of the Ashʿarite and Māturīdite theologians of its time. Abū al-Najīb begins by introducing a long list of negations, underlining not only the otherness of God, but also that of His transcendent discourse—the only legitimately affirmative speech about Him:

[The pious ancestors] agreed [*ijmāʿ*] that God the Transcendent is One, has no partner, no opposite, no match, to similar, *He is described by that which He describes Himself, and He is named by that which He names Himself*. He is not a body, insofar as bodies are compositions [*muʿallaf*], and compositions need to a composer. Nor is He a substance, insofar as substances can be enclosed, but the Lord cannot be enclosed, but He is the creator of all enclosers and enclosings. He is not an accident, because accidents don't persist temporally, but the Lord, glorified He is, persists necessarily. There is no combination, no division, no

¹⁴⁹² On the influence of Ibn Khafīf al-Shīrāzī (d.982)'s *Short Creed* [*al-ʿAqīdat al-Ṣuḡhrā*] on Abū al-Najīb's creed in the *Ādāb al-Murīdīn*, see Sobiero 1998.

thingness for Him. Invocation does not sway on Him. Thought does not reach Him, and words don't draw near to Him. Indications don't designate Him, thoughts don't encompass Him, [and visions do not comprehend Him]. Everything is limited for Him. One cannot say "His existence," but "His Being," because not all beings are existent, while every existent is. He is dissimilar to whatever imagination fancies or understanding apprehends. If you ask "when:" His existence antecedes temporality. If you ask "how:" the description of His essence is veiled. If you ask "where:" His being precedes space. His making is the cause of everything, and there is no cause of His making. There is no howness to His ipseity, and no commissioning to His actions. He is veiled from the intellects, as He is also veiled from eyes. His essence is not like essences; His attributes are not like attributes. *The meaning of "Knowledge" in His description is not the negation of ignorance [nafy al-jahl] from Him. Nor is the meaning of His "Power" the negation of inability [nafy al-'ajz] from Him.*¹⁴⁹³

The last sentences are of particular significance, as they follow Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī and al-Kalābādhī's emphasis on the irreducibility of the transcendent kataphasis to the human understanding. Accordingly, these divine attributes have a positive meaning, which is not accessible to human understanding or discourse. Abū al-Najīb affirms all anthropomorphic depictions of God, negating anthropomorphism itself, together with all human modes of thought and discourse:

They agreed on affirming [*ithbāt*] whatever is mentioned in His Book, and confirming the reports of the Prophet (peace be upon him) about His face, hand, soul, hearing, and vision, without similitude [*tamthīl*] or ineffectualism [*ta'tīl*]. ... Their doctrine on the "sitting" [on the throne] is what Malik ibn Anas (d.796) said when asked about it: "God's sitting on the throne is known [*ma'lūm*], but its modality is unknown. The belief in His "establishment" is obligatory, and the inquiry about it is an innovation." Their doctrine regarding [the prophetic report on] the descent [of God] is also like this.

They agreed that the Qur'ān is the word of God, and it is uncreated. ... They agreed on the *permissibility of the vision of God in the paradise via eyes*. God has negated the apprehension

¹⁴⁹³ Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī 1977, pp.1-2.

via eyes [*al-idrāk bi al-abṣār*], as it necessitates howness and comprehension, which is not the case for vision.¹⁴⁹⁴

Abū al-Najīb's *bilā kayfa* affirmation of the vision of God, and negation of His apprehension, insofar as it entails howness and comprehension, is similar with Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's work. But more elusively and importantly, it almost verbatim follows al-Māturīdī's Ḥanafī creed as well as Juwaynī's Ash'arite masterpiece the *Guidance*. Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī's influential book on proper Sufi conduct, beliefs, and ethics adopts a *bilā kayfa* apophaticism that is equally Ash'arite and Māturīdite, and yet depicts itself as neither of those. Rather, it is the theological dimension of a performative identity, the primarily concern of which is not theology, but proper conduct [*adab*] in the lineage of the pious ancestors.

'Umar al-Suhrawardī (d.1234)'s more famous and voluminous *Gifts of Gnosis*, like his *Guidance of the Desirers* [*Irshād al-Murīdīn*], is exclusively directed towards proper Sufi conduct, religious practices, and their deeper meanings in relevance to the spiritual quest. His discursive theology is found in the *Delivering Advice* [*A'lām al-Hudā*], a creedal work that probably circulated in al-Suhrawardī's convents [*ribāṭ*]. Composed in Mecca, the *A'lām al-Hudā* is a strong statement of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism in line with al-Qushayrī and Abū al-Najīb. Like in all of 'Umar's works, *A'lām al-Hudā* has a strong emphasis on divine unknowability, and otherness. The uncreated, transcendent word of God enjoys full theological authority as the only kataphatic theological discourse.¹⁴⁹⁵ *A'lām al-Hudā* follows Ash'arite theology by adopting the seven essential names of God that included "All-Seeing," and "All-Hearing." All justifications for any kataphatic discourse on God comes from the sacred reports, via a *bilā kayfa* attitude.¹⁴⁹⁶ All attributes of God, both the essential ones and the attributes of the acts, are inscrutable and are to be accepted without inquiring into their modality. They are known only through revelation; they fall far beyond the capacity of the intellect and its rational judgments to even begin to conceive their nature and significance.¹⁴⁹⁷ 'Umar al-Suhrawardī underlines this apophatic position by devoting a chapter to

¹⁴⁹⁴ Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī 1977, pp.1-3. For an English summary, see Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī 1975, p.28. The same argument appears later in 'Umar al-Suhrawardī (d.1234)'s Sufi creed, *A'lām al-Hudā*. See 'Umar al-Suhrawardī 1996, p.77.

¹⁴⁹⁵ "He has the Beautiful Names, and the Lofty Attributes; we don't name Him except with what He names Himself." ('Umar al-Suhrawardī 1996, p.57.)

¹⁴⁹⁶ "He hears ... without interpretation [*ta'bīr*] by means of language, and without exegesis." ('Umar al-Suhrawardī 1996, p.60.)

¹⁴⁹⁷ Ohlander 2008, p.265.

the anthropomorphist aspect that appears in the sacred reports [*fī al-āyāt wa al-akhbār al-wāridah fī al-ṣifāt*]. He writes:

The Real ... has reported that He is “sitting” [on His throne]... and the Prophet has reported His “descent,” among things like this, such as His “hand,” “foot,” “astonishment,” and “hesitance.” All of the revelations like these are proofs of divine unity; similitude or ineffectualism have no effect here. ... All of the sacred reports on His attributes are divine manifestations, unveilings, subtle secrets; some understand them, and some remain ignorant about them. Don’t distance yourself from Him through similitude, for He is near to you. Don’t approach Him via ineffectualism, for this is vile for you. The “sitting” is certain, and it is beyond howness; this is the case for all divine attributes. He is Manifest as He unveils Himself to His believers through these sacred reports; and He is Hidden as intellects fall short from the apprehension of their profundity and their howness [*kunhuhā wa kayfiyyatuhā*]. Nothing of what He hid is uncovered.¹⁴⁹⁸

Hence the reports themselves, with their unknowable modalities and inaccessible meanings, should be accepted as negations of anthropomorphism. While this *bilā kayfa* position is strongly supported both by Ash’arite and Māturīdite theologies, Al-Suhrawardī’s chosen groups of conversation are strategic, highlighting the politics and principles of selection in the rise of Suhrawardiyyah. Al-Suhrawardī appeals to the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism as a way to reconcile Ash’arīs and Ḥanbalīs:

O my Ḥanbalī brother! Your Ash’arī brother didn’t go to the path of interpretation [*ta’wīl*] except ... [avoiding] similitude and resemblance. If he just affirmed His “sitting” [on the throne], he wouldn’t interpret it. Hence the need [for interpretation] appeared only because of his fear of similitude. And o my Ash’arī brother! Your Ḥanbalī brother headed to exaggeration and firmness for the fear of negation and ineffectualism... So, one should make peace with the other ... and not insist on interpretation, as the mere recognition of “sitting” will not harm.¹⁴⁹⁹

¹⁴⁹⁸ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī 1996, pp.69-70.

¹⁴⁹⁹ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī 1996, p.70. For an alternative translation, see ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī 1996 in Ohlander 2008, p.267.

In these fascinating sections, al-Suhrawardī depicts Ḥanbalīs and Ash‘arīs as brothers who scrupulously avoid the fallacies of anthropomorphism, ineffectualism, and similitude. Their strategies were different, but a *bilā kayfa* position towards such controversial depictions of God, in line with Mālik ibn Anas whom al-Suhrawardī cites,¹⁵⁰⁰ is the way of the pious ancestors.

Al-Suhrawardī’s state-sponsored efforts to unify Ḥanbalism and Ash‘arism was a desideratum at least since the time of Niẓām al-Mulk and al-Ghazālī, who witnessed the hatred between the two prominent groups that divided Sunnism.¹⁵⁰¹ Hence his unification under the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism of an institutionalized, order-based Sufism was rewarding. This broad, reconciliation project of organized Sunnism was strongly supported and to some extent, administered by the ‘Abbāsīd caliph a-Nāṣir. Indeed, with its *bilā kayfa* apophaticism,

[the *A‘lām al-Hudā*] can be situated in the ethos of al-Nāṣir’s ideological program, the *da‘wā hādiya*, a program of propaganda which called for a certain rapprochement between various sectarian communities and dogmatic trends and the (re)centralization of identity and allegiance in a broader *jamā‘i-Sunnī* community under the all-embracing shadow of the caliph himself. This program was propagated early on by, among many others, Shāfi‘ī ‘*ulamā*’ and Sufi masters.¹⁵⁰²

Al-Suhrawardī’s Sufi project incorporated Ḥanbalīs, whose relationship with the caliphate, and political rule in general, had been cold. Yet in a couple decades, al-Jīlānī established himself as a charismatic preacher [*wā‘iẓ*], and teacher of law [*mudarris*], running a Sufi *ribāṭ* in Baghdād that would be carried on by his descendants. After al-Jīlānī’s death, his legacy was appropriated mostly by Shāfi‘ī Sufis, and spread outside ‘Iraq.¹⁵⁰³ Their doctrinal conformities, including the emphasis on an amodal, *bilā kayfa* approach to theology, certainly helped al-Jīlānī’s descendants in this process.

‘Umar al-Suhrawardī, on the other hand, in establishing his own rules of conduct, litanies, and wider theology, was in negotiation with already well-established masters, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī in particular. The Suhrawardiyyah, in its

¹⁵⁰⁰ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī 1996, p.71.

¹⁵⁰¹ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in Jackson 2002, p.93.

¹⁵⁰² Ohlander 2008, p.258.

¹⁵⁰³ Ohlander 2008, pp.32-33

formalization as an order, benefitted from its close positioning with this powerful Ḥanbalī Sufi. Many Sufis, whom al-Suhrawardī gave ratification [*‘ijāzah*] or invested his cloak [*khirqah*], were also associated with the followers of al-Jīlānī. Among other Sufi lineages, al-Suyūṭī’s prominent *Lubs al-Khirqah* puts both ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī and his ‘Iraqī student Aḥmad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Fārūthī (d.1295) under the lineages of the Suhrawadiyyah as well as the Qādiriyyah. ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī is also depicted here as a direct student of al-Jīlānī in the Qādirī lineage. The master - disciple relationship of the two Sufi masters was already claimed by the fourteenth century by the followers of al-Suhrawardī, which helped al-Suhrawardī legitimize his order. Unsurprisingly, it is al-Fārūthī, under whose authority the meeting of the two eponyms was narrated. The Shāfi‘ī judge Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d.1370), who reasserts the connections of Sufism and Ash‘arism in his works,¹⁵⁰⁴ also depicts al-Jīlānī and al-Suhrawardī not only in the formal, master - disciple relationship, but also as the most powerful bannerbearers of the tradition of the pious ancestors, with their strong expertise in prophetic traditions, law, and preaching.¹⁵⁰⁵ Such a meeting, though unlikely, was not impossible, as al-Suhrawardī came to Baghdād after 1160. Al-Suhrawardī’s alliance with Ḥanbalism, supported by a systematic defense of Ash‘arism against it,¹⁵⁰⁶ provided him a vast Sunnī ground to develop his Sufi order with its insistence on the normative authority of the pious ancestors.

The emphasis on how to approach anthropomorphic depictions of God was clearly determined by Abū al-Najīb, and then ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī, whose writings became the cornerstones of the order. Hence, *bilā kayfa* apophaticism, with the unknowability of the meaning of the transcendent discourse and its resistance to interpretation, is found widely among his disciples in the thirteenth century. The prominent jurist of Damascus and disciple of ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī, ‘Izz ibn ‘Abd al-Salām (d.1262) continues the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. As his *Epistles of Divine Unity* [*Rasā’il fī al-Tawḥīd*] and the *Tree of Gnosis* [*Shajarat al-Ma‘ārif*] clearly show, his theology is Ash‘arite, which he depicts as that of the pious ancestors. In his broad synthesis of a traditionist theology and Sufism, law plays an integral role. As a Shāfi‘īte jurist himself, his students and biographers, from Ibn Daqīq al-‘Īd (d.1302) onwards gave him high honorifics such as “*mujtahid*” and “*sulṭān al-‘ulamā*” [the sulṭān of religious scholars], while at the end of his life ‘Izz ibn ‘Abd al-Salām regarded himself as an “absolute *mujtahid*,”

¹⁵⁰⁴ Shihadeh 2007, p.5.

¹⁵⁰⁵ See Ohlander 2008, p.60.

¹⁵⁰⁶ See Mayer 2008, p.272.

i.e., a legal scholar whose judicial opinions were no longer tied to any constituted school. His *Epistles of Divine Unity* approached the divine nature through the lens of *bilā kayfa*, in line with what he depicted as a broad, mainstream Sunnī Sufism. The *Epistle* began with a list of strong negations, refusing to interpret the anthropomorphic depictions of God:

Established on the glorious throne *in the manner He said*, and *with the meaning that He intended*. His “establishment” transcends touching, sitting, settlement, incarnation, or movement: God is exalted and transcendent.¹⁵⁰⁷

‘Izz ibn ‘Abd al-Salām shows what God’s “establishment” is *not*, delegating the meaning of the transcendent discourse to God Himself, and canceling any kataphatic interpretive endeavor on the divine nature. He also supplies this amodal approach with a critique of the anthropomorphism of the “Riff-Raff” [*ahl al-ḥashw*] who attribute God shape [*shakl*].¹⁵⁰⁸

The Persian follower of al-Suhrawardī, ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī (d.1334) follows the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism of his masters, but also embodies an important watershed between the Arabic Sufi theology of the Suhrawardiyyah with its *bilā kayfa* position and Persian Sufism with its sustained interpretive approach to anthropomorphism. Kāshānī explains in his introduction that his Persian Sufi compendium *Lamp of Guidance* actually presents a Persian summary of ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī’s *Gifts of Gnosis*.¹⁵⁰⁹ Yet the immediate opening of the *Lamp of Guidance* is actually a loose translation of ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī’s Sunnī Sufi creedal treatise, *A’lām al-Hudā*. Like the *A’lām*, Kāshānī divides this first part into ten sections, each of which gives a translation of the *A’lām*. Hence the *Lamp* is undertaking a crucial move: in the name of translating the Sufi practice and etiquette-centered *Gifts of Gnosis*, it first introduces ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī’s Sunnī-Sufi theological harmonization project within a wide framework of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. Here, Kāshānī affirms first and foremost al-Suhrawardī’s strongly negativist depiction of divine attributes and the unknowability of the divine essence:

He is so transcendent that the epilogue of intellects in the prologue of His gnosis has no proof but perplexity and chaos. For the vision of the people of insight, there is no path but blindness and night blindness in the rays of His lights of splendor. ... If you

¹⁵⁰⁷ Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām 1415/1995, p.12.

¹⁵⁰⁸ Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām 1415/1995, p.12.

¹⁵⁰⁹ ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, pp.18-19.

ask “where,” space is His creation. If you ask “when,” He created it. If you ask “how,” similitudes and hownesses are His actions. If you ask “how many,” quantity and size are His creations. There is no beginning to the end-less [*zāt-a nā-maḥdūd*] ipseity, and no ending to His countless attributes. ... Ultimately, compared to whatever is contained in the intellect, understanding, estimation, perception or analogy, the essence of the glorious Lord is more transcendent and holy than that. For, all of these are created, and created ones can only comprehend what is created. The proof of His Being is, again, His Being. The demonstration of His vision is, again, His vision. ... In this station, the limit of comprehension is but incapacity. “The incapacity to comprehend the comprehension is comprehension.” No unifier can attain the comprehension of the reality of the One, except the One. Wherever comprehension reaches its end, it is the limit of comprehension, not that of the One. “God transcends this—He is exalted and great.”¹⁵¹⁰

Secondly, like Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī, al-Qushayrī and others, Kāshānī criticizes the negative theology of divine attributes that we find among philosophers. Accordingly, the divine attributes that we find in the sacred sources cannot be reduced to the discursive negation of their absence. The transcendent discourse cannot be mixed with the created one—a key insight of the amodal position indeed:

Sufis arrived at a consensus [*ijmāʿ*] that all divine attributes have a reality and genuine meaning differentiated from other attributes, and that all of them are the very ipseity in their essence. In opposition, the negators [*muʿatṭilah*] claim that the meaning of attributes is purely the negation of opposites; which means that the meaning of “knowledge” is the negation of ignorance [*nafy-a jahl*] from Him, and the meaning of “power” is the negation of incapacity [*salb-a ʿajz*], and so on. But the inanimate objects share these descriptions as well. So they had to be All-Knowing and All-Powerful as well.¹⁵¹¹

¹⁵¹⁰ ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, pp.25-26; my emphasis.

¹⁵¹¹ ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, p.31. Al-Kāshānī employs the terms *nafy* and *salb* interchangeably.

Kāshānī's Persian *Lamp of Guidance*, thus, follows al-Suhrawardī's Sunnī Sufi *bilā kayfa* apophaticism by negating divine knowability, modalities, and created discourse in general. Yet, Kāshānī prepares surprises by small but carefully chosen theological divergences from the position of the text that he translates. His *Lamp of Guidance* has a perfect structural correspondence with al-Suhrawardī's *A'lām al-Hudā*, except one section. This is the sixth section of the *A'lām*, "On the Verses and Sacred Reports on the Divine Attributes:" the key section where al-Suhrawardī lays bare the non-interpretive, non-cognitive position concerning anthropomorphism, and harmonizes Ash'arism with the Ḥanbalism on *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. While all other sections of the *A'lām al-Hudā* remain intact, Kāshānī deliberately skips this crucial section entirely. Instead, he opens a new section explaining faith in angels, the prophets and their sacred books sent before the Qur'ān. So his chapter on the creed of Sufis completes the book to ten sections in total, like that of al-Suhrawardī, but omits the most characteristic section for a broad *bilā kayfa* apophaticism with its Ḥanbalī - Ash'arī rapprochement. Instead of an entire section, he devotes a couple sentences to anthropomorphic verses, at the end of the third section on the divine attributes. His position is simply a summary of al-Suhrawardī's creedal position in the *A'lām al-Hudā*:

As for the verses and sacred reports that are revealed on the attributes such as "establishment," "descent," "hand," "foot," "laughing," and "astonishment:" all of them are the verses of His oneness and proofs of His uniqueness [*fardāniyyat*]. "Some understand them, and some remain ignorant about them." One should not be seized by anthropomorphism or ineffectualism. One's duty is to have faith in their presence, not to know their howness; as Mālik ibn Anas said...¹⁵¹²

Hence Kāshānī deliberately omits the reconciliatory gesture towards Ḥanbalism, even if his position does not really differ from the Sunnī Sufism of 'Umar al-Suhrawardī. Also in section five, on the nature of the divine word, and in the following section on the beatific vision, Kāshānī simply follows Abū al-Najīb and 'Umar al-Suhrawardī.

Kāshānī's underplaying of the *bilā kayfa* position in removing the relevant section in al-Suhrawardī's creed might be related to his larger interpretive and discursive response to anthropomorphism. In the section on the gnosis of the

¹⁵¹² 'Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, p.33. Cf. 'Umar al-Suhrawardī 1996, pp.69-70.

heart [*ma'rifat-a dal*], Kāshānī interprets not only the “throne,” but also the “face” of God in non-anthropomorphic ways:

...the “heart,” by way of indication, is the point where the circle of existence initiates and attains perfection, the secrets of endlessness and infinity [*sirr-a azal va abad*] are united, the prologue of opinion [*mabdā-ya naẓar*] reaches to the epilogue of vision, and the Beauty and Majesty of the eternal face [*jamāl va jalāl-a vājḥ-a bāqī*] are manifested. “The Throne of the All-Merciful” ... is among its descriptions. ... Its existence is qualified by love [*īshq*], and that of love by it. The heart of human body is like the throne of the All-Merciful. The throne is the macro-heart in the macro-cosmos; and the heart is the micro-throne in the micro-cosmos.¹⁵¹³

Neither Kāshānī's sections on the metaphysical status of the heart, nor its correspondence with the heavenly world were played out in such sophisticated labor in Abū al-Najīb or 'Umar al-Suhrawardī's writings. Neither of these masters engage in developed mystical exegesis of the anthropomorphic references to the divine nature—they rather tended to deflect any discursive and interpretive access to it. Kāshānī, on the other hand, develops multi-layered mystical readings of these references connecting the divine countenance and throne to the heart—the all-encompassing seat of the divine, and the center of excessive love. Then, where does Kāshānī get these interpretive sections? In its structure and its interpretive inclination that violates the *bilā kayfa* non-cognitivism of the eponyms of Suhrawardīyah, Kāshānī's *Lamp of Guidance* actually follows the teachings of another popular Sufi master of his time. These interpretive parts, both in cosmology and language, are fundamentally similar or directly taken from to three Kubrāwī sources: Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d.1221)'s *Fawā'ih al-Jamāl*, his pupil Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī (d.1256)'s *Path of God's Bondsmen*,¹⁵¹⁴ and the joint thirteenth century Kubrāwī exegesis, the *Expositions [Ta'wīlāt]*.¹⁵¹⁵ The Sufi order most prominent in thirteenth century Persia and Central Asia was organized around the mystical teachings of this Khuwārazmian Sufi master. The interpretive approach of the Kubrāwī masters made its mark beyond the order, as we clearly observe it in 'Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī's *Lamp of Guidance*. In the Persian world, interpretive approaches to anthropomorphism prevailed.

¹⁵¹³ 'Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, pp.96-97.

¹⁵¹⁴ Cf. e.g. Dāya Rāzī 1958, Ch.7, on “the Purification of the Heart,” with 'Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, Ch.3.6. “the Gnosis of the Heart,” pp.95-99.

¹⁵¹⁵ Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and al-Simnānī 2009, Vol.1, p.111.

Kubrāwī Interpretivism

Najm al-Dīn Kubrā was born in Khiwa, the small Shāfiʿite enclave in an otherwise Ḥanafī and Muʿtazilite dominant area of Khuwārazm. Through his masters Bābā Faraj (d.1172), Ismāʿīl Qaṣrī (d.1193) and ʿAmmār al-Bidlīsī (d.1207), Kubrā's spiritual as well as theological lineage runs back to Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī. Yet, the formal *bilā kayfa* Sunnī-Sufi position of the master on the anthropomorphic depictions of God had already changed by the time of his immediate students. The official, creedal non-cognitivism of Abū al-Najīb's normative *Sufi Etiquette for Novices* already ceded its place to non-anthropomorphic, mystical interpretivism in ʿAmmār al-Bidlīsī's writings. In both his *Delight of the People [Bahjat al-Ṭāʾifah]* and the *Fasting of the Heart [Ṣawm al-Qalb]*, Bidlīsī typically forbade the vision of God via human organs except for the prophets. Our vision of God happens as clairvoyance, and our conversation with Him happens through inner voice.¹⁵¹⁶ God's "throne," following earlier Sufis like al-Wāsiṭī, and later al-Maybudī, is actually a reference to the heart:

The attribute of the heart in the station of witnessing [*maqām al-mushāhadah*] corresponds to the throne of manifestations. For, manifestation is in terms of their hearts for the friends of God, and in terms of their eyes for the prophets. In the station of conversation [*maqām al-muḥaddathiyah*], the attribute of the heart corresponds to the Preserved Tablet [*lawḥ al-mahfūz*]. For, conversation with God is in the heart, and with the heart. As a proof of its being the throne of manifestations, it is said "my heart saw my Lord." And as a proof of its being the, it is said: "my heart spoke to me about my Lord."¹⁵¹⁷

Al-Bidlīsī consistently, and repetitively insisted on the same non-anthropomorphic, interpretive approach in his writings: the heart is the throne of divine manifestations.¹⁵¹⁸ The official, creedal non-interpretive position of Abū al-Najīb, who was one of his teachers, and ʿUmar al-Suhrawardī on anthropomorphism is left behind in favor of the less formally-defined, though sustained, interpretive Sufi heritage in Bidlīsī's works. The corpus of his Persian student, Najm al-Dīn Kubrā follows this heritage.

¹⁵¹⁶ For God's countenance, see al-Bidlīsī 1999a, p.116; al-Bidlīsī 1999b, Q.30:38, p.44.

¹⁵¹⁷ al-Bidlīsī 1999a, pp.137-138.

¹⁵¹⁸ al-Bidlīsī 1999a, pp.72-73, 79, 112; al-Bidlīsī 1999b, p.14, 39, 26-27.

The voluminous Qur'ānic exegesis that has various titles, one of which is the *Expositions* [*Ta'wīlāt*] is a collective, Kubrāwī project in two ways. First, the master Najm al-Dīn Kubrā initiated it, and was able to write up to Q.51:17-18 before he passed away. It was another energetic Kubrāwī Sufi of the time, 'Alā' al-Dawlah al-Simnānī (d.1336), who completed the work. Second, a number of manuscripts credit Kubrā's prominent student Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī (d.1256) with the work, but we do not know the extent of his involvement as an author or editor in the exegesis of the first 51 chapters.¹⁵¹⁹ At least in its theological approach to the divine essence, the *Expositions* is harmonious with Dāya Rāzī's influential Sufi manual *The Path of God's Bondsmen*. In its two-layered interpretive structure in terms of anthropomorphic depictions of God, the *Expositions* of the Khuwārazmian master is closely related to the *Subtleties* of al-Qushayrī, the *Unveiling* of al-Maybudī, and *Lamp of Guidance* of the later Suhrawardī Sufi, 'Izz al-Dīn Kāshānī (d.1334). The *Expositions* ingeniously uses Q.2:255, the verse mentioning of the "footstool," as an occasion to discuss Q.20:5, the verse on God's "throne" and the more general hermeneutical principle of its author in approaching such anthropomorphic depictions of God. First, Kubrā underlines that these terms of transcendent discourse indicate the highest levels of perfection—hence one cannot ignore the literal dimension of the transcendent discourse and simply interpret them:

[Q.2:255] "*His footstool comprises the heavens and earth.*" This [verse] informs us of the Beauty [*jamāl*] of His secrets via His creation, i.e., it means the darkening [*sīd*] of His Perfection [*kamāl*] in order to encompass the heavens, earth, and fire. This is, as His name is supreme [*'aẓim sha'nihī*], like His creation of circles in a desert in relation to His throne. Look at the perfection of the beauty of His throne! As for the meaning of His "footstool," you should know that religion and faith necessitate not interpreting anything of the essences [*al-a'yān*] according to their meanings without their forms.¹⁵²⁰

Kubrā here does not invalidate interpretive or discursive inquiries. He rather argues that the non-anthropomorphic interpretations of such verses add another, a deeper layer. Hence, one should not assume that the interpretation violates the literal form, or the surface of these verses. Rather than himself adopting *bilā kayfa*, anti-interpretive, non-cognitive positions, Kubrā is actually addressing the concerns of those who adopt it. He stresses that non-

¹⁵¹⁹ See Elias 1995, pp.204-205; Sands 2006, p.77.

¹⁵²⁰ Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and al-Simnānī 2009, Vol.1, p.330.

anthropomorphic, deeper interpretations do not violate the sacred form, but affirm it:

The Prophet, his companions, and the scholars of the pious ancestors interpreted them only through the realization apportioned to them by God, via unveiling of truths, hidden meanings, secrets, scriptural indications, and realization of interpretation. If a special meaning, indication and realization is unveiled, as much as it can be, without annulling the forms of essences (as in the cases of paradise and hell, the weighing, the narrow path, the houris, palaces, the flowing rivers and other things in the paradise), it may seem to annul its form, but it rather confirms the essence as it was revealed, and understands their truths and meanings. God has not created anything in this world of forms that can rival something in the world of meanings; and He has not created anything in the world of meanings (which is the afterlife) that does not have a reality in the world of truth (which is the hidden of the hidden).¹⁵²¹

Kubrā here highlights that these verses have two layers of truth, one literal and non-interpretive, the other anti-anthropomorphic and interpretive. From this deeper interpretive approach, God's "throne" and "footstool," unsurprisingly, indicate the center of the micro-cosmos, in line with al-Qushayrī, al-Maybudī, his own master al-Bidlīsī, and later, Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī, al-Kāshānī (d.1334), Bursawī (d.1725),¹⁵²² and other prominent Sufis:

God has not created anything in this or the next world that does not have an allegory or an example in the human world. So, know this, and understand that the allegory of the "throne" in the human world is the heart: it is the place of sitting of the spirit in vicegerency for God. And the allegory of the "footstool" is the innermost of the human. ... *"The All-Merciful, established on the Throne."* [Q.20:5] ... The wonder of all wonders is the capacity of the throne for the establishment of the All-Mercifulness. So it is said that it is like His creation of circles between the heavens and

¹⁵²¹ Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and al-Simnānī 2009, Vol.1, p.330.

¹⁵²² See Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī Bursawī (1330/1911), Vol.1, Q.2:255, p.404.

Ismā'īl Ḥaqqī Bursawī (d.1725) is quoting the *Expositions* in his in *Soul of Explication [Rūḥ al-Bayān]*. Hence Algar's (and Morrison's) assumption that the work is the expression of Dāya Rāzī's views should be approached with caution. cf. Algar in Dāya Rāzī 1982, p.84, fn.27; Morrison 1998, pp.153-158.

the earth, in correspondence with the capacity of the heart of the faithful.¹⁵²³

Kubrā's interpretive approach to anthropomorphic depictions of God was well-received among his pupils from early on. The exchange of letters between two Persian Kubrāwis, Majd al-Dīn Baghdādī (d.1219) and Sharaf al-Dīn Balkhī (fl.ea.13th CE) displays the prominence of interpretive approaches particularly with relevance to Sufi wayfaring. The exchange of letters has a clear emphasis on divine transcendence and unknowability. No wayfarer, no matter how long they pursue their spiritual travel, can actually attain the gnosis of the path to the Real [*ṭarīq al-Ḥaqq*]; it exclusively belongs to the Lord Himself [*istiḥqāq-a rubūbiyyat ast*].¹⁵²⁴ Once the wayfarer negates and erases [*nafy va maḥv*] all of their attributes, there will not be an end to the wayfaring either *to* God, or *in* God. At this point, the Sulṭān of Truth [*Sulṭān-a Ḥaqqīqat*] permeates the already emptied heart of the wayfarer; “He establishes Himself on the throne of the heart” [*istivā-ya ū bar ‘arsh-a dal*].¹⁵²⁵

The Nisābūrī Sufi poet Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.ca.1229) adopts an interpretive approach to the throne that is strikingly similar to that of Kubrā. His mystical allegorical feast, the *Conference of the Birds* follows a double-layered hermeneutics and theology that follow that of Kubrā. In the opening of the work, where ‘Aṭṭār describes the nature of God, he introduces His “throne” and “footstool” as realms where no discourse or interpretation operates. As they transcend the levels of human apprehension, one should not even ask their meaning—discourse is canceled in the very beginning due to human limits and the divine transcendence:

Reason, soul, religion, heart... We have lost all,
Still we are yet to understand a minimum of His perfection!

Shut your lips: don't ask of the “throne,” or of the “footstool,”
Even just for a letter—don't ask!

Your reason will burn from a minimum of it, thus:
Both of your lips should be seamlessly detached from asking of it.

¹⁵²³ Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and al-Simnānī 2009, Vol.1, p.331.

¹⁵²⁴ Meier 1999, p.278.

¹⁵²⁵ Meier 1999, p.278.

Nobody genuinely knows the profundity of a minimum of it,
How long will you talk, how long will you ask? Just stop!¹⁵²⁶

Yet, as we proceed, ‘Aṭṭār explains the cosmological role of the throne and footstool. Accordingly, God first creates the prophetic light, or the Muḥammadan Reality. Then it is followed by the levels of heavenly realms, such as the “throne,” “footstool,” “tablet” [*lavḥ*], and “pen.”¹⁵²⁷ The throne and the footstool are actually created from the mirror image of the prophetic reality [*‘aks-a zātash*].¹⁵²⁸ This hierarchical depiction of cosmology corresponds to the levels of wayfaring. Eventually, like all cosmological levels, the divine throne is contained in the heart of the wayfarer. Finding God in His proper house, i.e., the heart also means finding His throne. The heart is the mirror of the divine beloved, and everything it contains is a manifestation, or shadow of the divine.¹⁵²⁹

Kubrā’s prominent pupil Dāya Rāzī’s *Path of God’s Bondsmen* is also fundamentally discursive and interpretive. Human creation in the form [*ṣūrat*] of God, a bone of contention around anthropomorphism during the Inquisition [*miḥnah*], is interpreted here in light of a wider cosmology of manifestation, hence, non-anthropomorphically.¹⁵³⁰ In the same vein, the “double fingers” indicate God’s *Jalāl* and *Jamāl*: Divine Majesty and Beauty.¹⁵³¹ His interpretations of “throne” and “footstool” are similarly cosmological, corresponding to the higher levels of creation, i.e., immutable spiritual verities.¹⁵³² “Throne” is the all-encompassing center of the cosmos, and the equivalent of the universal soul [*naḥs-a kullīyya*].¹⁵³³ The phrases emphasizing the all-encompassing role of the heart, are verbatim from the *Expositions*: “the relationship of the heart to the

¹⁵²⁶ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #154-158.

¹⁵²⁷ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #283-284.

¹⁵²⁸ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #295-296.

¹⁵²⁹ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #1124-1129.

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None ... was fit to bear the burden of the Trust of knowledge, for out of all creation it was only man whose soul desired to be a mirror to the beauty of the Divine Presence and to manifest all of His attributes, both passively and actively. This is the meaning of the saying that “*God created Adam in His own image.*” (Dāya Rāzī 1982, Prologue, p.27.)

¹⁵³¹ Dāya Rāzī 1982, p.219.

¹⁵³² See e.g. Dāya Rāzī 1982, p.70fn.1; 76, 80, 84, 85, 106, 111-112, 202.

¹⁵³³ See Algar in Dāya Rāzī 1982, p.84fn.26.

body is like that of God's throne to the world."¹⁵³⁴ It is here where the excessive, life-bequeathing, existence-giving grace first emerges, and permeates creation. In this sense, the heart is not only His throne, but also His never-perishing face.¹⁵³⁵ Here it becomes particularly evident that Dāya Rāzī's *Path of God's Bondsmen* is Kāshānī's main source of his discursive, interpretive solution to the anthropomorphic depictions of God. Kāshānī's proximity to the Kubrāwī masters' interpretive approach to divine nature instead of the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism of the masters of the Suhrawardiyah demonstrates, once more, the theological flexibility among Sufi orders in the late thirteenth century after their establishment.

With prominent Sufis like Sa'd al-Dīn Ḥammūyah (d.1252), Shams al-Dīn Kīshī (d.1295) and 'Alā' al-Dawlah al-Simnānī (d.1336), Kubrāwī masters perpetuate their divergence from *bilā kayfa* apophaticism that paralyzed discourse on the divine nature. Their interpretive positions were rich. Shams al-Dīn Kīshī, in his Arabic commentary on a biblical theme and prophetic report, developed a highly philosophical interpretation of the anthropomorphic depictions of God. Here, it is the intellect that plays the key role in interpreting the creation of human beings in His form.¹⁵³⁶ Al-Simnānī, acclaimed by al-Sanūsī al-Idrīsī (d.1859) as the founder of the Rukniyyah branch of Kubrāwiyyah in Khurāsān, extends the two-layered interpretive schema of al-Maybudī, Kubrā, and others to four on the basis of a non-canonical prophetic tradition.¹⁵³⁷ It is important that al-Simnānī accepts that the literal form of the transcendent discourse should be taken in light of "a commentator whose authority derives from the Companions," instead of interpretation based on personal opinion [*ra'y*].¹⁵³⁸ Else, one will remain

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Know that the relationship of the heart to the body is like that of God's throne to the world. In the same way that the throne is the place of manifestation for the repose of the attribute of compassion in the macrocosm, so too the heart is the place of manifestation for the repose of the attribute of spirituality in the microcosm. There is, however, this difference, that the throne is unaware of the manifestation of the repose of the attribute of compassion, so that it is incapable of progressing to become the place of manifestation for the repose of other attributes; whereas the heart is possessed of awareness and is capable of so progressing. (Dāya Rāzī 1982, Ch.7, p.201.)

¹⁵³⁵ Dāya Rāzī 1982, Ch.7, p.202.

¹⁵³⁶ Shams al-Dīn Kīshī 2011, pp.299-300.

¹⁵³⁷ See Elias 1995, p.108; Sands 2006, pp.11-12.

¹⁵³⁸ See al-Simnānī in Sands 2006, p.62.

ignorant of the precepts [*aḥkām*], occasions of revelation [*asbāb al-nuzūl*], and more importantly, parables [*amthāl*], and fall into heresy. The denial of the interpretive layers of the transcendent discourse, on the other hand, is equally unacceptable as a clear sign of anthropomorphism.¹⁵³⁹ Accordingly, the Qurʾān has four layers, the last being accessible only non-discursively.¹⁵⁴⁰ Each level of meaning appeals to a different source of interpretation, and corresponds to a different level of existence: the Human Realm [*nāsūt*], the Kingdom [*malakūt*], the Omnipotence [*jabarūt*], and the Divinity [*lāhūt*]. This cosmology, of course, is related to the four levels of the human soul as well. It is not the first, “literal,” traditionist level of reading, but the last, highest rank of “Witnessing,” in the highest realm of Divinity, where interpretation and discourse are canceled.¹⁵⁴¹ Having interpretively ascended to this level, the seeker attains an apophatic apotheosis where her presence, agency, body, intellect, and discourse are perfected in their very negation. In other words, theological discourse cancels itself not at the *bilā kayfa* level, but at the very end, in correspondence with a Sufi cosmology and under the regulation of Sufi wayfaring.

Al-Simnānī, more directly, appeals to the divine “throne” and “hands” when he sets the cosmological and hermeneutical principles of his continuation of the *Explications*, sometimes called the *Wellhead of Life* [*ʿAyn al-Ḥayah*], in his long prologue. Accordingly, “throne” and “footstool,” as they were for the previous Kubrāwī masters, are cosmological as well as spiritual levels that the seeker attains in their transformative, interpretive wayfaring.¹⁵⁴² The two “hands” of God with which he created human beings are His grace and disfavor [*yadayy al-luṭf wa al-qahr*].¹⁵⁴³ His approach to the vision of the “face” of God in this world,

¹⁵³⁹ Elias 1995, pp.107-108; Elias 1991, p.211.

¹⁵⁴⁰

O seeker of the inner meaning of the Qurʾān! You should first study the literal level of the Qurʾān and bring your body into harmony with its commands and prohibitions. Secondly, you should occupy yourself with purifying your inner being so that you may comprehend the hidden meaning [*baṭn*] of the Qurʾān according to the instruction of the Merciful One and the inspiration of the Holy Angel. Thirdly, you should contemplate the gnosis of its limit [*ḥadd*] in the realm of hearts. [Only then] will you be distinguished with witnessing its point of ascent [*muṭṭalaʿ*] without thought or reckoning. (al-Simnānī in Elias 1995, pp.107-108. Also quoted in Sands 2006, pp.11-12.)

¹⁵⁴¹ Elias 1995, pp.108-109.

¹⁵⁴² Elias 1995, p.81; Elias 1991, p.172.

¹⁵⁴³ Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and al-Simnānī 2009, Vol.6, p.3.

similarly, is non-physical, and related to the purification one's own mirror of the heart,¹⁵⁴⁴ to His He-ness [*huwiyyah*],¹⁵⁴⁵ or to the endlessness of the manifestations of His Majesty and Beauty.¹⁵⁴⁶

Al-Simnānī (d.1336)'s four levels of existence, the Human Realm, the Kingdom, the Omnipotence, and the Divinity were actually developed earlier by another Khurāsānian Sufi master and a disciple of Kubrā, Sa'd al-Dīn Hamuwayh (or Ḥammūyah) (d.1252). Hamuwayh wrote a Persian hermeneutical feast, titled the *Lamp of Sufism* [*al-Miṣbāḥ fī al-Taṣavvuf*]. The work was devoted to the mystical and allegorical interpretations [*ta'wīl*] of Qur'ānic concepts, phrases, or even letters in a wider mystical, philosophical lens. Here Hamuwayh devoted a section titled "the Interpretation of the 'throne' [*ta'wīl-a 'arsh*]," where the interpretation was connected to cosmology as well as the levels of the wayfarer.¹⁵⁴⁷ 'Azīz Nasafī (d.ca.1300) became Hamuwayh's pupil [*tilmīz*] in the Kubrāwī convent [*khānaqāh*] that the latter established in Khurāsān. Nasafī's depiction of the divine throne and footstool is typical: they correspond to the two highest levels of the nine heavenly bodies.¹⁵⁴⁸ They have a physical reality,¹⁵⁴⁹ but they also correspond to the highest spiritual stations that the most elite wayfarers and prophets can achieve.¹⁵⁵⁰ He also appeals to the homology of creation and human nature as macro- and micro-cosmos. Yet, instead of the heart, it is now the intellect acclaimed in relation to the throne:

¹⁵⁴⁴ Cf. Elias 1995, p.106.

¹⁵⁴⁵ For his reading of Q.55:27 and Q.28:88 in this way, see Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and al-Simnānī 2009, Vol.6, p.68.

¹⁵⁴⁶ Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and al-Simnānī 2009, Vol.6, p.68.

¹⁵⁴⁷ Sa'd al-Dīn Ḥammūyah 1362/1983, pp.122-123.

¹⁵⁴⁸ 'Azīz Nasafī 2002, pp.77-79.

¹⁵⁴⁹ "When God Most High desired to create the world of bodies He glanced at the turbid dregs. Those dregs melted and boiled, and from its quintessence and select He created the Throne. And from the quintessence and select of what remained He created the Footstool." ('Azīz Nasafī 2002, p.134.) "Whatever exists in Mulk and Malakūt also exists in Jabarūt. Land, heaven, the Footstool and the Throne exist in Mulk and Malakūt and there are many creatures between the land and heaven." ('Azīz Nasafī 2002, p.158.) "When the Most High and Holy Truth desires to create a thing in the world, the form of that thing comes first to the Throne, then to the Footstool, and then to the fixed stars from the Footstool." ('Azīz Nasafī 2002, p.180.)

¹⁵⁵⁰ "Each spiritual level adopts a station in a bodily level, each one in its own station. The Throne became the station for the spirit of the Seal of the Prophets and became his hermitage and retreat. The Footstool became the station for the spirits of the Men of Resolution and became their hermitage and retreat." ('Azīz Nasafī 2002, p.136.) "The Seal of the Prophets and the Seal of the Friends of God can ascend as far as the Throne." ('Azīz Nasafī 2002, p.141.)

“intelligence is God’s deputy in the microcosm, and the human spirit is the throne of God’s deputy, the animal spirit is the footstool of God’s deputy.”¹⁵⁵¹ ‘Azīz Nasafī’s move from the heart to intellect is exactly the same as that of Shams al-Dīn al-Kīshī, who was the Kubrāwī Sufi master of the astronomer and philosopher, Quṭb al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d.1311).

Al-Simnānī’s ideas became influential in Iran, Central Asia and India, largely through the endeavors of his prolific nephew ‘Alī Hamadānī (d.1385) who had been instructed by two of al-Simnānī’s main disciples, Maḥmūd Mazdaqānī (d.1365) and ‘Alī Dūstī (d.1336).¹⁵⁵² A prominent Persian astronomer and Qur’ān commentator, Niẓām al-Dīn al-Nisābūrī (d.1329) also follows al-Simnānī in the beatific vision in this world.¹⁵⁵³ To counter the Qur’ānic verse, “eyes do not apprehend Him” [Q.103:6], he appeals to the argument that the negation of the apprehension via eyes [*al-idrāk bi al-abṣār*] is different than the vision of God. This argument, as we saw, was present in al-Māturīdī’s *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*,¹⁵⁵⁴ al-Juwaynī’s *Kitāb al-Irshād*,¹⁵⁵⁵ Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī’s *Ādāb al-Murīdīn*,¹⁵⁵⁶ and ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī’s *A’lām al-Hudā*.¹⁵⁵⁷ Yet al-Nisābūrī benefited much more extensively from the Kubrāwī *Expositions* than is appreciated in contemporary scholarship. Not only in his interpretations of specific verses, or the cosmology that parallels human micro-cosmos and the spiritual path,¹⁵⁵⁸ but also in his very hermeneutical principles, al-Nisābūrī follows Najm al-Dīn Kubrā. Indeed, the above quoted passages of Kubrā on not interpreting the transcendent discourse appears verbatim in al-Nisābūrī’s commentary as well.¹⁵⁵⁹ Like Kubrā, he even appeals to the key term “unidentified essences” [*al-*

¹⁵⁵¹ ‘Azīz Nasafī 2002, p.181.

¹⁵⁵² See Elias 1998, pp.595-613.

¹⁵⁵³ See Sands 2006, p.11.

¹⁵⁵⁴ al-Māturīdī 2003, p.145.

¹⁵⁵⁵ Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī 1950, pp.181-183.

¹⁵⁵⁶ Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī 1977, pp.1-3. For an English summary, see Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī 1975, p.28.

¹⁵⁵⁷ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī 1996, p.77.

¹⁵⁵⁸ See Morrison 1998, pp.158-171.

¹⁵⁵⁹

Know that the requirement of religion is that the Muslim should not interpret [*yu’awwilu*] anything in the Qur’ān or the ḥadīth according to meanings which would invalidate the essentials which the Prophet and the pious first generations commented on, like the garden, the fire, the path, the balance, the

a'yān] in distinguishing the inviolable interior meaning from its exterior. Al-Nisābūrī's indebtedness to the Kubrāwīyah in this interpretive theology is striking, considering his faith in scientific epistemology in general, and in astronomical observations in particular.¹⁵⁶⁰ His Qur'ānic exegesis displays some vague sympathy with, and evident knowledge of Shī'ism,¹⁵⁶¹ yet he also praises the Ash'arite polymath Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1210) *in extenso*, calling him "the most eminent imām."¹⁵⁶² Unlike many imagined physical meetings among such great masters, there can be little doubt that a meeting between al-Rāzī and Kubrā did actually take place around 1184, with a *terminus ante quem* of 1188. The direct narrator of the meeting, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Maqdisī (d.1241) was a Ḥanbalī turned Damascene Shāfi'ī, who came to Bukhārā, gained considerable respect and reputation, and became the disciple of Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā in Sufism. He then returned to Damascus, where he became a judge, and taught at four *madrāsahs* until his death.¹⁵⁶³ The reported visit to Kubrā paid by al-Rāzī and a Mu'tazilite theologian displays their divergences, notwithstanding the authority of Kubrā in Khuwārazm and beyond. 'Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī and Niẓām al-Dīn al-Nisābūrī provide evidence for the theological dimension of this authority beyond his order. The Kubrāwī non-anthropomorphic interpretive tradition on the divine nature became influential beyond Sufism, not only the Kubrāwī order, particularly in Central Asia and Persia by the end of the century.

D. *Bilā Kayfa* Mysticism in Andalusia

The Background

Imām Mālik's by-the-book approach, both in its *bilā kayfa* apophatic and transcendent anthropomorphist versions, was dominant in the West until the mid-twelfth century. The first generation of Mālikī jurists did write refutations to Khārijite, Ismā'īlī and Mu'tazilite doctrines from the ninth century onwards, but they carefully abstained from, or simply disliked, theological speculation, and had a strong tradition of ascetism.¹⁵⁶⁴ Ash'arism initially took root in cultural metropolises like Qayrawān with prominent scholars such as Ibn Abī Zayd (d.996), Abū al-Ṭayyib al-Asfāqīsī, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Qābisī (d.1013), al-Qalānisī (d.970), and

palaces, the rivers, the trees, etc. Instead, he must affirm these essentials just as they have been set forth. (Niẓām al-Dīn al-Nisābūrī in Sands 2006, p.42.)

¹⁵⁶⁰ See Morrison 1998, p.256.

¹⁵⁶¹ See esp. Morrison 1998, pp.155-156.

¹⁵⁶² See Niẓām al-Dīn al-Nisābūrī in Morrison 1998, p.151.

¹⁵⁶³ Shihadeh 2007, pp.105-106.

¹⁵⁶⁴ Casewit 2014, pp.42-45.

al-Bāqillānī. This was predominantly an anti-interpretive environment, with a rivalrous mix of early Ash‘arism and Mālikism; yet both of which harbored not only transcendent anthropomorphism, but also *bilā kayfa* apophaticism on the divine nature.

The full Ash‘arization of al-Andalus began to take place only in the late eleventh century, during the Murābiṭūn period.¹⁵⁶⁵ This was a key development because Ash‘arism had begun to adopt more discursive and interpretive approaches to the divine essence at the beginning of the century. Instead of the anti-interpretive Ash‘arites, such as al-Bāqillānī or al-Qalānisī, it was the prominent Ash‘arites with a strong appeal to reasoning in theology who became influential. Andalusian Ash‘arites, Abū al-Ḥajjāj al-Kalbī al-Ḍarīr (d. 520/1126)’s *Instruction and Guidance Concerning the Science of Creed* [*al-Tanbīh wa al-irshād fī ‘ilm al-’tiqād*], al-Salālijī (d.1178)’s *Demonstrations* [*Burhāniyyah*], and Ibn Tūmart (d.1130)’s *Guides* [*al-Murshidāt*] were all inspired in one form or another by Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d.1085)’s seminal *Book of Guidance* [*Kitāb al-Irshād*]. The *Book of Guidance*, with its interpretive theology, dominated al-Andalus, while the Mālikī, anti-interpretive al-Bāqillānī had more influence in North Africa. Still, Juwaynī’s *Book of Guidance* produced an astonishing number of commentaries in the following three centuries in the Maghrib.¹⁵⁶⁶

Yet interpretive theologies on the divine nature did not emerge only with rationalist versions of Ash‘arism in al-Andalus. Members of the juridico-theological trend of mysticism in Majrīṭ [Madrid] resorted to allegorical interpretation [*ta’wīl*] to respond the corporeal depictions of God. For example, Abū ‘Umar al-Ṭalamankī (d.1037), an ascetic mystic, polemicist theologian, traditionist, and Shāfi‘īte lawyer, argued that the verse “He is *with* you wherever you are” had to be interpreted as “God is with you *by His knowledge*.”¹⁵⁶⁷ There were other interpretive mystics: al-Ṭalamankī himself was deeply critical towards another indigenous mystical movement associated with Ibn Masarraḥ (d.931) that described interpretation as the cornerstone of their teachings.¹⁵⁶⁸ This was a distinctly Andalusian ascetic mystical tradition that was rather irreducible to “Sufism.” The applicability of “Sufism” to this Masarran interpretivism has been

¹⁵⁶⁵ Casewit 2014, pp.48-49.

¹⁵⁶⁶ Casewit 2014, pp.76.

¹⁵⁶⁷ See Casewit 2014, p.77; my emphasis.

¹⁵⁶⁸ Ibn Masarraḥ interpreted the “throne” as the prime matter from which the universe is created. See Abrahamov 2014, p.101.

recently questioned by some contemporary scholars like Epstein, while Casewit most recently proposed the alternative term “*al-Mu’tabirūn*,” literally, “those who cross-over,” as a more representative designation of this mystical tradition.¹⁵⁶⁹ The term “crossing-over” from the time of Ibn Masarrāh onwards, indicates a general ontological disposition in Andalusian mysticism to go beyond the visible phenomena via constant interpretation. As traversing the visible via interpretation, “the *Mu’tabirūn*” undertook an attitude towards scripture and the natural world that can be called “hermeneutical” in its etymological sense. Only with the twelfth century, the indigenous movement of “the *Mu’tabirūn*,” or “the Contemplators,”¹⁵⁷⁰ under diverse influences, began acquiring distinctly Sufi institutional forms, especially with the generation of mystics of the failed “*murīdūn*” revolt, Ibn Barraġān (d.1141), Ibn al-‘Arīf (d.1141), and Ibn Qasī (d.1151). The twelfth century was a watershed in al-Andalus for the incorporation of mysticism, law, traditionism, ascetism, and various (including *Ismā‘īlī*) theological traditions within the rising framework of Sufism.

Bilā kayfa apophaticism provides us a vantage point to observe the continuity of anti-interpretive negative theologies to wider Sufi teachings in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The *Splendors of Sessions [Maḥāsīn al-Majālis]* by Ibn al-‘Arīf (d.1141), the noted Andalusian traditionist scholar of Almeria and a late convert to mysticism, directly depended on ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d.1089)’s *‘Ilal al-Maqāmāt*.¹⁵⁷¹ Yet Ibn al-‘Arīf’s approach to the depictions of the divine essence and divine attributes are strongly interpretive in opposition to those of al-Anṣārī himself. Discussions on anthropomorphism, or related themes like “throne,” “fingers,” or “footstool” do not appear in Ibn al-‘Arīf’s *Splendors of Sessions, Letters, or Key to Happiness [Miftāḥ al-Sa‘ādah]*. The integration of mysticism with a larger traditionist, but also interpretive, discursive Sunnism can be observed in the *Splendors of Sessions*. Here Ibn al-‘Arīf begins by introducing creation, i.e., everything other than God [*māsiwā*], as His veil, suggesting that God’s vision in this world is not possible.¹⁵⁷² The elect gnostic can see [*rā’ā*] and witness [*mushāhadah*] Him in this world. Yet this vision happens non-physically, through the “eye of the heart” [*‘ayn al-qalb*], and more importantly, within the performative context of paradoxes instead of a *bilā kayfa* unknowability.¹⁵⁷³ The

¹⁵⁶⁹ See Casewit 2014, pp.416-418; Bowering and Casewit in Ibn Barraġān 2015, pp.7-15.

¹⁵⁷⁰ Ibn Barraġān 2015, p.7.

¹⁵⁷¹ See Meier 1999, p.245.

¹⁵⁷² Ibn al-‘Arīf 1933, p.76

¹⁵⁷³ See Ibn al-‘Arīf 1933, pp.88-89.

vision of God [*naẓar ilā Allāh*] is possible in the afterlife,¹⁵⁷⁴ as one of the wonders [*karāmāt*] that God bequeaths to the gnostics. This encounter [*liqā'*] of God will be an amodal [*bilā kayfa*] one.¹⁵⁷⁵ Transcendent anthropomorphism emerges neither in this world, nor in the next one; it is a venue that Ibn al-'Arīf never intended.

In the omission of controversial topics in terms of anthropomorphic depictions of God, Ibn al-'Arīf was not an isolated case of his time. The founding figure of the Almohadī movement, Ibn Tūmart (d.1130) deliberately avoided entering into debates on anthropomorphism in his creedal works the *Guides* [*al-Murshidāt*], and the *Most Precious One Can Ask For* [*A'azz Mā Yuṭlab*]. The absence of the terms “throne,” “footstool,” “fingers,” “hands,” etc. is striking in these works. Like rationalist Ash'arites, Ibn Tūmart saw reason as our main source on the nature of God, even if he appealed to prophetic traditions much more often in his writings. He argued that knowledge of God [*'ilm billāh*, or *ma'rifat al-ma'būd*] is incumbent on everybody, because this is a purely logical necessity that anybody, Muslim or non-Muslim, can attain. We can know God through natural rational means, and through His actions.¹⁵⁷⁶ He criticized the Mālikī traditionist emphasis on following earlier authorities [*taqlīd*], and underlined the key role of reasoning in theological matters.¹⁵⁷⁷ His depictions of God, from this perspective, were not surprisingly negative ones: we find pages of negations of His nature in the *Most Precious One* as well as the *Guides*. The transcendent discourse on the names of God is venerated without asking how,¹⁵⁷⁸ but this is a strongly negativist rationalist context, wherein no human category applies to God; anthropomorphism and comparability are utterly negated. In his discussions on the vision of God, Ibn Tūmart underlines that it does not entail His apprehension [*idrāk*], which is impossible. He situates the beatific vision in a context of rationalist negation of modalities:

He is seen without comparison [*lā tashbīh*], without qualification [*lā takyīf*]; eyes do not apprehend Him in the sense of exhausting [*nihāyah*], encompassing [*iḥāṭah*], connection [*ittiṣāl*], separation [*infiṣāl*], insofar as His description with the definitions of creation.

¹⁵⁷⁴ Ibn al-'Arīf 1933, p.97.

¹⁵⁷⁵ Ibn al-'Arīf 1933, p.103. For a French translation, see Ibn al-'Arīf 2012, p.56.

¹⁵⁷⁶ Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart 1997, pp.210-214; Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart 1993, pp.9-10.

¹⁵⁷⁷ Cornell 1987, p.96.

¹⁵⁷⁸ Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart 1997, p.220; Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart 1993, pp.15-16.

... Visions do not apprehend Him, but He apprehends the visions.¹⁵⁷⁹

In his clear, negativist theology, Ibn Tūmart was strongly resisting against transcendent anthropomorphism. His negationist approach to the divine nature that removes all human categories and his conception of the beatific vision are rooted in rationalist Ash'arism, influenced by Ibn Sīnā (d.1037)'s ontology.¹⁵⁸⁰ This discursive removal of the applicability of human terms from the divine nature is supported by abundant references to prophetic traditions. In the *Murshidāt*, he cites a prophetic report in support of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism on the divine nature, and rejecting anthropomorphism.¹⁵⁸¹ Here Ibn Tūmart adopts a non-interpretive position, yet in general he considers the rules of interpretation of ambiguities in the Qur'ān and the prophetic reports one of the five main principles of religious scholarship [*fiqh al-sunnah*].¹⁵⁸² He gestures towards Q.2:255 in full, but drops the part on the footstool, carefully avoiding direct references to topics related to anthropomorphism.¹⁵⁸³ While his interpretive, rationalist tendencies are obvious, Ibn Tūmart deliberately avoided entering into debates that would certainly bring him into conflict with the popular non-interpretive positions towards these verses.

Ibn al-'Arīf's venerated master,¹⁵⁸⁴ Ibn Barrajan (d.1141) also interpretively eliminated the literal applicability of divine names, such as "the Firm" [*al-Matīn*], as they have corporeal implications.¹⁵⁸⁵ His two Qur'ān commentaries provides us highly personal interpretations on select verses of the Qur'ān, evidently in the Mu'tabirūn interpretive line. This line, in contrast to the philosophical and Sufi lines of indicative [*ishārī*] interpretation, adopted a contemplative [*itibārī*], literally, "hermeneutical" approach wherein cosmology is directly implicated in the interpretive encounter. The discovery of the inner meanings of the Qur'ān went hand in hand with an ever-ascending apprehension of the natural order.¹⁵⁸⁶ The divine throne, within this context, was the real all-encompassing cosmological level that mediates the divine word. This interpretive, visionary

¹⁵⁷⁹ Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart 1997, pp.220-221. Cf. al-Māturīdī 2003, p.151.

¹⁵⁸⁰ Griffel 2005, p.806.

¹⁵⁸¹ Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart 1993, p.20.

¹⁵⁸² Cornell 1987, p.94.

¹⁵⁸³ Muḥammad Ibn Tūmart 1997, p.224.

¹⁵⁸⁴ See Ibn al-'Arīf and 'Atīq ibn 'Īsā 1993, pp.108-109; Ibn Barrajan 2015, pp.18-19, 160.

¹⁵⁸⁵ Casewit 2014, p.209.

¹⁵⁸⁶ Casewit 2014, p.250.

reality, however, did not indicate a physical one. Instead, each level of heaven has its own “footstool” and “throne.”¹⁵⁸⁷ A similarly hierarchical spiritual anthropology corresponded to different levels of understanding the scripture, and ascending through contemplation. At the highest level attainable by non-prophets, such as saints, one’s lower attributes [*ṣifāt dunyā*] are transformed into higher divine attributes [*ṣifāt ‘ulyā*], where one hears the direct Word of God [*mukhāṭabah wa al-taklīm*], and receives direct communication [*muḥādathah*] and discourse [*taklīm*] with Him. Yet, as in the case of His vision happening via insight [*baṣīrah*], none of these terms had a corporeal meaning for Ibn Barraĵān.¹⁵⁸⁸ With his interpretive approach, Ibn Barraĵān distanced himself from anthropomorphism and *bilā kayfa* apophaticism, approaching the position of later Ash‘arites in interpretively removing corporeal implications. He explicitly criticized the *bilā kayfa* approach of the earlier Ash‘arism,¹⁵⁸⁹ and appealed to rationalist Ash‘arism in support of his constant hermeneutical quest for the hidden meaning.

The first openly and consciously “Sufi” movement of the Muslim west emerged only with Abū Madyan (d.1198) and his directing-master [*shaykh al-tarbiyah*], Abū Ya‘za (d.1177). It is worth noting that mysticism in Andalusia on the eve of the rise of Sufism adopted interpretive approaches towards the divine nature, instead of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. The Contemplators in Ibn Masarraḥ’s line, or other ascetics like al-Ṭalamankī increasingly chose philosophical, rationalist Ash‘arite, or mystical hermeneutical responses instead of the prominent non-interpretive creeds of Mālikī scholars such as Ibn Abī Zayd (d.996) or al-Bāqillānī. These mystics, on the other hand, integrated *ḥadīth*, *uṣūl al-fiqh* and mysticism with a systematic focus on the teachings and practices of the *Sunnah* and the pious predecessors, opening religious dogmatics in the Peninsula to a more universal, Sunnī internationalist, inter-ethnic discourse.¹⁵⁹⁰ Formal Sufism in the West emerged with a similar claim for Sunnism, projecting itself back onto the earlier mystical tradition. Yet unlike earlier mysticism, it depicted itself initially as non-interpretive, closely following *bilā kayfa* apophaticism on the divine essence. Hence the rise of institutional Sufism in the East and the West were dramatically similar. Both emerged in interpretive, discursive mystical contexts, yet initially associated themselves with anti-interpretive, non-cognitive theologies.

¹⁵⁸⁷ Ibn Barraĵān 2015, pp.148-149 (Arabic text).

¹⁵⁸⁸ Casewit 2014, pp.247-248.

¹⁵⁸⁹ Casewit 2014, p.4, 209.

¹⁵⁹⁰ Casewit 2014, p.39.

Sufism and Bilā Kayfa in the Thirteenth Century Muslim West

Al-Ghazālī's *Revivification [Ihyā']* presented Sufism as a distinctive dimension of broader Sunnism with its legitimate practices, teachings and institutions. The *Revivification* was put to the torch in 1109 and 1143 in Andalus, but both Ash'arism, and some direct disciples of al-Ghazālī were already settled in Andalusia. His influence on Ibn Barrajan, and Ibn al-'Arif were rather negligible.¹⁵⁹¹ The *bilā kayfa* apophaticism that al-Ghazālī widely preached in his corpus did not find a footing in their writings. It began to make its mark with the rise of Sufism, once the *Ihyā'* controversy was settled, and the earliest Sufi hagiographies began emerging with Ṭāhir al-Ṣadafī (d.af.1177), al-Tādilī (d.ca. 628/1230), Ibn al-'Arabī (d.1240), and Abū al-Ḥasan al-Marrākushī (fl.ea.13th CE).¹⁵⁹²

The Mālikī legist and mystic 'Alī Ibn Ḥirzihim (d.1162) was the nephew of Ṣāliḥ ibn Ḥirzihim (d.af.1111) and a student of the great jurist Abū Bakr Ibn al-'Arabī (d.1148), both of whom were pupils of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī.¹⁵⁹³ Ibn Ḥirzihim had a Sufi convent [*zāwiyah*] in Fez, where the famous Baghdādīan mystic al-Muḥāsibī (d.857)'s *Book of Observing God's Due [Kitāb al-Ri'āyah]*, and al-Ghazālī's *Revivification* were the required readings. Later, Abū Madyan himself made the *Revivification* the obligatory source for his own disciples. He also quoted the *Epistle [Risālah]* of al-Qushayrī (d.1072) in his discourses;¹⁵⁹⁴ al-Tamīmī (d.ca.1206), his disciple in Fez, asked him to read the *Epistle* under his supervision.¹⁵⁹⁵ As both of these monumental works strongly expounded *bilā kayfa* apophaticism as the normative Sufi teaching, it would be hardly surprising to find Abū Madyan following this path. Indeed, the short but powerful *Blessed Creed [al-'Aqidah al-Mubārakah]* attributed to him is a perfect example of *bilā kayfa* apophaticism of the divine essence in the line of al-Ash'arī.¹⁵⁹⁶ It begins with negations of modalities, binaries, comparability, and knowability from God. Then it affirms the typical Ash'arite attributes without any further explanation. God spoke to Moses amodally; His "hand" has no arm; His "face" has no defect; His "hearing" and "vision" are non-physical—all are beyond human

¹⁵⁹¹ For the *Ihyā'* controversy in al-Andalus, see Casewit 2014, pp.93-102.

¹⁵⁹² See Meier 1999, pp.423-427.

¹⁵⁹³ Cornell in Abū Madyan 1996, pp.19-21.

¹⁵⁹⁴ Cornell in Abū Madyan 1996, pp.4-5, 13.

¹⁵⁹⁵ Gril 2016.

¹⁵⁹⁶ Cornell in Abū Madyan 1996, pp.48-53.

understanding to be accepted non-cognitively. He is “established” on the “throne,” neither in the sense of fixedness nor physical sitting.¹⁵⁹⁷ We know that these terms of the transcendent discourse are not physical, or within the limits of human understanding, and we do not have discursive access to their meaning.

Fitting perfectly into al-Ghazālī and al-Qushayrī’s *bilā kayfa* apophaticism, the *Blessed Creed* actually belongs to a much later Sufi of Fez, Abū Madyan ibn Muḥammad al-Fāsī (d.1768).¹⁵⁹⁸ On the other hand, the meeting or the fraternal bond of Abū Madyan with Aḥmad al-Rifā’ī and ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, began to circulate already in the thirteenth century. Two great Sufis, both al-Rifā’ī and al-Jīlānī had a clear anti-interpretive approach similar to that of *The Blessed Creed*, and Abū Madyan began to be depicted in the same *bilā kayfa* orientation in the next century. It is difficult to ascertain that Abū Madyan actually fitted into *bilā kayfa* apophaticism, but we may propose a strong parallel, if not overlap, with al-Qushayrī, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, al-Rifā’ī and al-Jīlānī in his theological outlook.

Yet such an anti-interpretivism was in contrast with the Andalusian mystical strands as well as the Almohadī interpretivist theology gently suggested in Ibn Tūmart’s works. An early Sufi from Fez and contemporary of Abū Madyan, Abū al-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Yūsuf Lajā’ī (d.1202) demonstrates that al-Juwaynī’s interpretivist *Irshād* played a role among western Sufis as significant as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s post-Sufism works. Al-Lajā’ī’s two books on Sufism,¹⁵⁹⁹ the *Pole of the Gnostics in Beliefs and Sufism* [*Quṭb al-‘arīfīn fī al-‘aqā’id wa al-taṣawwuf*], and the *Sun of Hearts* [*Shams al-qulūb*] are perfect examples that display the prominence of interpretivism in the wake of institutional Sufism in the Almohadī West. His best-known work, the *Pole of the Gnostics in Beliefs and*

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The Throne possesses limitation and physical measure, but the Lord is far removed from the perception of sight. The Throne can be specified by mental images and can be characterized by width and length, yet [God] is beyond all of this. He it is who never changes and is never removed. The Throne, in itself, implies “place” and possesses sides and supports. [Yet] it belonged to Him and was without place—now He presides over that which formerly was. It has no bottom that might diminish Him, no top that might shade Him, no sides that might confine Him, no back that might support Him, no front that might limit him. [God] is Exalted beyond [the limitations of] abstraction, fixedness, specification, form, resemblance, or likeness. (Abū Madyan 1996, p.52.)

¹⁵⁹⁸ Gril 2016.

¹⁵⁹⁹ All three of his extant works are on Sufism. See al-Dībājī in al-Lajā’ī 2003, pp.2-3.

Sufism, begins with a clearly interpretivist philosophical theology. The table of contents of the work suffices to show its powerful negative theology of the divine essence. The book is composed of three parts, and the list of early sections covered in the first part are as follows:

The knowledge of creation, and the distinction between the eternal attributes and the created attributes

The negation [*nafy*] of precedence and subsequence from God

The negation of movement and stability from God

The negation of imaginability, modality, representability, and variegation from God¹⁶⁰⁰

The negation of similitude between the Creator and creation

The negation of injustice and tyranny from God

The negation of partnership from God

The negation of spatiality from God¹⁶⁰¹

These sections contain pages of negative statements. The terminology that he applies is philosophical, and he follows the sharp philosophical distinction between the created and eternal attributes, which renders the latter unknowable by the former.¹⁶⁰² Yet al-Lajā'ī does not stop with the unknowability of the divine attributes and the essence. He rather embarks on a sweeping interpretive operation in the following sections of the part. God's establishment, throne, speech, vision, smile, coming, hands, proximity etc. go through a rigorous interpretive process. His "establishment" means His power, overcoming, and agency¹⁶⁰³—the same interpretation as al-Juwaynī, and even the same examples concerning the linguistic usage of the term.¹⁶⁰⁴ His proximity is a metaphor for His knowledge and supervision, while His smile is an allegory [*ḍarb mathālan*] to His blessings and generosity.¹⁶⁰⁵ "His 'hands' mean his power... His 'hearing' means His apprehension of all audibles; and His 'vision' means His

¹⁶⁰⁰ *Nafy al-takhyīl wa al-takyīf wa al-tamthīl wa al-talwīn*. In Qur'ānic exegesis, the term *takhyīl* refers to "the visual, anthropomorphic representation of an abstract notion like God's Omnipotence." The famous Mu'tazilite polymath al-Zamakhsharī (d.1144) appealed to the negation of *takhyīl* in his anti-anthropomorphic interpretation of Q.39:67, which ascribes God a "hand." The rhetorician Ibn al-Zamlakānī defined *takhyīl* in the same way, as "depicting the essence of something, so that it might be assumed that it has a form that can be seen with the eyes." (Heinrichs 2008, p.2, 13-14.)

¹⁶⁰¹ al-Lajā'ī 2001, p.187.

¹⁶⁰² al-Lajā'ī 2001, p.51; al-Lajā'ī 2003, pp.187-188.

¹⁶⁰³ al-Lajā'ī 2001, pp.57-58.

¹⁶⁰⁴ Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī 1950, p.40.

¹⁶⁰⁵ al-Lajā'ī 2001, p.59.

apprehension of visibles. His ‘face’ means His Being, which is unlike that of creation.”¹⁶⁰⁶ All of these examples are identical with the interpretations of al-Juwaynī.¹⁶⁰⁷

Al-Lajā’ī’s Sufi manual the *Sun of Hearts* follows a similar theological path. The book is oriented towards the practice of wayfaring, describing Sufi states, stations and main concepts. Still, with its strong emphasis on negative descriptions of God, it does not hesitate to negate all of His kataphatic descriptions, along with the knowability of His essence and even attributes.¹⁶⁰⁸ Here al-Lajā’ī also negates His being “above” [*fawq*] or “on” [*‘alā*] something, or being carried by a “throne.” “Throne” marks the ascription of createdness, and violates His unique, unknowable, eternal singularity.¹⁶⁰⁹ He follows the sharp philosophical distinction between the created and eternal attributes, which renders the latter unknowable by the former.¹⁶¹⁰ Hence His “establishment” on the “throne” is “without reciprocity, neighboring, without touching, without indwelling, without similarity, and without modality.”¹⁶¹¹ His “coming” is, similarly, “without transferring, without movement, without similarity, and without modality. ... He was Pre-Eternal without space, without similarity or modality.”¹⁶¹² God is exalted from being above something, from being carried by a throne, from having a face, or any attribute that applies to creation.¹⁶¹³

Al-Lajā’ī quoted a poem of Ibn al-‘Arīf in the *Sun of Hearts*, calling him the “venerated teacher” [*al-ustādh al-fāḍil*], and cited al-Juwaynī in the *Pole of the Gnostics* as the “*imām*.” It is the interpretive position of al-Juwaynī, instead of the anti-interpretive *bilā kayfa* position of al-Ghazālī that makes its mark on al-Lajā’ī’s works on normative Sufism. Yet it would not be wrong to attribute much prominence to *bilā kayfa* apophaticism among Sufis of the late twelfth century under the influence of al-Qushayrī and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī. Many of these

¹⁶⁰⁶ al-Lajā’ī 2001, p.61.

¹⁶⁰⁷ Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī 1950, p.155.

¹⁶⁰⁸ al-Lajā’ī 2003, p.64.

¹⁶⁰⁹ al-Lajā’ī 2003, pp.188-189; al-Lajā’ī 2001, p.53.

¹⁶¹⁰ al-Lajā’ī 2001, p.51; al-Lajā’ī 2003, pp.187-188.

¹⁶¹¹ al-Lajā’ī 2003, p.188 (*bilā muqābalah wa lā mujāwarah wa lā mumāssah wa lā ḥulūl wa lā tashbīh wa lā takyīf*).

¹⁶¹² al-Lajā’ī 2003, p.189 (*bilā naqlah wa lā ḥarakah wa lā tashbīh wa lā takyīf. ... Wa huwa ka-mā kāna fī al-azal bilā makān wa lā tashbīh wa takyīf*).

¹⁶¹³ al-Lajā’ī 2003, p.64.

early Western Sufis are reported to dislike engaging in producing theological discourses, or writing books. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Malāmatī Sufi master Abū Muḥammad al-Qaṭṭān (fl.I.12th CE) admonished those who write or compile books, arguing that the transcendent discourse, i.e., “the Book of God and the traditions of His messenger are sufficient.”¹⁶¹⁴ They kept a distaste for discursive productions, and adhered rather to the transcendent discourse of the sacred scripture, or to the *bilā kayfa* position of al-Ghazālī and al-Qushayrī’s monumental works. It was the pupil of Abū Madyan, Ishāq al-Kūmī (d.1180), who introduced the *Epistle* of al-Qushayrī to the young aspirants Badr al-Dīn al-Ḥabashī (d.1221) and Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240). Ibn al-‘Arabī beautifully narrates how the two companions followed al-Kūmī to a mosque on the top of a mountain, where al-Ḥabashī and Ibn al-‘Arabī recited the *Epistle*, and the master expounded upon it.¹⁶¹⁵ On the other hand, even if the generation of Abū Madyan, al-Qaṭṭān and al-Kūmī adopted the *bilā kayfa* position, it did not extend to the next one in al-Andalus.

Al-Ḥabashī, a freed slave of Ethiopian origin, had already acquired a copy of the *Epistle* before Ibn al-‘Arabī. Al-Ḥabashī’s *Kitāb al-Inbāh [The Awakening to the Path of Allāh]* claims to transmit what the author heard from Ibn al-‘Arabī, “our master, our shaykh and our guide, the *imām*, the most pure man of knowledge, the Red Sulphur.”¹⁶¹⁶ Hence *The Awakening* is an excellent witness to the mystical ideas of not only the Ethiopian Sufi, but also the young Ibn al-‘Arabī. *The Awakening* adopts a *bilā kayfa* approach to the beatific vision, limiting it to the afterlife. It cites Q.75:22-23 and Q.83:15 in justification of the meeting and vision [*waṣl ilayhi wa rā’hu*] in the afterlife,¹⁶¹⁷ while the vision in this world is a non-discursive, non-corporeal, mystical one.¹⁶¹⁸ It also interprets the “hand of God”

¹⁶¹⁴ Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī 1971, p.112.

¹⁶¹⁵ See Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī 1971, pp.71-72.

¹⁶¹⁶ al-Ḥabashī in Gril 1979, p.104 (Arabic text), p.123 (French translation).

¹⁶¹⁷ Q.75:23; al-Ḥabashī in Gril 1979, #20, p.108. For the English and French translations, see al-Ḥabashī 1994, #20; Gril 1979, #20, p.128.

¹⁶¹⁸

As for the realities [*ḥaqā’iq*], they are of four kinds, in connection with (1) the divine essence, (2) the attributes, (3) the actions, and (4) beings which have been brought into existence. The latter are of three kinds: (4a) the higher world or intelligible beings, (4b) the lower world or sentient beings, (4c) the intermediate world or imaginal beings. (1) The essential realities are all places of vision [*mashhad*] where God establishes you without entailing comparability [*tashbīh*]. It has no modality [*takyīf*], discourse does not extend to it, and

as a metaphor for divine agency.¹⁶¹⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own hermeneutical, anti-corporeal paradoxical approach closely follows that of Ibn Barrajān. Our “literalist” Sufi depicts God’s “throne,” and “footstool” as real cosmological entities that manifest the divine mercy and veil the unknowable ipseity simultaneously.¹⁶²⁰ The “throne” and “footstool” are higher cosmological realities and loci of divine manifestations that can be witnessed through spiritual wayfaring because of the correspondence between the macro-cosmos and the micro-cosmos:

The “footstool” is the locus of knowledge as the heart is the locus of knowledge. Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d.848) said: “Were the world and all that is in it to fall a thousand thousand times into a corner of the heart of the gnostic, he would not feel it because of the spaciousness of his heart.” For this reason al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said: “The ‘footstool’ of His ‘throne’ is taken from the Prophet’s saying, ‘The heart of the man of faith is of the throne of God’.” The word “footstool” denotes a small footstool which cannot be separated from the seat of the throne. It is like the heart both as imagined and portrayed in its greatness and magnitude. But as for the greatest and most glorious throne, it is the first spirit and its image. Their ideal form is present in the eighth and greatest sphere, which encompasses the seven heavens and all that is in them.¹⁶²¹

Ibn al-‘Arabī situates such apparently corporeal descriptions of God within a metaphysical visionary cosmology, as Ibn Barrajān did. As a critique of allegorical interpretation [*ta’wīl*], yet a master of a wider hermeneutics of constant traversal, Ibn al-‘Arabī is firmly situated within the Mu‘tabirūn tradition. God’s “hands,” “fingers,” and “face” turn into experiential signifiers in a hierarchical

allusion does not indicate it. (al-Ḥabashī in Gril 1979, #46, p.115. For the English and French translations, see al-Ḥabashī 1994, #46; Gril 1979, #46, pp.135-136.

¹⁶¹⁹ al-Ḥabashī in Gril 1979, #45, p.114. For the English and French translations, see al-Ḥabashī 1994, #45; Gril 1979, #45, p.135.

¹⁶²⁰

I saw the throne of God as though supported on numberless pillars of light, all of which flashed like lightning. Despite this I could see that it had a deep shadow in which there was an unimaginable peace. This shadow was that of the concavity of the throne, veiling the light of Him Who sat upon it, the Merciful. I saw also the treasure which was under the throne. ... The treasure was none other than Adam. (Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī 1971, p.34.)

¹⁶²¹ Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī in Renard 2014, p.30.

metaphysical system. He venerates the literal surface of the scripture, underlines its ultimately unknowable nature as the transcendent discourse, but also depicts a depth-hermeneutics as the best way of celebrating this transcendence. In terms of this interpretive theology, Ibn al-‘Arabī is closer to Ibn Barraġān’s *Wisdom Deciphered* [*Īdāḥ al-ḥikma*] that he studied with ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Mahdawī (d.1221) in the latter’s center of instruction in Tunis in 1194.¹⁶²² Al-Mahdawī himself wrote a Qur’ān commentary that would be later transmitted to Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d.1274)’s library. In Barraġān’s interpretive lineage, the *Blessed Prayer* [*al-Ṣalāh al-Mubārakah*] attributed to al-Mahdawī associates the “throne” of God with the Muḥammadan Reality where all divine names emanate.¹⁶²³ Al-Mahdawī was a student of Abū Madyan, yet he actually connected Ibn al-‘Arabī to Ibn Barraġān’s interpretive tradition instead of the *bilā kayfa* position of al-Qushayrī and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī.

If there ever was a *bilā kayfa* apophaticism in the first self-consciously “Sufi” generation of Abū Madyan, it did not find wide resonance in the next generation. Among others, Abū Madyan was the spiritual master of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shādhilī (d.1258), through his direct disciples Ibn Mashīsh (d.1228) and Ibn Ḥarāzim (d.1235). Strictly limiting himself to the transcendent discourse, al-Shādhilī saw any of his inclination to a discursive formation except the Qur’ān and the prophetic reports as vain passions.¹⁶²⁴ Yet unlike the other two eponyms ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d.1166) and Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī (d.1182) with whom Abū Madyan would be associated after his death, al-Shādhilī did not adopt a *bilā kayfa* approach to the anthropomorphic depictions of God. Instead, he situated them in a cosmology where they lose their corporeal implications, but attain a rather

¹⁶²² See Elmore 2001, p.611.

¹⁶²³

O God! Bless the throne of the seating of thy names [*‘arsh istiawā’ asmā’i-ka*] with respect to the comprehension of the unity of Thy Divinity [*aḥadiyat ulūhiyati-ka*], thine all-inclusive mercy and thy perfect benediction. ... Bless the one [i.e., the Prophet] who is assimilated to thine attributes [*al-mutakhalliḡ bi-ṣifāti-ka*], immersed in the immediate vision of thine essence. ... We, indeed, are too weak as regards the comprehension of our intellects, the limit of our insights and the precedents of our spiritual energies to bless him for himself—how could we do that when thou hast made thy Speech to be his very nature and thy names his place of manifestation [*mazharuhu*]? (al-Mahdawī in Elmore 2001, pp.607-608. Also see Elmore 2001, p.610.)

¹⁶²⁴ Ibn al-Sabbāgh 1993, pp.148-149.

visionary dimension.¹⁶²⁵ Accordingly, God created the prophetic soul, and gave him His “command” so that the prophetic intellect became manifest in His “throne” under the light of the command. Then His “spirit” became manifest through the prophetic intellect, and through His “spirit” His “footstool” became manifest under the light of the throne. This complex system of emanations descends to the lower, bodily world of veils. The wayfarer should ascend in this system by purifying her soul.¹⁶²⁶ Hence, “throne,” or “footstool” signify both cosmological realities and the highest spiritual levels that the wayfarer can attain for the early Shādhilī Sufis. Al-Shādhilī himself reports in various places that he transcended the “veil of throne,”¹⁶²⁷ saw his Sufi master under the throne,¹⁶²⁸ or traveled there with the grandson of the Prophet, al-Ḥusayn (d.680):

My ancestor, al-Ḥusayn, took me and put his finger in my navel and turned me around over his head until the heavens, the earth, the throne, and the footstool became before me like the country round about.¹⁶²⁹

Within a non-anthropomorphist, interpretive context reminiscent of Ibn Barrajān, the “throne” is named as the highest heavenly realm in al-Shādhilī’s cosmology.¹⁶³⁰ It had no physical implications for the nature of God. Al-Shādhilī’s disciple and successor Abū al-‘Abbās al-Mursī (d.1287) and his pupils followed this visionary interpretive perspective. Al-Mursī used to veil his eyes during his own discourses lest he be consumed by the illuminations of the divine throne that he saw.¹⁶³¹ Reportedly, he claimed that he knew the throne “as he knew the palm of his hand.”¹⁶³² His successor, Ibn ‘Aṭā’ al-Iskandarī (d.1309) depicts God’s hand¹⁶³³ or throne as non-physical metaphors for deeper metaphysical realities. “Throne,” as the highest cosmological level associated with the prophetic soul, is where the excessive mercy of God emanates. He is “settled on the throne

¹⁶²⁵ He also intensively mentioned the verses that address the divine throne or footstool in devotional contexts. See e.g. Q.2:255, Q.9:129, Q.20:5, in Ibn al-Sabbāgh 1993, p.111, 78, 66. For the “throne of honor,” see *ibid.*, p.73.

¹⁶²⁶ Ibn al-Sabbāgh 1993, p.190-191.

¹⁶²⁷ Ibn al-Sabbāgh 1993, p.78.

¹⁶²⁸ Ibn al-Sabbāgh 1993, p.149.

¹⁶²⁹ Ibn al-Sabbāgh 1993, p.157; with my slight modification.

¹⁶³⁰ Ibn al-Sabbāgh 1993, p.184.

¹⁶³¹ Ibn al-Sabbāgh 1993, p.158.

¹⁶³² Ibn al-Sabbāgh 1993, p.215.

¹⁶³³ Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī 199?, #236, p.40 (Arabic text), p.36 (English translation).

through His mercifulness, such that the throne disappeared into His mercifulness, as the universe disappeared into His throne.”¹⁶³⁴ As this is a cosmological level that marks the prophetic intellect, Abū al-‘Abbās al-Tanjī (fl.bef.14th CE) makes the same point on the divine excess with reference to the Prophet: “behold, heaven and earth, God’s throne and God’s footstool, are filled with the Apostle of God!”¹⁶³⁵

In brief, Shādhilism since its very emergence followed an interpretive approach to the divine nature, instead of the normative Sunnī Sufi creed promulgated in the works of al-Ghazālī and the *Epistle* of al-Qushayrī. While Sufis intensively cited al-Ghazālī as the great Sufi authority, they preferred to follow interpretive theologies. Ibn ‘Aṭā’, for example, intensively cites al-Ghazālī as the great “imām” in his manual on invocation, *Key To Salvation [Miftāḥ al-Falāḥ]*, yet he carefully sorts out the *bilā kayfa* dimensions of it. It is rather the *Book of Guidance [Kitāb al-Irshād]* of Ghazālī’s teacher, al-Juwaynī that makes an unmistakable imprint on Ibn ‘Aṭā’s works, including his mystical aphorisms.¹⁶³⁶ Among Shādhilī Sufis, al-Juwaynī’s theological interpretivism was much more powerful than the *bilā kayfa* Sufism of his celebrated student Abū Ḥāmid.

The Shādhilī interpretivism in North Africa mirrored al-Andalus. The *bilā kayfa* apophatic position evidenced in the later Sufi “creed” attributed to Abū Madyan did not find any inheritors among Sufis of al-Andalus in the thirteenth century, and even in his own times. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s generation and his students adopted similarly interpretive, mostly paradoxical or philosophical approaches to the divine essence. The inapplicability of modalities to the divine nature among Andalusian Sufis in the thirteenth century operates mainly within an interpretive framework instead of *bilā kayfa*. Ibn Sab‘īn (d.1269) provides an excellent demonstration of the philosophical rigor in anti-anthropomorphic interpretive positions that Sufis adopted. The third issue that Ibn Sab‘īn addresses in his *Sijillian Questions* is the definition of *Categories [Maqūlāt]*. After introducing the four possible causalities in Aristotle’s works, Ibn Sab‘īn discusses the nine “questions” [*maṭlab*], such as “what,” “which,” “how,” “why,” “how many,” “where,” “when” that can be asked on any object. As God does not have a cause [*illah*], “none of the nine principle questions, except ‘is?’ [*hal?*], can be asked

¹⁶³⁴ Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī 2006, p.102; Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Iskandarī in Jackson 2012, #343, p.146.

¹⁶³⁵ Meier 1999, p.537.

¹⁶³⁶ T. Mayer 2008, p.272.

about God.”¹⁶³⁷ In other words, Ibn Sabʿīn employs logic, instead of the transcendent discourse to cancel human discourse on the divine nature. He also interprets God’s “eye” [*ʿayn*] and “hand” as His apprehension and power respectively. In his extensive discussion of anthropomorphism, he does not even bother himself with interpreting the non-Qurʿānic attributions that have corporeal implications; he rather refuses them outright as unacceptable and inapplicable. In his interpretive, philosophical approach to the divine essence, the transcendent discourse does not have any less authority than it has in non-cognitive approaches.¹⁶³⁸

E. Summary

In the formative period of Islamic thought, the term “*bilā kayfa*” marks two closely related, yet very different anti-interpretive positions on the nature of the divine essence. First, it indicates the literal acceptance of transcendent anthropomorphism without adding an interpretation. Such anthropomorphism in the ancient near eastern tradition was popular among Sunnī traditionists well into the twelfth century, as Ibn al-Jawzī’s refutations testify. Second, “*bilā kayfa*” names the non-cognitive, apophatic theological position wherein neither God, nor the meaning of His transcendent discourse is accessible. Human discourses cancel themselves in favor of the incomprehensible transcendent discourse on the unknowable ipseity. As al-Māturīdī puts it, “the principle here is this: to say as much as it is revealed; to negate all of the meanings that are about creation; and no interpretation [*tafsīr*]—as nothing is revealed.”¹⁶³⁹

Instead of such anti-interpretive paths, early Sufis of Baghdād and Baṣra adopted primarily interpretive approaches to the anthropomorphic depictions of God in the sacred sources. Only with Ḥanbalī Sufism and Ibn Khafīf, the student of al-Ashʿarī, did anti-interpretivism towards the divine essence appear among Sufis. Yet it would have a sustained career among the Sufi manuals, and under their clear influence, in the founding generation of the Suhrawardiyyah, Rifāʿiyyah, and Qādiriyyah. The Sufi manuals met an important task by presenting Sufism as a *bilā kayfa* apophatic institution in a dominantly anti-interpretive scholarly and political context. With these manuals, “Sufism” emerged as a broad, formalized piety that not only projects its conception of Sunnī mysticism and the *bilā kayfa* apophatic theology onto the previous generations, but also selectively claims a

¹⁶³⁷ Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, p.60.

¹⁶³⁸ Ibn Sabʿīn 1941, pp.85-88.

¹⁶³⁹ al-Māturīdī 2003, pp.145-146.

large variety of local movements and groups. This canonized Sufism provided the bedrock for the establishment of the Sufi orders. The *bilā kayfa*, non-cognitive, anti-interpretive theology played an integral role in the rise of these first and foremost practice-oriented institutions of piety that were organized around the charismatic masters. In the West, on the other hand, the interpretivism of the Andalusian mystical movements and the Almohadī rational Ash‘arism prevailed over the anti-interpretivism of the prominent Sufi works of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and al-Qushayrī. It was against this interpretive background that the Shādhilī order emerged.

With a couple exceptions, Sufism in Persian language did not undergo the *bilā kayfa* interruption in the formalization, and later, institutional period that we observe in Arabic. Among the early Sufi manuals, that of Hujvīrī was an exception not only in being written in Persian, but also in criticizing the *bilā kayfa* positions on the divine nature. Persian Sufis of diverse backgrounds and loose affiliations with the rising orders followed the general rule of interpretivism. Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn (d.1244), Rūmī (d.1273)’s early master interprets God’s “fingers” as His agency¹⁶⁴⁰ and His “hand” as His power.¹⁶⁴¹ The latter interpretation is similar to early Sufi approaches that we find in Tustarī, or in al-Sulamī’s compilation of Sufi exegesis on the Qur’ān.¹⁶⁴² Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (fl.ca.1263) follows a rationalist Ash‘arite approach to the categorization of the divine attributes, which he supplies with the paradox of the veil. Accordingly, on par with Ibn al-‘Arabī, Naṣīr al-Dīn argues that the true knowledge of God’s essence cannot be accessed by creation. We can only “witness that Essence in respect of its manifestation within the loci of manifestation.”¹⁶⁴³ God’s throne and footstool are, again in line with Ibn al-‘Arabī, cosmological levels with visionary mystical significance, instead of corporeal relations to God. In other words, they signify the divine dominion [*mulk*].¹⁶⁴⁴ Insofar as the exploration of this cosmos is paralleled with the inward quest, such cosmological descriptions have non-

¹⁶⁴⁰ Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn 1973, p.62.

¹⁶⁴¹ Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn 1973, Q.48:10, p.122.

¹⁶⁴² Burhān al-Dīn also appears skeptical on the vision of God, arguing that only God witnessed God. Cf. Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn 1973, p.67.

¹⁶⁴³ Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī in Chittick 1992, p.61.

¹⁶⁴⁴ “The world of bodies is of two types: the heavenly things and the earthly things. The heavenly things include the throne, the footstool, the seven heavens, the fixed stars, and the planets.” (Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī in Chittick 1992, p.80.)

corporeal, visionary significance.¹⁶⁴⁵ Naṣīr al-Dīn's non-corporeal interpretation jointly responds to divine "nearness," and the "throne," pulling the reader towards paradoxical apophaticism:

*He is nearer to the servants than the jugular vein [Q.5:16], and further from them than any distance that comes to mind. His relationship of nearness to the majestic Throne is the same as His relationship with the bottom of the earth. He is hidden because of extreme evidence, and evident because of extreme hiddenness. ... Whatever may pass into the fancies, imaginations, and minds of human beings—He is not that, and He is not like that.*¹⁶⁴⁶

The *Discourses* of Rūmī's enigmatic master Shams al-Tabrīzī (d.1248) is also deeply interpretive. Each of his *Discourses*, very much like Dāya Rāzī's *Path of God's Bondsmen*, begins with a Qur'ānic verse. His discussions on the anthropomorphic depictions of God are critical to the *bilā kayfa* anti-interpretivism that he associates with al-Ash'arī.¹⁶⁴⁷ "Throne" and "footstool" mark the highest cosmological levels, but he also adds to them a personal, visionary dimension by attaching them to the heart.¹⁶⁴⁸

While Shams' rich, interpretive response to anthropomorphism is evident, theological discourse is an integral dimension of a primarily practice-oriented institution that regulates spiritual wayfaring and human conduct [*adab*] at large.¹⁶⁴⁹ No matter whether Sufis followed the *bilā kayfa* apophatic creeds or rather interpretive positions, discourses on the divine ipseity were firmly related to larger visionary cosmologies, and the normative practices that regulated wayfaring and human conduct.

¹⁶⁴⁵ Cf. Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī in Chittick 1992, Q.20:5, p.73.

¹⁶⁴⁶ Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī in Chittick 1992, p.121.

¹⁶⁴⁷ Shams Tabrīzī 2004, #225, pp.157-158.

¹⁶⁴⁸ Shams Tabrīzī 2004, #100, p.90; #104, p.92; #194, p.136; #195, p.136; #198, p.137; #199, p.138; #225-229, pp.157-160.

¹⁶⁴⁹ For the wonderful anecdote on the man, who is bewildered between the interpretation-oriented and the *bilā kayfa*-minded preachers, and his wife, see Shams Tabrīzī 2004, #42, pp.60-62.

PART 4. REGULATING NEGATIVITY: THE CASE OF APOPHATIC APOTHEOSIS

CHAPTER 8. THIRTY BIRDS UNITED IN THE MIRROR SUN: APOPHATIC APOTHEOSIS AND DIVINE UNION IN THE MAKING OF THE MAWLAWIYYAH

*The Absolute has no face; only the person has a face permitting the “face to face” encounter, and it is in this “face to face” that the pact of chivalric solidarity is made.*¹⁶⁵⁰

This chapter introduces the apophatic dimensions of divine union from the perspective of Rūmī (d.1273), with a focus on the larger institutional and normative context that governs it. As I highlighted in the introduction, apophaticism has been generally theorized in the study of religion within the field of divine union as the ineffable individual experience of the holy that overwhelms the mystic. A close analysis of how Rūmī and his circle perceived divine union, however, puts these depictions of medieval Sufis into question. The antagonists of Sufis, the Sufis themselves since the late medieval period, and the orientalist of the last two centuries put Rūmī’s approach to divine union within the line of Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240). Instead, with reference to the relatively neglected but key Sufi terms “discursive companionship” [*ṣuḥbah*] and Sufi “etiquette” [*adab*], I will situate Rūmī within the normative context of Khurāsānian Sufism wherein divine union was perceived as a discursive and communal process whereby the excessive existentiating mercy overflows to, and reflects from, the embodied companions. The depiction of Rūmī’s divine union as an individual quest towards an apophatic experience with an objectified God is a remnant of the wider stereotypical and consistent depiction of Sufis as introverted individual mystics instead of urbane pietists situated within well-organized social networks and regulating moral principles. The apophatic dimensions of Rūmī’s approach to divine union become visible in their normative Sufi context wherein human soul is perfected concurrently with a multi-lateral, embodied, discursive communion of companions.

A. Divine Union in Thirteenth Century Sufism

Debates on divine oneness [*waḥdah*] and unity [*tawḥīd*] gathered momentum at the end of the thirteenth century, thanks to the Andalusian Sufis, particularly to Ibn al-‘Arabī and his circle. While his immediate followers’ and companions’ writings were sympathetic to, if not laudatory of, his ideas, the earliest critiques were less acquainted with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s works than they were stereotypical. None of the earliest biographical dictionaries or accounts of Ibn al-‘Arabī openly

¹⁶⁵⁰ Corbin 1977, p.24.

condemned his ideas. Neither Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī (d.1256)’s praises nor the antipathy of Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām (d.1262) and al-Qaṣṭallānī (d.1287) (both of whom were Sufi initiates in the Suhrawardī line) were conversant with his corpus.¹⁶⁵¹ By the end of the century, when Ibn Taymīyyah (d.1328) penned his harsh polemics against a group of “monist Sufis” based on his direct encounter with works like Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Bezels of Wisdom* [*Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*], a sweeping polemical literature of a self-proclaimed traditionalism [*ahl al-sunnah*] against “oneness of being” [*waḥdat al-wujūd*] had already emerged.

While the target names were primarily Sufis of Andalusian background such as al-Shushtarī (d.1269), al-Tilimsānī (d.1291) and Ibn Sab‘īn (d.1269) along with Ibn al-‘Arabī, eastern Sufis connected to Ibn al-‘Arabī such as Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī (d.1238), Balyānī (d.1288) and Sa’d al-Dīn al-Farghānī (d.ca.1300) could not escape the accusations of monism.¹⁶⁵² The association with “oneness of being” [*waḥdat al-wujūd*] would soon extend to Sufis and mystics of various groups including Rūmī (d.1273)’s circle, and Rūmī himself by the fifteenth century. Indeed, it was Rūmī’s close associate from Konya, Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d.1274), the son-in-law and the foremost disciple of Ibn al-‘Arabī, who employed the phrase the “oneness of being” likely for the first time, though not as a technical term.¹⁶⁵³ The two scholars in Konya had a curious spiritual rivalry but kept at a respectful distance when they were alive. More curiously, Rūmī’s great master and companion Shams Tabrīzī (d.1248) might have met and indeed many times convened with Ibn al-‘Arabī himself.¹⁶⁵⁴ Shams’ discourses mention a kind, gentle shaykh named “Muḥammad Ibn al-‘Arabī,” who became one of Shams’ associates in Damascus, a few years before Shams came to Konya and met Rūmī in 1244.¹⁶⁵⁵ Well-known Akbarī Sufis, such as al-Farghānī and Mu‘ayyad al-Dīn al-

¹⁶⁵¹ Knysh 1999, especially Ch.2-4, pp.25-112.

¹⁶⁵² It is rather more likely that Ibn al-‘Arabī and Ibn Sab‘īn developed their approaches towards the “oneness of being” independently. See Cornell 2007, p.34.

¹⁶⁵³ Ibn al-‘Arabī did not use the phrase, even if he comes close to it in various places (see e.g. “one in being” [*wāḥid fī al-wujūd*], in Ibn al-‘Arabī 2007t, p.231). The term “oneness of being” [*waḥdat al-wujūd*], appearing first in Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī’s Neoplatonic *the Key of the Unseen* [*Miftāḥ al-Ghayb*], was made popular dramatically by one of its most ardent opponents, Ibn Taymīyyah. For a succinct summary see Chittick 1994, pp.78-79; “Rūmī as Sufi,” in F. Lewis 2000, pp.21-26. In *the Reflection of the Awakened* [*Mi’rāt al-‘Ārifīn*] Qūnawī employs a similar the term: “the one Being [*al-wujūd al-wāḥid*] manifests itself, which is the universe.” (Qūnawī 1387/2008, p.37.) For his appeal to *al-wujūd al-wāḥid*, see al-Qūnawī 2003, p.81.

¹⁶⁵⁴ For an analysis, see Chittick’s “Introduction” in Shams Tabrīzī 2004, pp.xviii-xix.

¹⁶⁵⁵ See e.g. Shams Tabrīzī 2004, 1.43-53, pp.28-33.

Jandī (d.1291) who were the direct disciples of Qūnawī and came to Konya with a group of Sufis also met Rūmī along with Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mawṣilī (fl.13th c.), Naṣīr al-Dīn Qūnawī (fl.13th c.), Shams al-Dīn Iyķī (fl.13th c.).¹⁶⁵⁶ The famous Sufi Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Irāqī (d.1289), who exchanged letters with al-Qūnawī, also arrived at the capital and might have met Rūmī there.¹⁶⁵⁷ ‘Irāqī stayed in Konya, became a disciple of Qūnawī, and finished his *Divine Flashes* [*Lama’āt*] before the latter’s death in 1274. ‘Irāqī was deeply influenced by the lectures of Qūnawī in Konya,¹⁶⁵⁸ and his *Divine Flashes* was an “abridged paraphrase in Persian of the *Fuṣūṣ* [that] carried Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teaching as far as eastern Iran.”¹⁶⁵⁹ Aflākī reports how ‘Irāqī praised Rūmī and was impressed by him, while the silence of both Rūmī and ‘Irāqī on each other might indicate rather a rivalry of spiritual authority between the two.¹⁶⁶⁰ Eventually, it was Mu’in al-Dīn Parvāna (d.1277), the vizier of Saljūqī ruler ‘Ala’ al-Dīn Kayqubād (r.1249-1257) and a keen client of Rūmī, who built for ‘Irāqī a Sufi convent [*khānaqāh*] in Tokat, another city in central Anatolia.¹⁶⁶¹ Finally, Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī (d.1238), whose ideas, beliefs and ecstatic outbursts [*shaṭahāt*] were not as problematized as his association with young men [*shubbān*] as a vehicle of spiritual perfection,¹⁶⁶² met both Ibn al-‘Arabī and Shams. Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Meccan Openings* [*al-Futūḥāt al-Makkīyyah*] mentions his meeting with Kirmānī in Cairo, indicating his influence on Kirmānī who settled in Elazig, again, in central Anatolia. Ibn al-‘Arabī decided to send his

¹⁶⁵⁶ Aflākī 2002, #294, p.249; Aflākī 2001 Vol.1, #292, p.573.

¹⁶⁵⁷ “Iraqi was at once a metaphysician of the Ibn al-‘Arabīan school of Sufism and an artist of the Persian school of Sufism that was to culminate with Rūmī.” (Chittick in ‘Irāqī 1982, p.x.)

¹⁶⁵⁸ “Almost everything he [‘Irāqī] says about Love—not to speak of Love qua Being—is derived from the teachings of his master, Qūnawī.” (Chittick in ‘Irāqī 1982, p.6.)

¹⁶⁵⁹ Ates 2012. Also see Safi 1999, p.64-65. In his letter to al-Qūnawī, ‘Irāqī writes that he received indications [*ishārāt*] from Ibn al-‘Arabī, which made him spread his teachings in Syria and Hijaz. “Because of the indications of the Shaykh (Ibn al-‘Arabī)—may God be well pleased with him—I left Rum and came to the sanctuaries of Damascus and Jerusalem. From there I went on to the tomb of the Prophet in the Hijaz. Here I am awaiting further indications.” (‘Irāqī 1982, p.49.)

¹⁶⁶⁰ Lewis 2000, p.124. Chittick accepted Aflākī’s report uncritically (Chittick in ‘Irāqī 1982, p.43.)

¹⁶⁶¹ Aflākī 2002, #332; Aflākī 2001, Vol.1, #330, p.619.

Rūmī’s *Discourses* display that Parvāna was present in most of Rūmī’s recorded assemblies of companions [*ṣuḥbah*], while they exchanged many letters some of which were related to daily life and the needs of disciples, some of which contained Rūmī’s advices to the vizier. See e.g. Rūmī 1963, letters #2, 15, 16, 19(?), 26, 30, 31, 37, 42, 51, 63, 68, 72, 78, 82, 84(?), 85, 86, 89(?), 90(?), 91(?), 96, 99, 101, 106(?), 114, 115(?), 116, 137.

¹⁶⁶² See e.g. Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī 1969, #9, pp.40-41; #48, p.193; #49, p.194; #54, p.213, #58, p.227. Also see Karamustafa 1994, p.57.

son-in-law al-Qūnawī to Kirmānī for education; for two years in Shīrāz—both traveling and remaining in one place—he was a companion of Kirmānī.¹⁶⁶³ Qūnawī poetically writes that he drank “from the breasts of two mothers,” meaning Kirmānī with Ibn al-‘Arabī, and in his last will and testament he asked to be buried in the robe of Ibn al-‘Arabī and laid out on the prayer carpet of Kirmānī.¹⁶⁶⁴ Shams’ quite different meeting with Kirmānī might have happened in Damascus, or in Central Anatolia, Kayseri, in 1232.¹⁶⁶⁵ In his *Discourses* [*Ma‘ārif*], Shams expresses his distaste with Kirmānī’s sexually transgressive tendencies, and his incapacity in the way of self-blame [*malāmah*].¹⁶⁶⁶ These issues were repeatedly raised in Aflākī’s reports¹⁶⁶⁷ with additional reports of Rūmī’s critical remarks.¹⁶⁶⁸ Another early hagiographer of Rūmī, Sipahsālār (d.ca.1312) claims that Kirmānī met Rūmī in person probably during the latter’s educational stay in Syria after his father’s death between 1233 and 1237, if such a meeting ever happened.¹⁶⁶⁹

Considering these intertwined networks, it is not surprising to observe that not only the reductive and sometimes distortive lens of their disgruntled antagonists, but later Sufis themselves tended to see the two masters Ibn al-‘Arabī and Rūmī in the same line and on the same side of monism. By 1312, a friendly face-to-face meeting and companionship between the old Ibn al-‘Arabī and young Rūmī in Damascus had already been forged by biographers seeking to demonstrate Ibn al-‘Arabī’s spiritual approval of the young mystic.¹⁶⁷⁰ The very title given to the

¹⁶⁶³ See Chittick 1992, p.261.

¹⁶⁶⁴ “They should wrap me in the clothing [*thiyāb*] of the Shaykh -may God be pleased with him- and also in a white covering; and they should spread in my grave the prayer-rug [*sajjādah*] of Shaykh Awḥad al-Dīn -may God’s mercy be upon him.” (al-Qūnawī in Chittick 1978.)

Also see Chittick in ‘Irāqī 1982, p.43; Safi 1999, pp.65-68; Kilic 2011. Kilic unfortunately assumes that the meeting of Rūmī and Ibn al-‘Arabī narrated in Sipahsālār really happened, which is very unlikely.

¹⁶⁶⁵ The records of a pious endowment seem to prove that Shams stayed in Kayseri, Central Anatolia, in 1232. Kirmānī’s hagiography (wr.ca.1250-1300) narrates a meeting with a certain Kāmil al-Tabrīzī in Kayseri at the Baṭṭal Masjid. Instead of a proper name, “Kāmil,” literally “the perfected one,” might be a designation, and a reference to Shams al-Tabrīzī. (Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī 1969, #47, pp.191-192.)

¹⁶⁶⁶ Shams Tabrīzī 2004, 1.54, 1.55, 2.67, pp.34-35.

¹⁶⁶⁷ Aflākī 2002, #4-5, pp.423-424; Aflākī 2001, Vol.2, #4-5, pp.191-193.

¹⁶⁶⁸ Aflākī 2002, #399-400, pp.302-303, Aflākī 2001, Vol.1, #397-398, pp.191-193.

¹⁶⁶⁹ Sipahsālār 2004, p.34.

¹⁶⁷⁰ Sipahsālār 2004, p.34; Safi 1999, pp.72-73.

discourses of Rūmī as early as 1317, “In it is what is in it” [*Fīhi Mā Fīh*], an enigmatic phrase that appears in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Meccan Openings*, might corroborate such a very early association between the legacies of the two scholars.¹⁶⁷¹ An interesting case of this harmonization project can be witnessed in the epitaph of Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn (d.1244), who was a disciple of Rūmī’s father, Bahā’ al-Dīn Valad (d.1231), and a beloved master of Rūmī with an immense influence on his education. The original epitaph of his tomb in Kayseri is now lost, as it underwent a restoration during 1891-1894. We do not know whether the restored epitaph was faithful to the previous one, but it telling in any case on how Rūmī and Ibn al-‘Arabī were closely associated among Ottomans. The epitaph added with this renovation reads as follows:

*Sayyid Muḥaqqiq-i dīn of Tirmidh
He was Burhān al-Dīn [a proof of religion] on the path of certainty
As he was the second, after the Reviver of Religion
So his birth year be “second.”¹⁶⁷²*

While “second” indicates the year 561 AH (1165-1166 CE) in numerology [*abjad*], the phrase “the Reviver of Religion” is nothing but a reference to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s well-known first name “Muḥyī al-Dīn.” Burhān al-Dīn is perceived as the second master after the first master Muḥyī al-Dīn, and it is no doubt Rūmī and his order who will continue this unified Akbarī-Mawlawī Sufi line. The Naqshbandī Sufi Jāmī (d.1492) narrates how the Kubrāwī Sufi master Najm al-Dīn Dāya Rāzī (d.1256) came to Konya and met the two younger Sufis Rūmī and al-Qūnawī. Accordingly, Rūmī and al-Qūnawī invited the elderly shaykh to lead the evening [*maghrib*] prayer. Dāya Rāzī recited the same chapter, “al-Kāfirūn” [the Disbelievers] in both units of the prayer, which was unusual.¹⁶⁷³ When the prayer

¹⁶⁷¹ While the manuscript dated 1317 does have the title *Fīhi Mā Fīh* on its cover, another dated 1350 simply calls the work “The Glorious Secrets” [*al-Asrār al-Jalāliyyah*] indicating that there was no consensus among early Mawlawīs on the title. (Safi 1999, pp.69-71)

¹⁶⁷²

Sayyid-i Tirmizī Muḥaqqiq-i dīn
Hast Burhān-i Dīn ba rāh-i yaqīn
Chūn ka thānīst ū ba Muḥyī al-Dīn
Sāl-i mavlūd-i ū ba “Thānī” bīn. (Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn 1973, p.16; also see Ceylan 2009.)

For the visual material and more architectural information on Burhān al-Dīn’s tomb in Kayseri, see R. Aydin 2011.

¹⁶⁷³ The influential Sufi master Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d.996) had prescribed the recitation of *al-Kāfirūn* three times in each unit of a supererogatory prayer on Saturday clearly as a ritual

was finished, Rūmī turned to Qūnawī, and whispered in jest [*‘alā wajh al-mizāḥ*]: “one of those were to you, the other to me!”¹⁶⁷⁴ Historically Jāmī’s anecdote is untenable, as Dāya arrived at Konya in the early 1220s returning to Baghdād in 1225, while Rūmī settled in Konya in around 1228 and al-Qūnawī even later, after 1240 when Ibn al-‘Arabī died.¹⁶⁷⁵ However, the story reflects how al-Qūnawī and Rūmī were seen as the two great master companions of the same form of Sufi thought by a later champion of the same heritage. The same Jāmī would initiate a dual-commentary tradition on the *Fuṣūṣ* and *Maṣnavī*, which is still very much alive. Especially Ottoman Sufism entailed the harmonization of the two masters as a major project.¹⁶⁷⁶ Indeed, a visionary book on the establishment of the Ottoman Empire was ascribed to Ibn al-‘Arabī, along with a commentary attributed to al-Qūnawī. Accordingly, Shaykh Adab ‘Ālī (d.1326), the Anatolian Vafā’ī Sufi master and the spiritual father of the Ottoman Dynasty (r.1298-1920), met Ibn al-‘Arabī and became his follower in Damascus.¹⁶⁷⁷ Ismā’īl Rusūkhī Anqarawī (d.1631), Abd Allāh Busnawī (d.1644) and Ismā’īl Ḥaqqī Bursawī (d.1715) were the most well-known figures in the dual-commentary tradition that extends from Molla Fanārī (d.1431),¹⁶⁷⁸ Ibrāhīm Gulshenī (d.1534) and ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī (d.1731) to Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi (d.1913), Mustafa Fevzi (d.1924), Avni Konuk (d.1938), and Sefik Can (d.2005). Sufi or non-Sufi, intellectuals of diverse backgrounds in the Ottoman lineage have arguably drunk “from the breasts of two mothers,” this time Ibn al-‘Arabī and Rūmī, to revisit al-Qūnawī’s metaphor.¹⁶⁷⁹

While the polemics on divine union after the thirteenth century revolved around Ibn al-‘Arabī’s legacy and the phrase “oneness of being,” we should recall that

response to the Jewish Shabbath. Thus the repetitive emphasis on the chapter would bear a clear message of distaste. See al-Makkī 2001, Vol.1, p.83.

¹⁶⁷⁴ “Najm al-Dīn al-Rāzī al-Ma’rūf bi-al-Dāya,” in Jāmī 2003, Vol 2, #474, p.593.

For a brief introduction to the relationship between Rūmī and Qūnawī, see Safi 1999, pp.61-63.

¹⁶⁷⁵ Chittick narrates the anecdote without giving the name of Dāya Rāzī. Here again Chittick presumes the historical authenticity of the story. Chittick in al-‘Irāqī 1982, p.44.

¹⁶⁷⁶ See Chodkiewicz 2005.

¹⁶⁷⁷ See Kilic 2011.

¹⁶⁷⁸ Fanārī wrote a commentary on the introduction part [*dibāja*] of *Maṣnavī*, a commentary to al-Qūnawī’s *Miṣbāḥ*, and a commentary titled “*Taḥqīq al-Ḥaqqā’iq al-Ashyā’*” on a poem of Ibn al-‘Arabī in the *Futūḥāt*. (See I. Aydın and Gorgun 2009.) Even if he is known as a *Fuṣūṣī*, he did not write a commentary on Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*.

¹⁶⁷⁹ See Ceylan 2013.

the phrase in various forms had diverse careers that not only developed independently from the Akbari school, but also preceded Ibn al-‘Arabī, and in many ways, encompassed his interpretation. Chittick cites eastern Sufis ranging from Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī (d.815) to Abū al-‘Abbās Qaṣṣāb (fl.10th century), Abdullāh al-Anṣārī (d.1089), Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111) and Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d.1126) indicating that looking at Rūmī’s masters, textual and instructional authorities and at his intellectual world in general would be more meaningful than seeking an influence of Ibn al-‘Arabī on Rūmī’s approach to divine union.¹⁶⁸⁰ “The *Maṣnavī*’s paraphrase of passages or stories from Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s ‘*Revivification*’ [*Iḥyā al-‘Ulūm al-Dīn*] testifies to Rūmī’s familiarity with this work,” which indeed follows an Avicennian (d.1037) path of “oneness of being.”¹⁶⁸¹ Accordingly, there is no Being [*wujūd*] except God, where the being that we perceive as creation is that which emanates from God every moment and permeates creation. Abū Ḥāmid repeats the idea in his other popular works, such as the *Maqṣad al-Asnā*,¹⁶⁸² and the *Niche of Lights* [*Mishkāt al-Anwār*]. He claims that “there is nothing in *wujūd* except God,” and the term “being” applies to creation only metaphorically [*musta‘ār*].¹⁶⁸³ “This is a mysterious way of saying that created data have no ontological status of their own at any time, and therefore, that insofar as we speak of existence at all, it is a theophany.”¹⁶⁸⁴ Nothing exists save God.¹⁶⁸⁵ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d.1234), a very conservative Sufi in theological matters, echoes al-Ghazālī.¹⁶⁸⁶

Another direct influence on Rūmī’s conception of divine unity is Sanā‘ī (d.1131) and Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār (d.ca.1230), who are among the most cited names in Rūmī’s corpus. “All is but He” [*hamā ūst*] cries ‘Aṭṭār,¹⁶⁸⁷ following another great

¹⁶⁸⁰ Chittick 1994. F. Lewis (2000) follows this view.

¹⁶⁸¹ Lewis 2000, p.23. Cf. Abrahamov 2014, p.121.

Rūmī seems to have taken some *ḥadīth* reports from the *Iḥyā’*. See Furūzān-far’s endnote in Rūmī 1969, p.265 to the *ḥadīth* on p.15.

For the Bāyramī master Aksemseddin (d.1459)’s wider “*wujūdī*” defense, see Winter 2007, p.141. Later, like Aksemseddin, al-Suyūṭī (d.1505) cites Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, arguing that “there is no Being but God” [*laysa fī al-wujūd illā Allāh*]. See al-Suyūṭī (1934), p.78.

¹⁶⁸² Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in Abrahamov 2014, p.122.

¹⁶⁸³ “*Laysa fī al-wujūd illā Allāh.*” (al-Ghazālī 1986, p.127.)

¹⁶⁸⁴ Mayer 2008, p.274.

¹⁶⁸⁵ Hardy 2008, p.307.

¹⁶⁸⁶ “*Laysa fī al-dārayn ghayr Allāh.*” (‘Umar al-Suhrawardī 1939, p.55)

¹⁶⁸⁷ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #60-65.

master, Ibn Abī al-Khayr (d.1049).¹⁶⁸⁸ In connection to this prominent tradition, Aflākī narrates for us the conversation on composing the *Maṣnavī* between Rūmī and Ḥusām al-Dīn Chalabī (d.1284), who was Rūmī’s close companion and his first successor in the emerging Mawlawī order. Ḥusām al-Dīn asked Rūmī to compose “a book in the style of the Sage Sanā’ī’s *Book of God [Ilāhināma]*”¹⁶⁸⁹ and in the meter of ‘Aṭṭār’s *Conference of the Birds [Maṭīq al-Ṭayr]*,” both of which were already widely read by the companions “with complete desire and great love.”¹⁶⁹⁰ A Persian *mathnawi* of nearly 5.000 verses written in 1187, ‘Aṭṭār’s *Conference* is an allegorical narrative on the birds around the world gathering and deciding to travel to the lord, king, beloved, and sustainer of all birds, the Phoenix [*Sīmurgh*]. The joint journey of the aspirant birds to their lord is thus a metaphor for the spiritual journey of the seeker to the divine beloved. The birds’ journey to the beloved is of course grueling, demanding the emptying of the concupiscent soul [*khūdī*] of all desires and ambitions other than the beloved. Many birds give up, while many others die on their journey. Death on the way to the beloved is in a sense communion with the beloved, because the journey itself demands full annihilation [*fanā’*] of the ego for the sake of the beloved. Eventually, only thirty birds are able to cross “the seven impassable valleys” of the spirit and the stations of the soul. They are welcomed rather by an emptiness: they cannot see the *Sīmurgh* anywhere. However, once the sun of proximity [*āftāb-a qurbat*] rises from within themselves and the face of the *Sīmurgh* manifests itself on the rays: the manifestation of *Sīmurgh* is nothing but *thirty birds [sī murgh]*. “They saw themselves as *Sī-murgh*; indeed, you are *Sīmurgh*.”¹⁶⁹¹

Notwithstanding their nuanced differences, Rūmī and Ibn al-‘Arabī were consistently seen in the same boat of pantheistic monism from orientalist perspectives until recently. Von Hammer’s article (pb.1816)¹⁶⁹² and book (pb.1818)¹⁶⁹³ on Persian belles-lettres [die schönen redekünste] are the earliest European sources that describe Rūmī as a pantheist along with Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār

¹⁶⁸⁸ Ibn al-Munavvar 1313/1934, p.241.

¹⁶⁸⁹ “*Ilāhināma*” is a reference to Sanā’ī (d.1131)’s influential work, the *Garden of Truth [Ḥadīqat al-Ḥaqīqah]*. Not to be confused with ‘Aṭṭār’s *Ilāhināma*. See O’Kane in Aflākī 2002, note#3, p.741.

¹⁶⁹⁰ Aflākī 2002, #3, p.516; Aflākī 2001, Vol.2, #3, p.326.

¹⁶⁹¹ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #4550-4555.

¹⁶⁹² Von Hammer 1816, p.306.

¹⁶⁹³ Von Hammer 1818, pp.346-347.

(d.ca.1230).¹⁶⁹⁴ Soon an immense literature on Persian mystical pantheism depicting Rūmī as its paragon emerged with Goethe's *Divan* (pb.1819) and Tholuck's works (pb.1821) and (pb.1825), which describe Rūmī's and 'Aṭṭār's monism as an intoxicated "sense-pantheism" [*Gefühlspantheismus*]¹⁶⁹⁵ with a dressing of pantheistic fatalism.¹⁶⁹⁶ While his *Conference of the Birds* was described as exemplary of bold pantheism,¹⁶⁹⁷ 'Aṭṭār was the pantheist poet precursor to Rūmī, who had become "the greatest pantheistic poet of all times" [der grösste pantheistische Dichter aller Zeiten] at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁶⁹⁸ Weiser, the translator of 'Umar al-Suhrawardī's Sufi manual *Gifts of Gnosis* [*Awārif al-Ma'ārif*] (pb.1891) describes Sufism as "a monomania in which man blasphemously attempts to fathom the depths of the essence of God. This disease attacks every nation after it has passed the meridian of its grandeur."¹⁶⁹⁹ As the indigenous morbid development of an already eclipsed Islam, Sufism brings about world class poetry, and Rūmī is the best poet of the pantheistic heresy, which is "so native to the east."¹⁷⁰⁰ Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, Weiser observes that "many consider pantheism and Sufi,ism [sic.] to be identical,"¹⁷⁰¹ and quotes a couplet from Rūmī's *Maṣnavī* as an example. Lawrence Mills describes Rūmī's thought as "post-prandial pantheism" in his sermonette in 1899,¹⁷⁰² while Hastie, the translator of selections from Rūmī's *Dīvān* (pb.1903), vocally protests the reduction of Rūmī's subtle "monism" into pantheism: "no, Jelal is not to be tabooed, off-hand, and labelled merely as a Pantheist!"¹⁷⁰³

While all of these discussions of the last century on monism and pantheism seem distant from the current nuanced scholarship on Rūmī, they have a clear continuity with our contemporary understanding of the divine union in Rūmī's

¹⁶⁹⁴ F. Lewis initiates the Western literature connecting pantheism and Rūmī with Tholuck and omits von Hammer's works. See F. Lewis 2005, p.506.

¹⁶⁹⁵ Tholuck 1821; Tholuck 1825, p.256.

¹⁶⁹⁶ See Hodge and Smith 1839, p.90.

¹⁶⁹⁷ Kuhn 1878, p.780.

¹⁶⁹⁸ Ethe 1896-1904, p.287.

¹⁶⁹⁹ Weiser 1891, p.2.

¹⁷⁰⁰ E. Cowell 1899, p.127. Also see Zwemer 1905, p.61; Hughes 1885, p.609, 620; Goldziher 1981 (first published in 1910), pp.135-136.

¹⁷⁰¹ Weiser 1891, p.3.

¹⁷⁰² Mills 1899, p.138.

¹⁷⁰³ Hastie 1903, p.xxiii.

thought. The scholarship on Sufism has persistently framed the concept of unity within the debate over the relationship between God’s absolute oneness and its ontological accessibility to human beings.¹⁷⁰⁴ ‘Aṭṭār’s depictions in the last two hundred years have evolved from a master of Persian pantheistic poetry [Pantheistischen Dichtkunst] only surpassed by another Persian pantheist, Rūmī,¹⁷⁰⁵ but his *Conference of the Birds* is still cited as the best example of pantheism or crude monism in medieval Islam.¹⁷⁰⁶ Current scholarship still tends to read Rūmī’s passion for unification as an effort directed towards God and focusing on the experience of ontological unity in divine oneness, similar to the depiction of his contemporaries, Ibn al-‘Arabī, al-Qūnawī or ‘Irāqī. The recent *Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, for example, displays the inappropriateness of applying the term “pantheism” to Sufi conceptions of the divine union, but envisages no possibility of divine union other than the inwardly, experiential union with an objectified God as defined by William James (d.1910).¹⁷⁰⁷

Not the stereotypical or outdated depictions of Sufis as pantheists or monists,¹⁷⁰⁸ but this perpetually theocentric, or to employ Weiser’s term, “monomaniac” description of divine unity in Sufism is what I want to question with a focus on Rūmī’s entourage. I will argue that even a cursory impartial reading of Rūmī’s corpus will show how misleading it is to depict the divine union in Rūmī as directed towards an objectified God. None of the Arabic and Persian terms used to describe divine union, such as *vaḥdat*, *tavḥīd*, *ittiṣāl*, *ittiḥād*, *jam’*, *yakī shudan*, *imtizāj*, *ikhṭilāt*, *payvastagī*, or *āmikhtan*¹⁷⁰⁹ are employed in Rūmī’s corpus in order to refer to the human desire for ontological unification with God. These terms are used to describe the union (and the desire of union) of a human being

¹⁷⁰⁴ The framing persists even in the contextualist, or, constructivist studies. See e.g. Katz 1978, pp.44-45.

¹⁷⁰⁵ Von Hammer 1816, p.306.

¹⁷⁰⁶ To cite just a few examples, with a focus on the last forty years: see Sharafuddin 1977, p.84; Nazir-Ali 1983, p.90; Nazir-Ali 1987, p.131; González 1992, p.52; Jaén 1992, p.92; Ritter 2005, and O’Kane in Ritter 2005; Starr 2013, pp.441-442.

¹⁷⁰⁷ Ridgeon 2014, pp.125-147.

¹⁷⁰⁸ Such terms are still widely employed with reference to Sufism, e.g. Reilly 2010.

¹⁷⁰⁹ Cf. Discourse #70 where *āmikhtan* is employed as a reference to *ṣuḥbah*. Rūmī 1969, p.257; Rūmī 2000, p.429.

For the convenience of the reader I give the citations of Arberry’s English translations of Rūmī’s *Maṣnavī* and *Discourses* along with the Persian or Turkish editions. However, all the translations that are given throughout this chapter are mine, and they do not fully correspond to Arberry’s translations.

with another human being instead of a human being with God as an object. The desire for *vaḥdat* is fully (and excessively) present in Rūmī's entire corpus, but it is directed not towards God, rather towards other human beings with specific qualities. The voluminous *Dīvān* with more than 5000 poems devoted to "Shams" embodies an excessive desire not for an ontological unity with God, but for an embodied, discursive companionship [*ṣuḥbah*] with the divinized beloved. A touching passage in Rūmī's letter to his close companion, Chalabī Ḥusām al-Dīn succinctly displays the terminology of his excessive desire for divine union with his beloved companion:

Your enlightened conscience [*ẓamīr-a munīr*] knows that the cohesion [*payvastagī*], communion [*ittiṣāl*], fusion [*imtizāj*], unification [*ittiḥād*] and joining [*ikhtilāṭ*] of our spirits is beyond imitation [*taqlīd*] and beyond any argumentation [*istidlāl*]. Their cause-free and quality-free [*bī-chūn va bī-chagūna*] cohesion is beyond all cohesions.¹⁷¹⁰

None of Rūmī's works contain deep philosophical passages or expositions on divine union with God comparable to material from Ibn al-'Arabī's circle or even to local scholars of Konya such as Qāḍī Sirāj al-Dīn 'Urmawī (d.1283)¹⁷¹¹ or Naṣīr al-Dīn Qūnawī (d.af.1262).¹⁷¹² *Maṣnavī*, which became a canonical and liturgical text even when it was being still composed, itself witnesses a charge against Rūmī that the work did not meet the expectations for a Sufi text.¹⁷¹³ Accordingly, it did not contain any "great mysteries, theosophical inquiries, or descriptions of stations of asceticism or how to achieve union with God."¹⁷¹⁴ The letters and discourses of Rūmī are even farther removed from meeting the expectations for ways to attain divine unity with an objectified God. The search for Ibn al-'Arabī's direct or indirect influence on Rūmī's conception of *vaḥdat al-wujūd* is thus misguided not because there is no such discernible influence, but because

¹⁷¹⁰ Rūmī 1937, #128, p.134; Rūmī 1963, #130, p.196.

¹⁷¹¹ As 'Urmawī explains in the introduction, he penned his great philosophical treatise *Subtleties of Wisdom* [*Laṭā'if al-ḥikmah*] around 1257 (al-Urmawī 1972, p.4). The book contains dense discussions on the proof of the necessary being [*wājib al-wujūd*], the relationship between the divine ipseity and divine attributes, and the levels of the soul, and ethics. It was the absence of these very topics that disgruntled the sophisticated *Maṣnavī* readers. 'Urmawī also wrote many influential works in the field of philosophy and logic (See Cagrici 2009).

¹⁷¹² Chittick 1992. For the authorship of the three treatises introduced in the book, see the appendix, pp.255-263.

¹⁷¹³ Rūmī 2015, Vol.3, #4232-4237.

¹⁷¹⁴ Tourage 2007, p.33.

Rūmī's divine union has a different trajectory than that of his contemporaries Ibn al-'Arabī, al-Qūnawī, and 'Irāqī (though having convergent orientations and even starting points). We have a *waḥdat al-wujūd* in Rūmī's thought, which has not been yet analyzed in depth because of our consistently theomaniac and to some extent stereotypical depiction of medieval Sufis when it comes to divine union. Instead, the desire overflowing from Rūmī's heart is not about uniting with God, but with a fellow human being. This overflow of desire is carefully organized by the Sufi institutions and their normative principles of thirteenth century Sufism in Khurāsān and Anatolia. Thus it is firstly with Rūmī's conception of human being, i.e., his "anthropology" that we should begin if we are to understand his conception of divine union and its apophatic dimensions. After introducing Rūmī's anthropology, we will analyze in the third section the ways in which the spiritual quest, and human conduct at large are governed in Rūmī's context. Here we will focus on these fundamentally important institutions of companionship [*ṣuḥbah*] and etiquette [*adab*] that not only regulate Sufi relations, but also steer them towards a communal understanding of divine union with their multilayered subversive capacities.

B. Discursive Desire in Rūmī's Anthropology

The Essential Desire

As early as with Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d.728), Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d.765) and al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d.857), prominent Muslim scholars began to speak of God's *'ishq*, i.e., passionate love.¹⁷¹⁵ Insofar as the terms *'ishq* and *maḥabbah* can be compared with "passionate love," *érōs*, and "compassionate love," *agápē* respectively, the application of the term *'ishq* instead of *maḥabbah* to describe the love between God and human beings could lead to the accusation of anthropomorphism in the time of Nūrī (d.908) in Khurāsān.¹⁷¹⁶ By the end of the twelfth century, however, *'ishq* had already become in Khurāsānian Sufism either a divine name, as it was for Rūmī, or the very divine essence itself,¹⁷¹⁷ as in Aḥmad al-Ghazālī,¹⁷¹⁸

¹⁷¹⁵ Lewisohn 2014, pp.152-155. His pupil, 'Abd al-Wāḥid ibn Zayd (d.af.767) transmitted a divine report [*ḥadīth qudsī*] from Ḥasan al-Baṣrī which stated: "when I [God] have made my servant find happiness and joy in remembering Me, he desires Me and I desire him [*'ashiqanī wa 'ashiqtuhu*]." (See Lewisohn 2014, p.152.)

¹⁷¹⁶ Ernst 1994. Also see Schimmel 1975, p.137. Like Rābi'a (d.ca.792), al-Kharrāz (d.899) employs exclusively *maḥabbah* with reference to divine love. (See al-Kharrāz 1937, Ch.13, pp.47-51 (Arabic text); pp.39-41 (English text); Lewisohn 2014, p.159.)

¹⁷¹⁷ The two were indeed more or less the same thing, "for if Love in one respect is an Attribute of God, in another respect it is identical with his very Essence. It is God himself." (Chittick in 'Irāqī 1982, p.5.)

Rūzbihān Baqlī (d.1209), al-‘Irāqī¹⁷¹⁹ and Qaysarī (d.1350).¹⁷²⁰ This wider appeal to love self-consciously situated itself into an impressive number of early Sufis such as ‘Abd al-Wāḥid Ibn Zayd (d.ca.750), Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d.848), Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d.861), Junayd al-Baghdādī (d.910), Yūsuf ibn Ḥusayn al-Rāzī (d.916), al-Ḥallāj (d.922), Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī (d.932), Shiblī (d.946) and Ḥuṣrī (d.981).¹⁷²¹ For Rūmī, who employs both terms interchangeably like ‘Irāqī¹⁷²² and Rūzbihān Baqlī,¹⁷²³ the essentiality of love in human beings and creation is an expression of the divine compassion that encompasses every creature.¹⁷²⁴ God created the world because he loved them to be.¹⁷²⁵ In every second he blows his

¹⁷¹⁸ Aḥmad al-Ghazālī equates Love with the apophatic One in the categories of pentad of Plotinus (d.270). See Pereira 2000, p.360.

¹⁷¹⁹ ‘Irāqī 1982, p.72.

¹⁷²⁰ al-Qaysarī 1997, pp.138-139.

¹⁷²¹ Ernst 1994. On al-Ḥallāj’s conception of love as constituting the divine essence itself, see Lewisohn 2014, p.162.

Of course the harmonization of *‘ishq* and *ḥubb* in various Sufi groups cannot be generalized. In 1875 a British missionary in Northern India observed that *‘ishq* was employed by Muslim “mystics” to express divine love, while “orthodox Muslims” preferred *ḥubb*. (Hughes 1885, p.220)

¹⁷²² For ‘Irāqī, love denotes the “Reality purified of all entification. Call it Amorousness [*ḥubb*] or Love [*‘ishq*], let us not quarrel over words.” (‘Irāqī 1982, p.72.)

¹⁷²³ See Lewisohn 2014, p.173.

¹⁷²⁴ At first glance this idea seems to follow Ibn Sīnā (d.1037)’s *Treatise on Love* [*Risālah fī al-‘ishq*], where he provides logical proofs that love [*‘ishq*] pervades all beings including (i) simple and inanimate substances, (ii) plants, (iii) animals, (iv) the noble-minded, (v) divine souls. When things, plants or animals crawl for food, light, stability, etc. Ibn Sīnā derives a yearning for good and perfection which is outside themselves.

Being which is too exalted to be subject to the governance must be the highest object of love, because it must be the maximum in goodness. And the highest subject of love is identical with the highest object of love, namely, its high and sublime Essence. Because the good loves the good through that attainment and penetration whereby it is connected with it, and because the First Good penetrates itself in eternal actuality, therefore its love for itself is the most perfect and complete. And because there is no distinction among the divine qualities of its essence, love is here the essence and the being purely and simply, i.e. in the case of the pure good. In all beings, therefore, love is either the cause of their being, or being and love are identical in them. It is thus evident that no being is devoid of love. (Ibn Sīnā 1945, p.214.)

Rūmī approaches love more as a theophany than ontological necessity, and his proof is more existential than logical, while it is not devoid of these philosophical dimensions.

¹⁷²⁵ A sacred report [*ḥadīth qudsī*] most addressed in this context is, “I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known.” Rūmī cites it in various places, e.g., Rūmī 1969, p.253; Rūmī 2000, p.422.

breath of mercy, being the sustainer and real agent behind every action. Just to exist means to be loved by God. As a product of excessive desire, beings essentially yearn for returning to divine union. Every creature essentially loves and desires the divine beloved; but not all know this, because they are neither aware of their own selves, nor the nature of creation. Thus our love directed towards various aims and objects is in fact directed towards God veiled by these mediators. They are forms desired not for themselves, but for their divine origin of all desires.¹⁷²⁶ As God is infinite love, lover and beloved, He is also the source of love in its excessive, infinite manifestations and the hidden but real addressee of our love.¹⁷²⁷ “None but God is truly loved [*ḥubb*]. Love for all else ends in God. So, love a thing only for God, and seek a thing only for God, until in the end you come to God and love it for itself.”¹⁷²⁸ Indeed, Rūmī and Ibn al-‘Arabī converge not only in the essential desire of divine union in creation, but also in this issue of the “veiled love affair.”¹⁷²⁹ However, again, this should not be taken to indicate an influence of Ibn al-‘Arabī on Rūmī, as the idea of love as the source of existence was already well-established in Khurāsānian Sufism by the twelfth century.¹⁷³⁰ This all-encompassing ontological conception of love that leaves no room for a “secular” love could easily be found in Rūmī’s sources, most famously

¹⁷²⁶ “All things in this world—wealth, a mate, and clothing—are desired for something other than themselves.” (Rūmī 1969, p.118; Rūmī 2000, #67, p.181.)

¹⁷²⁷ “All things are the shadow of the Real [*zill-a Ḥaqq*]. ... All people seek a Beloved, for they all desire to be lovers of the Real, enemies to its enemies, and friends to its friends. All these are the rules [*aḥkām*] and attributes [*ṣifāt*] of the Real that appear in the shadow.” (Rūmī 1969, p.253; Rūmī 2000, p.423.)

¹⁷²⁸ Rūmī 1969, pp.145-146; Rūmī 2000, pp.228-229.

¹⁷²⁹ The quotation from Rūmī immediately recalls another famous passage from Ibn al-‘Arabī:

“[N]one but God is loved in the existent things. It is He who is manifest within every beloved to the eye of every lover—and there is nothing which is not a lover. So the cosmos is all lover and beloved, and all of it goes back to Him... Though no one loves any but his own Creator, he is veiled from Him by the love of Zaynab, Su‘ad, Hind, Layla, this world, money, position, and everything loved in the world. Poets exhaust their words writing about all these existent things without knowing, but the gnostics never hear a verse, a riddle, a panegyric, or a love poem that is not about Him, hidden beyond the veils of forms.” (Ibn al-‘Arabī in Chittick 1989, p.181.)

¹⁷³⁰ Both Aḥmad and Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī had argued that “the different sources of love are all illusion, for in reality there is no object of love but God—the ultimate source of love. The principle that God is the ultimate source of both [1] the instinct for survival and [2] beneficence, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d.1273) was later to versify in the *Mathnawī*.” (Lewisohn 2014, p.169.)

in the “Inspirations from the World of Pure Spirits” [*Savānih al-‘Ushshāq*] of Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, to whom the Mawlawiyyah, among others, traces its lineage.

Parallel to this ceaseless flow of excessive love from the divine beloved to creation, the desire for divine union [*vaṣl*] is essential to creation:

Within people there is a longing and a desire such that, even if a hundred thousand worlds were theirs to own, still they would find no rest or comfort. They try every trade and craft, studying astronomy, medicine and every other subject, but they reach no completion, for they have not found their true desire. Poets call the Beloved “heart’s ease,” because there the heart finds its rest. How can we find peace and rest in anything but the Beloved?¹⁷³¹

Rūmī also employs his creative hermeneutics in order to point out that the desire to return to the “reed bed” of the divine does not end until one reaches the grave. Citing a verse generally interpreted as a self-reference to the Qur’ān, Rūmī subverts the standard reading of the passage and argues that it is the essential yearning and desire that will be divinely protected eternally.¹⁷³² Human beings keep searching, desiring, running after various things, and generally are between conflicting forms of love throughout their lives.¹⁷³³ However the divine meaning is the same behind the variety of objects of desire.¹⁷³⁴ It is the true source and non-object of desire, God, who is always in the proximity [*pahlū*] of the desirer; God binds us with these veil “bridles” and “pulls” us to mercy and deliverance against our will [*bī-murād*], like a magnet.¹⁷³⁵ Once one is able to look with the pure mirror of the heart, “the prism of forms” breaks,¹⁷³⁶ the pluralist vision of strabismus ends and one sees that everything is in fact desiring

¹⁷³¹ Rūmī 1969, p.79; Rūmī 2000, #15, p.119.

¹⁷³²

“‘It is We who have sent down the Remembrance [*zīkr*], and We watch over it’ (Q.15:9). Commentators say that this quote refers to the Qur’ān, but it also means, ‘We have put in you a substance [*javharī*], a seeking [*ṭalabī*], a yearning [*shavq*]. We will watch over that, not letting it go to waste, but will bring it to its rightful place.’” (Rūmī 1969, p.132; Rūmī 2000, #26, p.207.)

¹⁷³³ “Lovers have heartaches no cure can mend, neither sleeping, traveling, nor eating—only the sight of the beloved [*didār-a dūst*].” (Rūmī 1969, p.245; Rūmī 2000, #63, p.403.)

¹⁷³⁴ Also see ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #2309-2321.

¹⁷³⁵ See Rūmī 1969, p.154; Rūmī 2000, #33, pp.242-243; ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #2821-2832.

¹⁷³⁶ Rūmī 2015, Vol.1, #2364, Vol.3, #578-580. For the story of the novice who saw two glasses, and broke one of them with the order of his master, see Rūmī 2015, Vol.1 #327-332.

and running behind the different manifestations of the one divine beloved [*ma'shūq-a vāḥid*] in various forms and ways.¹⁷³⁷

The Essential Logos

In line with his father Bahā' al-Dīn as well as his masters Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn, Shams Tabrīzī,¹⁷³⁸ 'Aṭṭār and Sanā'ī, Rūmī considers human being the locus of *coincidentia oppositorum*—uniting [*jam*] two opposites. “Human being is composed of [*murakkab ast az*] a body [*tan*], which is lowly, lowly, lowly [*khasīs*], and a soul [*jān*], which is noble, noble, noble [*sharīf*].”¹⁷³⁹ Parallel to the widely accepted conception of the anthropos among the Philosophers [*falāsifāh*] and in Yaḥyā al-Suhrawardī (d.1191)'s illuminationist [*ishrāqī*] school, human being is made of the divine, angelic light dressed in a material darkness—the body.¹⁷⁴⁰ Rūmī's position underlines the fact that the uniquely human capacity, and hence, burden is an intellectual gift:

There are three kinds of creatures. First there are angels, who are pure spiritual conscience. Worship, service and the remembrance of God are their nature and their food. ... Angels are pure and free of lust, so what favor do they gain by not yielding to such desires? Since they are free of these things, they need not struggle against them. If they obey God's will it is not counted as obedience, for this is their nature, and they cannot be otherwise. Second are the beasts who are pure sensuality, having no spiritual conscience to restrain them. They too are under no burden of obligation. Lastly, there remains the poor human being, who is a compound of spiritual conscience and sensuality. We are half angel, half beast. ...We are forever in battle. If our spiritual conscience overcomes our sensuality, we are higher than the angels. If our sensuality overcomes our spiritual conscience, we are lower than the beasts. The angel is saved through knowledge,
The animal—through ignorance.
Between the two struggle the people of this world.¹⁷⁴¹

¹⁷³⁷ Rūmī 2015, Vol.3., #1254-1275. Also see Zarrinkub 2009, p.311.

¹⁷³⁸ E.g., Shams Tabrīzī 2004, 1.3, p.4.

¹⁷³⁹ Rūmī 1937, #95, p.99; Rūmī 1963, #97, p.143.

¹⁷⁴⁰ Also see “The Ego Animal,” in Rūmī 2005, pp.16-22.

¹⁷⁴¹ Rūmī 1969, pp.93-94; Rūmī 2000, #17, pp.139-140.

Human being existentially possesses all the classical animal faculties, including perception, imagination, discernment [*tamyīz*] and carnal desires, but human being is also gifted by a peculiar, lofty faculty: *logos* [*nuṭq*]. Here the term “logos” is irreducible to our contemporary concept of “reason,” mainly because “reason” has today already lost the definitive significance of *speech* for “logos” in Greek¹⁷⁴² also appropriated into Arabic. The unique gift of human beings, in other words, is the ability of think and to produce discourse. “As it is said ‘the human being is a discursive animal [*ḥayvān-a nāṭiq*],’ human being is of two parts. ... The animality within it flees from God, while its spiritual self [*insāniyyah*] flees from this world.”¹⁷⁴³ Logos [*nuṭq*] is primarily discursive [*nāṭiq*]: speech [*nuṭq*] manifests the angelic, rational capacities of human beings not only to others, but also to themselves.¹⁷⁴⁴

An untrained reader of Rūmī’s corpus will be shocked to observe that statistically more than half of his discourses directly refer to the nature of speech and language.¹⁷⁴⁵ Speech is a derivate of the Real, and a shadow of the Real, thus it manifests the divine qualities of human being in endless forms. A verse in the *Maṣnavī* claims that human being is “thought [*andisha*]” itself and the rest is just bones and nerves,¹⁷⁴⁶ and the *Discourses* present Rūmī’s vivid explanation of what he meant there:

In using the word [*lafz*] “thought” my intention [*gharāz*] was the “essence” [*ma’nā*].” If you need to interpret [*ta’wīl*] this “essence” in a more humdrum way so that common people can understand, then say: “The human being is a speaking animal [*ḥayvān-a nāṭiq*].” *Speech is thought* [*nuṭq andisha bāshad*], whether spoken or not. The rest of the human being is animal. Therefore, it is perfectly true to say people consist of thought, and the rest is “bones and nerves.” Speech [*kalām*] is like the sun, all

Rūmī calls reason “the hero of religion” [*Shujā’ al-Dīn*] as opposed to the carnal ego, which is a “powerful trickster” that one should be always wary of until the last breath. (Aflākī 2002, #44, p.90; Aflākī 2001, Vol.1., #44, p.301.)

¹⁷⁴² See “Language and Logos,” in Gadamer 2006, pp.406-417.

¹⁷⁴³ Rūmī 1969, p.70; Rūmī 2000, #12, p.106.

¹⁷⁴⁴ “Your attributes are subtle lovers of the Real. You cannot see them except through the translative mediation of the tongue. Else, because of their subtlety, they are naked and they retreat back out of vision.” (Rūmī 1969, p.78; Rūmī 2000, #14, p.118)

¹⁷⁴⁵ The same observation can be made in terms of Shams Tabrīzī’s *Discourses* as well.

¹⁷⁴⁶ Rūmī 2015, Vol.2, #277.

people derive warmth and life from the sun, and the sun is always there. The entire world is warmed by the sun, yet the sun's rays are not always visible. When thought is expressed through word or sign, be it thanks or complaint, good or evil, then the sun of speech [*āftāb-i sukhan*] becomes visible, just as the rays of the celestial sun become visible when they shine upon a wall.¹⁷⁴⁷

The Real transcends the realm of the sayable, but it is manifested in endless forms and languages,¹⁷⁴⁸ be it human and non-human, through speech. Behind the veil of these endless forms and exteriors, the divine meaning of the human condition manifests itself in every speech act: the burning desire of the divine beloved. Of course this existential desire is ineffable; it cannot be described, and the one who gives a verbal description is indeed not really “tasting” [*zavq*] that burning desire. In other words, human being as essentially desiring God, and essentially discursive are identical, as discourse, behind the veil of speech, in fact expresses the yearning for the divine. Discourse on the essential desire itself is more difficult to produce. The more authentic the desire, the more burning the discourse—like a hot bread:

There are many whose heart is full of such discourses [about the desire of the divine beloved], but they cannot transmit with expressions [*ibārat*] or words [*alfāz*] even if they are lovers [*āshiq*], desirers [*tālib*] and supplicants [*niyāzmand*]. This is not surprising, and not a barrier to love, but indeed the root of the issue is heart [*dal*], supplication, passion [*ishq*] and love [*maḥabbat*]. A child is in passion [*ishq*] with milk, and from milk it derives succor and strength, yet the child cannot explain milk or describe it, saying, “what pleasure I find in drinking milk, and how weak and anguished I would be without it.” The child has no words for it, yet still it desires milk. Grown people, on the other hand, even though they might explain and describe milk in a thousand ways, still they find no such pleasure or delight in milk like they did as children.¹⁷⁴⁹

¹⁷⁴⁷ Rūmī 1969, p.218; Rūmī 2000, #53, p.254.

¹⁷⁴⁸ “Speak Persian, even though Arabic is nicer, but love has still a hundred other tongues.” (Rūmī in Abou-Bakr and Rūmī 1994, p.37.)

¹⁷⁴⁹ Rūmī 1969, p.192; Rūmī 2000, #44, p.254.

As the divine aspect of human being, *logos* expresses and communicates the essential desire for divine union in the form, and veil, of verbal speech.¹⁷⁵⁰ Neither verbal expressions nor actions are themselves the human essence; they are rather quiddities [*araz*]. It will be insufficient to look at the verbal discourses or the actions to know a human being genuinely.¹⁷⁵¹ The attributes [*ṣifāt*] of human beings, parallel to those of God, manifest themselves with “the veil of speech.”¹⁷⁵² The positive attributes are manifested via discourse, while the ipseity of the soul remains unknowable. It is be known when one passes beyond verbal speech towards tasting [*zavq*] via performing a variety of specified, disciplinary spiritual practices.¹⁷⁵³ While the intentional experience is the root [*aṣl*] and verbal speech is the branch [*furūʿ*], it is this branch, or form, by which the root is attained.¹⁷⁵⁴ As the manifestation of the divine desire, verbal speech

¹⁷⁵⁰ Indeed neither speech nor desire is exclusively human. Every creature, by being a creature, desire the divine union and expresses this desire at every second in its peculiar “language of state.” World itself is a speech, and there is no need for verbal expressions for those who understand its language. See Rūmī 1969, p.35; Rūmī 2000, #6, p.39.

¹⁷⁵¹ This sharp distinction between speech forms and their meaning, or between forms of action and their intentional reality can be traced back to the Baghdādī Sufi-theologian, al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī (d.857). In his *Book of Observing God’s Due* [*Kitāb al-riʿāyah li-ḥuqūq Allāh*], and in his *Questions Concerning the Actions of Hearts* [*Masāʾil fī aʾmāl al-qulūb*] he claims that it is the intention [*niyyah*], sincerity [*ṣidq*], and purity of dedication [*ikhlas*] that embodies the reality of an action; physical action is itself essentially worthless (Ohlander 2009). The same sharp distinction, expressed with the maxim “all actions are [evaluated] according to their intention” [*kull aʾmāl bi al-niyyah*] became a key concept of fiqh in the twelfth century, especially with the rise of the “higher intentions of Islamic law” [*maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*] literature. See Opwis 2010.

¹⁷⁵² See Rūmī 1969, pp.77-78; Rūmī 2000, #14, pp.115-118. Shams sees speech as a “veil of light,” through which one approaches God. Its perfection, however, is silence in the fullness of meaning in the divine union with the beloved. (Shams Tabrīzī 2004, #38, pp.24-25)

¹⁷⁵³

Someone was saying, “I have studied many sciences and mastered many ideas, yet I still do not know what essence [*maʾnā*] in the human being exists forever.”
 ... Rūmī said: if such things were knowable through speech [*sukhan*] alone, you would never need to annihilate being [*fanā-ya wujūd*] and suffer such pains. (Rūmī 1969, p.216; Rūmī 2000, #52, pp.349-350.)

¹⁷⁵⁴

Someone said, “Remember us in your intention. Intention is the root of the matter. If there are no words, let there be no words. Words are the branch.”

Rūmī said: Well, intention first exists in the inner world before entering this world of form. So if form does not matter, what is the purpose of this world? If you plant only the kernel of an apricot stone, nothing will grow. If you plant it with its husk, then it becomes a tree. From this we know that form also has a

will burn the audience and the speaker with its fire of desire, when it comes from the depths of the soul.¹⁷⁵⁵ Thus it also propagates the desire for divine union.¹⁷⁵⁶ Lovers' speech instigates the angelic fire in their audience—a burning, excessive desire of divine union that fills every creature:

Someone asked: “Then what is the use [*fā'ida*] of expressions [*ibārat*] and words [*alfāz*]?” Rūmī answered: Words set you searching [*ṭalab*]. Speech [*sukhan*] is not the object of your quest. If that were the case, there would be no need for all this spiritual struggle [*mujāhadah*] and self-annihilation [*fanā-yi khūd*]. Discourse is like glimpsing something far away. You follow in its trail to see it better, but this doesn't mean the trail is what you are seeking. Speech is inwardly the same—it excites you to seek the meaning [*ṭalab ān ma'nā*], even though you never see it truly.¹⁷⁵⁷

In sum, forms of speech constitute the most complete ways of expressing, communicating and thus igniting the existential desire for union, which is the motor of Sufi practices. Divinely gifted *logos* is not mere theoretical reasoning without practical significance, but it constitutes the soul of the sacred practice.

function. Yes, prayer is an inward matter: “There is no prayer without the heart being present.” But it is still necessary to bring the prayer into form. With outward words, genuflection, and prostration, you gain benefit and attain your desire.

The outer form of prayer is temporary, the inner spirit never ends. For the Spirit of the world is an infinite ocean, the body but a limited shore. Therefore, continual prayer belongs only to the spirit, but that inward prayer must manifest. Until intention and form are wedded, there are no children born.

When you say that words are the branch, this is only a relative term. Until the branch exists how can the term “root” gain its meaning? So the meaning of root came out of this branch. If the branch had not existed, it could never have had a name. When you speak of woman, there must also be man. When you speak of a Master, there must be a student. When you speak of the Ruler, there must be one ruled. (Rūmī 1969, 164-165; Rūmī 2000, #38, p.258)

¹⁷⁵⁵ Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn employs a beautiful metaphor, asking “how can the hot bread of speech that comes from the oven of the heart not burn the hand?” (Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn 1973, p.34)

¹⁷⁵⁶ “Human bodies are created of earth, but they shed tears when they hear a discourse [*sukhan*]. Their tears become running water, for ‘thou seest their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they recognize [Q.5:83].’” (Rūmī 1969, p.166; Rūmī 2000, #39, p.261. Arberry's translation is very misleading here.)

¹⁷⁵⁷ Rūmī 1969, p.216; Rūmī 2000, #52, pp.349-350.

Practice can take many forms, but it is the spoken, sincere, discursive belief that manifests the inner meaning of the Sufi practice.¹⁷⁵⁸ Speech is the divine gift given to human beings in its highest form—it is loftier than practice in ontological terms.¹⁷⁵⁹ But epistemologically, practice is loftier than verbal speech, because practice produces a kind of divine knowledge that cannot be reduced to the discursive knowledge attained via reason in philosophy, logic, jurisprudence or theology. In both cases, supremacy is based on the desire for divine union. The ontological superiority of logos over practice implies a priority for the divine essential quality that persists regardless of our actions. The important thing is one’s intention [*maqṣad*], will and desire instead of the discursive or performative ability to realize this desire. *The Maṣnavī*, like ‘Aṭṭār’s *Conference*,

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The Amir said: “The root of the matter [*aṣl*] is action [*‘amal*].”

[Rūmī said:] Where are such people of action, so that I can teach them action? But now look how you cock your ears, seeking after words instead of action. If I were to stop speaking now, you would become upset. Become a seeker of action, so that I can show you action!

I am looking all over the world for students of action so that I can teach action. I am looking all over the world for anyone who knows action, but I find no desirer of action [*mushtarī-ya ‘amal*]—only of words, and so I occupy myself with words. What do you know of action? Action is only known through action. There is not one traveler upon this road—it is empty—so how will anyone see if we are on the true path of action?

After all, prayer and fasting are not action; these are forms of action [*ṣūrāt ‘amal*]. Action is an inward reality [*ma’nāyī dar bāṭin*]. From the time of Adam to the time of Muhammed, prayer and fasting have changed their form, but action is still the same.

Action is not what people think it is. People believe action is this outward show. But if a hypocrite performs only the form of action, such as prayer or fasting, it gains them nothing, since the sincere desire for true action was not present.

The root of all things is speech [*guftan*] and words [*qavl*]. You do not yet know the true knowledge of speech and words, therefore you consider them unimportant. However, speech is fruit from the tree of action, for words are born of action. God created the world by a word.

You may have faith in your heart, but unless you share it through words, it is worth nothing. When you say, “In this present age words are of no account,” you say this with words, do you not? If words are of no account, then why do we hear you say this with words? (Rūmī 1969, Persian pp.90-91; Rūmī 2000, #16, pp.133-135.)

¹⁷⁵⁹ Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī also repeats the idea that knowledge [*‘ilm*] is the root [*uṣūl*] and practice [*‘amal*] is the branch [*furū*]. (Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī 1977, #52-53, p.22.)

is full of anecdotes that underline the importance of being on the way of the beloved, instead of being able to realize the unity. On the side of epistemology, discourse does not directly help one remove the rust from one's heart and purify one's soul as much as practice does. Verbal speech reaches its acme by leading to and becoming the soul of practice.¹⁷⁶⁰ Only with a set of disciplined practices, which includes interpersonal conduct and discursive companionship as its key dimension, can one remove the barriers that veil the beloved.

It is the desire for divine union that underlies both the ontological primacy of speech over practice, and the epistemological priority of practice over discourse in Rūmī. Thus, *speech about practice* could progress little in the way of divine union—until the initiation, or the “shore,” while the *practice of speech* in various forms is the most important method of human perfection and spiritual purification.¹⁷⁶¹ The record of an entire discourse of Rūmī is devoted to explain the key importance of this communal practice of discursive, yet spiritual purification:

Struggles [*mujāhadat*] are of various kinds. The most splendid way is to spend time [*āmikhtan*] with companions [*yārān*] who have turned their faces to Truth and turned their backs on this world. There is no more difficult combat than this, for the very sight of these companions dissolves the ego [*ifnā-ya nafs*].¹⁷⁶²

It is not the inward quest of isolated individuals to an objectified God, but the institutionalized, social communion of lovers where we should look for the genuine unfolding of the essential discursive desire and the apophatic divine union. It is in this interpersonal context wherein the *practice of speech*, and human essence, perfects itself.

C. The Discursive Unity of Companions and Polished Mirrors ***Hierarchical Ṣuḥbah and Subversive Ṣuḥbah***

While contemporary scholarship has somewhat vaguely realized the centrality of discursive companionship [*ṣuḥbah*] for the transmission of mainly legal knowledge, there is yet no comprehensive work on the role of *ṣuḥbah* in either

¹⁷⁶⁰ Rūmī 1969, p.177; Rūmī 2000, #42, p.279.

¹⁷⁶¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī also claims that practice is perfected in discursive knowledge. “The noblest [*ashraf*] practice of yours is (discursive) knowledge [*‘ilm*].” (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2007t, p.233.)

¹⁷⁶² Rūmī 1969, p.257; Rūmī 2000, #70, p.429. For W. Chittick’s alternative translation, see Rūmī 1983, p.155.

Rūmī or any Sufi group including the Mawlawiyyah.¹⁷⁶³ Considering the vast literature and ink spilt on Rūmī, it is surprising that two of the most ubiquitous terms not only in Rūmī’s corpus but also in Sufi literature, “speech” and “companionship” are neglected in the scholarship on ostensibly the most well-known (and arguably ill-known) aspect of his thought—divine union.¹⁷⁶⁴ From the ninth century onwards, from Ibn al-Ḥusayn Burjulānī (d.852) and Yaḥyā ibn Mu’ādh al-Rāzī (d.872) to al-Sulamī (d.1021) Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d.1111), a normative “manners of intimate conversation” or “etiquette of (discursive) companionship” [*ādāb al-ṣuḥbah*] literature was established in Khurāsānian Sufism.¹⁷⁶⁵ It is interesting to note that ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d.1167), Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī (d.1168) and Najm al-Dīn Kubrā (d.1221), the eponyms of the three powerful Sufi orders of the Central Asia and the wider Islamic world wrote on *ādāb al-ṣuḥbah*. As for the Naqshbandiyyah, the first in the spiritual chain of its masters and the codifier of the main elements of Khwājagānī doctrine, al-Ghujduwānī (d.1220) is most famous of his saying “close your door to seclusion [*khalwah*], and open it to spiritual companionship [*ṣuḥbah*].”¹⁷⁶⁶ For Abū al-Najīb Suhrawardī those who want to go into seclusion can do so only with

¹⁷⁶³ The two important analyses of *ṣuḥbah* are provided by Berkey and Makdisi, which focus on it as an aspect of either everyday piety or of higher education (primarily, law) (Makdisi 1981, p.114, 128-129; Berkey 1992, pp.26-35). Makdisi’s earlier monograph on *ṣuḥbah* follows the same trajectory (see Makdisi 1977). For an excellent analysis of *ṣuḥbah* in Naqshbandī Sufism in modern Turkey, see Silverstein 2007).

¹⁷⁶⁴ *Sufi Path of Love* abounds with quotations from Rūmī’s corpus on companionship, but it does not connect it to divine union, which is depicted as an introverted, non-discursive experiential process. (Especially see “separation and union,” Chittick in Rūmī 1983, pp.232-247.)

Similarly, famous Rūmī scholar of Turkey, Sefik Can (d.2005) has references to intimate companionship (see esp. Can 2008, pp.99-100) in Rūmī’s thought, but it is disconnected from divine union. According to Can, the term “*ittihād*” explains Rūmī’s perception of divine union, and it is attained via individual experience. (See “*Tawḥīd* (Unity of God) and *Ittihād* (Union with God),” in Can 2008, pp.136-140.)

Eminent Iranian scholar Zarrinkub (d.1999)’s *Pelle Pelle Ta Moqalat-e Khoda* [*Step by Step to Union with God*], first published in 1991 and translated to English in 2009, contains no reference to companionship. (Zarrinkub also transmits the hagiographical sources uncritically in retrieving the life story of Rūmī.) (See Zarrinkub 2009.)

Dominican Rūmī scholar Ambrosio, on the other hand, depicts the divine union of Rūmī in line with an apophatic interpretation of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *waḥdat al-wujūd*, i.e., as an individual union with an absent, hiding God [*Deus Absconditus*; *Deus Fugens*]. (See Ambrosio 2006.)

¹⁷⁶⁵ Meier 1999, pp.49-64.

¹⁷⁶⁶ Zarccone 2012.

an ethical dispensation [*rukḥṣah*].¹⁷⁶⁷ Such dispensations are very reluctantly permitted by the Sufi masters in Khurāsān only in extraordinary cases and deviations from the normative Sufi practices in the thirteenth century.¹⁷⁶⁸

Rūmī inherits this social, urban form of institutional spirituality from his masters such as Shams¹⁷⁶⁹ and Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn¹⁷⁷⁰ who explicitly reproved the

¹⁷⁶⁷ Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī 1977, #183, p.88.

Still, ‘Izz al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Kāshānī (d.1335) in his *Miṣbāḥ* defends the forty day seclusion [*chillah*], while he acknowledges its absence in the *Sunnah*. Kāshānī employs Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī’s legal distinction and admits that seclusion is an innovation, but a good one [*bid’ah ḥasanah*] instead of a harmful innovation. With his inclination towards strict ascetism, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d.996) did not make the distinction between good and bad innovation. He considered seclusion a *bid’ah*, the opposite of the tradition [*sunnah*] of the prophets, which is socialization and mixing [*mukhālaṭah*] in the community.

¹⁷⁶⁸ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī likewise considers the appeal to *rukḥṣah* an indicator of lack of resoluteness. He associates it with the Qalandaris and Malāmatīs, two groups which are according to him not among the Sufis, but appear to be so. These irresponsible groups are not sensitive about laws and Sufi *adab*, but follow the comfortable way of *rukḥṣah*, instead of the truthful way of resoluteness [*aẓīmah*]. (‘Umar al-Suhrawardī 1939, p.57.) For other critical perspectives on *rukḥṣah*, see al-Sarrāj 1914, p.10 (Arabic text); Ibn al-‘Arīf 1993, p.90; al-Ḥabashī in Gril 1979, p.107; ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, p.56; Bahā’ al-Dīn Naqshband in Muḥammad Pārsā 1975, p.9.

The univocal distaste of the thirteenth century Sufis with the ethical dispensations did not exist in the tenth century, particularly within the Ḥanafī context where they could become even a duty. (See al-Makkī 2001, Vol.2, p.608. Cf. Abū Ḥanīfah in Wensinck 2008, p.129.)

¹⁷⁶⁹ Accordingly, the spiritual exercise of seclusion for forty days [*arba’in, chillah*] is an innovation and a practice that belongs properly to the community of Moses. (See Shams Tabrīzī 2004, #2.145, #2.212, #3.140).

There was an ascetic in the mountains. He was of the mountain. He was not of Adam. If he had been of Adam, he would have been among the people. Such people have understanding, they have imagination they have the capacity to know God. What was he doing in the mountains? He was mud, so he inclined toward stones. What does man have to do with stones? Be among the people, but be alone. Don’t go into seclusion, but be solitary. (Shams Tabrīzī 2004, #54, p.203.)

Despite his appearance as probably one of the most seclusive Sufis in Rūmī’s environment, Shams has a subtle view of social solitarism. The records of his discourses defend seclusion with God while living in the midst of society [*khalvat dar anjumān; al-khalwah fī al-jalwah*] that is achieved only within the society and with companionship. As opposed to seclusion and quietism, Shams understand “solitariness” as freeing the ego from vanities via the discursive companionship with spiritual masters:

When you serve the shaykh and are in the presence of the most outstanding of the shaykhs, you will have a permanent seclusion without sitting in seclusion. A

practice of seclusion in favor of ways of perfection within the community of seekers.¹⁷⁷¹ Like many urban Sufi masters of his time¹⁷⁷² Rūmī is also against

state will come over you such that you will always be in seclusion. God has servants such that, when someone joins their service, he has a constant and continuous seclusion. (Shams Tabrīzī 2004, #63, p.210.)

For one of many report of Aflākī on Shams' emphasis on companionship, see Aflākī 2002, #38, p.439; Aflākī 2001, Vol.2, #38, p.213.

¹⁷⁷⁰ "With the seclusion that some praise, indeed one drifts apart from the destination. ... The more one stands in seclusion, the more they digress from the destination." (Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn 1973, p.87.)

¹⁷⁷¹ Judah Ha-levi (d.1140)'s *Book of Refutation* [*Kitāb al-Radd wa al-Dalīl fī al-Dīn al-Dhalīl*] known as *al-Khuzari* (wr.ca.1120-1140), a dialogue built around the story of the Khazar king, depicts a theological apology of rabbinic Judaism and a critique of other sects, including the Karaites, philosophers -his portrayal of the teachings of the philosophers is based on those of Ibn Bājjah (d.1139) and Ibn Sīnā-, dialectical theologians [*mutakallimūn*], Christians and Muslims from an anti-rationalist standpoint. (Harvey 2005, p.352.) Lobel's recent study of Ha-Levi's *Khuzari*, following outdated works such as that of Guttmann (1922) or Baneth (1924), accepts Ha-levi's description of Sufism uncritically. Accordingly, Sufis were ascetics who stressed isolated, quietistic, individual communion with the Divine, and in contrast, Ha-Levi "celebrates this-worldly, communal, and active character of Jewish life." (Lobel 2000, p.7, p.158.) The categories such as "Sufis" and "philosophers" are also employed stereotypically throughout the book: "unlike the Sufis or Plotinus however, Ha-Levi's philosopher—like other medieval Neo-Platonists—holds that union with God or the One is not possible." (Lobel 2000, p.25.) Many counter-examples from "Sufis" and "philosophers" can be cited easily. Even Ibn al-'Arabī, who is stereotypically cited as the paradigm example of medieval monism, explicitly and repeatedly claims that union with God is not possible (see e.g. Ibn al-'Arabī 1428/2007p, p.39; Ibn al-'Arabī 1428/2007b, p.109). Not only Lobel's assumption of Sufis accepting the possibility of an ontological union with God, but also her deeper conviction that Sufis seek divine union with God, an idea perpetually repeated in the Sufi scholarship, should be questioned. A brief survey on Sufi literature suffices to observe the misrepresentation of Sufism in the work. See al-Kharrāz 1937, p.64 (Arabic text), p.52 (English translation); Hujvīrī 2001, p.85, 290-293; Wilcox 2011, p.117; Keeler 2007, p.19.

Similarly, Lobel employs specific terms for divine union debated among Sufis themselves, "*ittiḥād*" or "*ittiṣāl*," reductively and without qualification. Accordingly, "[for] Sufis and philosophers *ittiṣāl* had come to indicate the goal of a human-initiated quest for union," (Lobel 2005, p.29) and Ha-levi cleverly "subverts" this landscape in favor of a God-given, divinely inspired and communally structured life-affirming communion. However, let alone the heated debates among Sufis on divine union, these terms were employed in a multi-layered manner with different meanings depending on the context. "Oneness of being," for example, was employed as least in seven different ways depending not only on the specific contexts, but also on the agents, who employ it, and their purposes (Chittick 1994, pp.88-89). Or, Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d.1274)'s prolegomena to Sufism, *Attributes of the Illustrious* [*Awṣāf al-Ashrāf*] depicts *ittiḥād*, not *ittiṣāl*, as the standard zenith of the Sufi path. (Ṭūsī 1369/1990, pp.95-96.) For others, *ittiṣāl* could mark only a spiritual state which is subject to be transcended by others. For al-Kharrāz, for

seclusion in favor of a social, family life, and discursive companionship for spiritual progress. His son Sulṭān Valad had to make an immense effort to gain Rūmī's permission to go into seclusion.¹⁷⁷³ The very fact that Sulṭān Valad, or in another case, Majd al-Dīn Atabeg (d.1277),¹⁷⁷⁴ asked Rūmī for a special dispensation illustrates the abnormal status of seclusion in Rūmī's circle. Rūmī unwillingly gave the dispensation to his son. Following Shams Tabrīzī, he depicts seclusion as "the way of Jesus," or as "the way of Moses," in reference to his forty day seclusion before his divine union at the Mount Sinai.¹⁷⁷⁵ While the way of seclusion leads the aspirants to deliverance, "the way of Muḥammad" demands the purification of the soul from worldly desires without cutting out everyday practical contact with the world. Hence, it is more challenging, and seclusion is only the secondary way of dispensation:

The way of the Prophet is this: It is necessary to endure pain [*ranj kashīdan*] to help rid ourselves of selfishness, jealousy and pride ... so the Muḥammadan world can become clear. The way of Jesus was wrestling [*mujāhadat*] with solitude [*khalvat*] and not

example, *ittiṣāl* marks not the zenith of the Sufi path, but just one of the early steps (al-Sīrjānī 2012, p.64).

As Foucault points out, "the man and his works" approach, aiming to create critical, creative pre-modern individuals, who transcend their historical context and please our contemporary intellectual standards and ethical gaze, in turn does injustice to those dwarfed actors, in this case Sufis among others, thrown to the periphery. (See Foucault 1998, pp.205-222.)

¹⁷⁷² Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in al-Suyūṭī 1934, pp.81-82.

¹⁷⁷³ Aflākī 2002, #10, p.553; Aflākī 2001, #10, p.382.

¹⁷⁷⁴ Sīpahsālār 2004, p.108; Aflākī 2002, #253, p.228; Aflākī 2001, Vol.1, #251, pp.536-537.

Majd al-Dīn, the son-in-law of Mu'in al-Dīn Parvāna, was a powerful officer who served the Saljūqīs of Rum in various official positions, including as *mustawfī*, as vizier, when Šāhib 'Aṭā' (d.1288) was prisoned in Osmancik during 671/1272-674/1275, *Atabeg* and *mu'tamad* of the Sulṭān (Ibn Bībī 2007, pp.228-229; Yazici in Aflākī 2001, pp.113-115; Turan 1988).

For Rūmī's letters to Majd al-Dīn Atabeg, see Rūmī 1963 #8, 9, 10, 17, 54, 66, 121.

¹⁷⁷⁵

A worthy man once shut himself in a cave for forty days seclusive discipline [*chillah*], seeking spiritual enlightenment. A voice came to him, saying, "Such a lofty goal will never be attained by forty days seclusive discipline. Abandon your cave so the love of a great saint [*naẓar-a buzurgī*] may reach you and your goal can be realized." "Where shall I find that great one?" the man asked. "In the congregational mosque," came the answer. "In such a throng of people, how shall I recognize who the one is?" he inquired. "Go," said the voice, "the one will recognize you and will gaze upon you." (Rūmī 1969, p.55; Rūmī 2000, #10, p.77)

gratifying lust. The way of Muḥammad is to endure the oppression and agonies inflicted by men and women. If you cannot go by the Muḥammadan way, at least go by the way of Jesus, so you will not remain completely outside the spiritual path!¹⁷⁷⁶

The urban Sufi organization of the moral, mimetic, and intellectual collective life among Sufis is broadly defined as “companionship” [*ṣuḥbah*]. It is so closely associated with Sufi practices in thirteenth century Anatolia that the itinerant Darvīsh, Yunus Emre (d.ca.1320), compares the relationship of Sufis and *ṣuḥbah* to that of the lover and the beloved.¹⁷⁷⁷ Rūmī is a Sufi par excellence for Yunus Emre, and in one of his poems Yunus rejoiced that he was lucky enough to join the *ṣuḥbah* of Rūmī, whose “sublime glance became the mirror of his heart.”¹⁷⁷⁸ “*Ṣuḥbah*’s meanings and uses, however, were wider than that which is implied by companionship or fellowship, and ranged from affiliation to a group to subordination to a powerful individual.”¹⁷⁷⁹ In the thirteenth century, *ṣuḥbah* named a set of various hierarchical social relations between the spiritual master and the disciple, old and young, slaves [*mamluk*] and their master [*ustādh*], civilian [*a’yān*], military or political eminent [*amīr*] and their servant [*khādim*] regulated by reciprocally binding specific moral principles. As Ibn al-‘Arabī’s companion, al-Ḥabashī (d.1221), who died in Central Anatolia, indicates, the main aim [*gharaḍ*] of the master in *ṣuḥbah* is to give the disciple the knowledge of the proper conduct with God [*‘ilm adab ma’ Allāh*], not to become their governor [*amīr*].¹⁷⁸⁰ The Sufi *ṣuḥbah* as a connection between the master and the disciple was established for the sake of the unilateral, merciful discursive flow of sacred knowledge from the master, thus, for the benefit [*fā’ida; istifāda*]

¹⁷⁷⁶ Rūmī 1969, p.104; Rūmī 2000, #20, p.157.

¹⁷⁷⁷

Sufilere sohbet gerek
Ahilere ahret gerek
Mecnun’lara Leyla gerek
Bana seni gerek seni (Yunus Emre [undated], #381, p.312.)

¹⁷⁷⁸

Mevlana Hudavendgar bize nazar kılalı
Anun görklü nazarı gönlümüz aynasıdır (Yunus Emre [undated], #64, p.52.)

¹⁷⁷⁹ Chamberlain 1994, p.121.

¹⁷⁸⁰ al-Ḥabashī in Gril 1979, #61, pp.118-119. For the English and French translations, see al-Ḥabashī 1994, #61; al-Ḥabashī in Gril 1979, #61, p.141.

of the disciple. The record of a discourse depicts an amusing picture wherein a disciple in the audience falls asleep during Rūmī's *ṣuḥbah*. Still, Rūmī interprets this as a sign of the unique security, safety, hope and felicity that the *ṣuḥbah* produces.¹⁷⁸¹ The disciple who falls asleep symbolizes the immense benefit and auspiciousness [*barakah*] that they derive from the *ṣuḥbah* of the master.

The Sufi ethics of *ṣuḥbah* in the sense of the unilateral transmission of sacred knowledge gives nearly absolute discursive authority to the master.¹⁷⁸² Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, Abū al-Najīb Suhrawardī, Shams, and Rūmī unanimously praise the submissive silence of the novice and the ignorant in front of the master in order to benefit most by active listening. In their presence one should not speak unless one is specifically called upon, and in every case speech should be performed with minimum words possible, directly, sincerely, respectfully and gently, without boasting or yelling.¹⁷⁸³ The disciple, who is literally the “desirer” [*murīd*]

¹⁷⁸¹

Do you see this man who has fallen asleep while we were talking? That slumber is not a sign of heedlessness, but safety and security. Like a caravan travelling along a difficult and dangerous road on a dark night, they drive on in fear, lest harm should befall them. But as soon as the voice of a dog, or cock, reaches their ears and they find a village, they are carefree. They stretch out their legs and sleep sweetly. On the road, where not a sound or murmur would disturb them, they cannot sleep out of fear. But in the village they find security, and with all the barking of dogs and crowing of cocks, still they are happy and fall asleep. Our words also derive from community and security, they are the sayings of prophets and saints. When soul hears the words of those familiar friends, it feels secure and is delivered from any fear, for upon these words is wafted a scent of hope and felicity. (Rūmī 1969, p.190; Rūmī 2000, #44, pp.301-302)

¹⁷⁸² Ohlander 2008, pp.218-216; Malamud 1994; Malamud 1996.

Shaykhs occasionally compared knowledge explicitly to blood: “If one is ignorant of knowledge,” wrote one writer [in thirteenth century Syria], “it is as though he is ignorant of his father. Knowledge for one who seeks it is a father, only better.” A poet made this association even more explicit: “The blood-tie of *‘ilm* [knowledge],” he wrote or recited, “is superior to the blood-tie of kinship.” Writers often compared family loyalties to loyalties among scholars. Shaykhs were “like fathers” to their disciples, and referred to them as their “sons.” The prestige that attached itself to lineages in other societies adhered to scholarly. (Chamberlain 1994, p.110.)

¹⁷⁸³ “Dhū al-Nūn was discoursing to his brethren [*ikhwān*] on the knowledge of oneness and gnosis. A young boy [*ghulām shāb*] asked where the bread was coming from. ‘Take this boy to the Sufis,’ said Dhū al-Nūn, ‘so that they will teach him manners [*al-adab*].’” (al-Makkī 2001, Vol.2, p.922.)

is there in order to witness the master's practice of speech and benefit from the *ṣuḥbah*. The disciple witnesses, desires and imitates [*tashabbuh*] the master devoting herself or himself to the master [*khidmah*] as a step towards the realization of divine submission, fully opening them their dreams, visions, incoming inspirations, and states and stations of their soul.¹⁷⁸⁴ A conversation between Rūmī and his son Bahā' al-Dīn Sulṭān Valad narrates this absolute authority clearly:

[Rūmī said:] "Every disciple who comes to the master must first abandon his or her own spirit [*ma'nā*], becoming in need of the master." Bahā' al-Dīn asked: "but they shouldn't abandon their own spirit for the sake of the master's form [*ṣūrat*], but for the sake of the master's spirit?" [Rūmī replied:] That shouldn't happen. Else, both would be masters.¹⁷⁸⁵

The divine agency will fill the emptied soul of the disciple through the guidance¹⁷⁸⁶ and mediation of the master. Thus the master is expected to impart benevolently truth and spiritual guidance in epistemologized and highly personalized, experiential forms to every *murīd*. The disciple's devotion to her or his master is a necessary step for the annihilation of the lower soul and carnal desires, which are "devoured" by the divine presence mediated by the master.¹⁷⁸⁷ Rūmī cites Jesus, and interprets his saying in support of the master-disciple *ṣuḥbah*:

Jesus said, "I wonder at the living creature [*ḥayvān*] that can eat a living creature." The literalists [*ahl-a zāhir*] say that this refers to people eating the flesh of animals. This is an error. Why? Because

¹⁷⁸⁴ After claiming that they are God's proof [*ḥujjat*], and "the rank and station of men and women is determined by how they treat the saint," Rūmī adds a warning: "if they are hostile to the saint, they are acting hostile against God. If they befriend the saint, they have made friendship with God." (Rūmī 1969, p.89; Rūmī 2000, #16, p.131. The heading of the Discourse #16 is omitted in Arberry's edition (Rūmī 2000); discourses jump from #15 to #17, while p.131 should be the beginning of a new discourse.)

¹⁷⁸⁵ Rūmī 1969, p.107; Rūmī 2000, #20, pp.161-162.

For Rūmī the exterior and interior submission of the disciple are equally fundamental. However, Sulṭān Valad's question was legitimate, because the interior orientation of the disciple has a primacy over the exterior actions in the normative Sufi literature of the century. (See e.g. al-Suhrawardī 1939, p.32.)

¹⁷⁸⁶ "The Amīr said: "Since God has such grace [*luṭf*], then everyone who seeks in truth shall find." Rūmī said: But without a guide [*bī-sālār*] this does not come to pass." (Rūmī 1969, p.68; Rūmī 2000, #12, p.100)

¹⁷⁸⁷ Cf. Aḥmad al-Ghazālī 1986, p.51; Aḥmad al-Ghazālī [undated], #35, p.19.

when people eat flesh, it is not animal any longer, but inanimate. Once the animal is killed, the living spirit is gone from that flesh. The true meaning [*aghrāz*] of this saying is that the master consumes the disciple cause-freely and quality-freely [*bī-chūn va chagūna*]. I wonder at an event so extraordinary!¹⁷⁸⁸

Rūmī's immediate textual source on Jesus is difficult to trace. Yet it is very likely that he had familiarized himself with a Christian tradition on divine union, which we find in the Flemish mystic John Ruysbroeck (1293-1381), that Rūmī rather tellingly associated with the discursive companionship of the master and the disciple.¹⁷⁸⁹

However, *ṣuḥbah* not only operates through or reproduces social hierarchies, but in appropriate settings, it subverts them. Creating a moral sense of reciprocal¹⁷⁹⁰ altruism [*ithār*] and simply sharing, *ṣuḥbah* not always (re)produces hierarchical social relations between masters and disciples, but it also creates subversive relationships by removing hierarchical barriers among companions. Al-Yūnīnī (fl.13th CE)'s anecdote about a thirteenth century Syrian Sufi master, who was taken captive by a crusader bandit, narrates how *ṣuḥbah* demands an unconditional indebtedness on the side of the bondman:

In the middle of the night, tied up while his captors were sleeping, he heard some Muslim bandits approaching. Although he could have saved himself by raising the alarm, he woke his captors and went into hiding with them. When they asked him why he saved them when he could have been freed, he replied, "it was because *I was your companion [ṣāhibtukum] and ate your bread. Truly ṣuḥbah is a mighty thing [inna al-ṣuḥbah 'azīzah].*"¹⁷⁹¹

Spending time in their presence and sharing food with them produces powerful, reciprocal, moral obligations. However this is not a hierarchical association like the connection between the master and the disciple. In the very first story of *the Conference* (generally omitted in the English translations¹⁷⁹²), 'Aṭṭār narrates

¹⁷⁸⁸ Rūmī 1969, p.212; Rūmī 2000, #51, p.344.

¹⁷⁸⁹ "To eat and to be eaten! This is union! ... Since his desire is without measure, to be devoured of him does not greatly amaze me." (John Ruysbroeck in Katz 1978, p.41.)

¹⁷⁹⁰ For an emphasis on this reciprocity between the master and the disciple, see Felek 2012.

¹⁷⁹¹ al-Yūnīnī in Chamberlain 1994, p.121; my emphases.

¹⁷⁹²All English translation of the *Conference*, except the relatively recent translation of Avery, omit 'Aṭṭār's long introduction that praises the Prophet, and remove the work from the Islamic prophetic context.

another story, shedding light on the other side of the companionship—the obligation of unconditional hospitality upon the benefactor established with *ṣuḥbah*:

A robber came up with some unlucky fellow.
Tying his hands, he had him at his mercy.
He went off to fetch a sword to cut off his head.
It was then that his wife gave the captive a crust of bread.
When the man came back with the sword,
Then he saw that the poor wretch had a piece of bread in his hand.
He asked, “Who gave you, you friendless one, bread?”
The man answered, “None but your own gave it.”
When the man heard this complete answer,
He said, “Killing you has become forbidden to me,
Because any man who’s broken our bread,
The sword may not be turned against him.
To one who’s eaten our bread there’s no begrudging life.
How might I spill his blood with the sword?”

...

*When someone breaks the bread of another,
He puts that other under obligation.*¹⁷⁹³

In the Sufi moral etiquette literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the subversive form of *ṣuḥbah* is organized as a relationship among peers. This distinction between hierarchical *ṣuḥbah* of the unequals and the subversive *ṣuḥbah* of the peers in thirteenth century Sufism is most explicitly defined in a small Sufi manual of ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī (d.1234), titled the *Guidance of the Desirers [Irshād al-Murīdīn]*.¹⁷⁹⁴ If the participants belong to different spiritual categories, then the discursive relation among the participants is morally organized as a unilateral flow of divine guidance from the master to the benefitting [*mustafīd*], actively listening, and imitating disciples. If both sides are disciples or both masters, then their *ṣuḥbah* becomes a subversive companionship among brethren [*ikhvān*], peers, or perfect lovers.¹⁷⁹⁵

¹⁷⁹³ ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #219-227; my emphasis. (Here I employed Avery’s English translation; ‘Aṭṭār 1998.)

Cf. Q.6:12 and Q.6:54 where God *obliged himself to Mercy* [*katāba ‘alā nafsihi al-Raḥmah*].

¹⁷⁹⁴ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī 2014, p.89.

¹⁷⁹⁵ Makdisi’s conception of “*ṣuḥbah*” as the equivalent of “master-disciple relationship” borrowed by Sufis and others from legal institutions, as well as more recent studies in social history that approach *ṣuḥbah* as an institution that (re)produces specific social and spiritual hierarchies and normalizes various power relations focus only on one aspect of *ṣuḥbah*, and

The Sufi threshold between the hierarchical *ṣuḥbah* and the subversive *ṣuḥbah* among the peers is regulated by a complex set of personal and institutional relationships based on the spiritual level on the path. A master's association with the youth in forms other than the standard master-murīd relationship is a distinct sign of moral weakness that Rūmī and Shams also submitted.¹⁷⁹⁶ The conduct of the disciple [*murīd*], on the other hand, should be regulated by the same normative rules that preserve the boundaries for the benefit of the *murīd*. If the master is present, one should avoid excessive behaviors and exaggerated display of intoxication and ecstasy. Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī write that if possible, the disciples should refrain from rising to dance [*samā'*] if the master is present. On the other hand, the observance of formalities among peers is seen as artificial and insincere [*bā-takalluf*].¹⁷⁹⁷ The *ṣuḥbah* among peers is meant to remove the spiritual barriers in a dialogical manner wherein the participants transcend the binaries (thus, hierarchies) of the “desirer” [*murīd*] and the “desired” [*murād*], “master” and “disciple,”

ignore the subversive capacity of *ṣuḥbah* particularly in peer relations. (Cf. Makdisi 1981, p.114, 128-129, 285; Makdisi 1977.) Especially the recent works of social history of Sufism bring a very much needed Foucaultian perspective to the study of Sufism that situates Sufis within well-organized networks and power relations. However, the depiction of *ṣuḥbah*, Sufi etiquette, morality and master-disciple relationship as institutions that operate as forms of governmentality, subordination, discipline, social control, hierarchical (re)constructions or authority (re)productions unfortunately neglect the subversive, insubordinate roles that these institutions played. (E.g., Anjum 2012, Felek 2012, Ohlander 2008, Malamud 1994, Malamud 1996; Digby 1986; Radtke and O'Keane 1996.) Huda rightly criticizes this paradigm which “suggests that the knowledge learned from a senior Sufi shaykh ... needed to have established boundaries in order to ensure that the master-disciple relationship would not be threatened and that the disciples would not transgress their limitations with the authority of the shaykh.” (Huda 2004, p.469.) While Huda points out that the aim of these institutions were “transcending *all* boundaries,” this fully-subversive version of *adab* should also be refined with a distinction between master-disciple relationship and the companionship among peers.

¹⁷⁹⁶ Aflākī 2002, #399, pp.302-303; #27, p.434; Aflākī 2001, Vol.1, #398, p.665; Vol.2, #27, pp.205-206.

¹⁷⁹⁷ Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī quotes Salmān al-Fārisī (d.656) saying, “The Prophet forbade us to behave in an affected, forced manner [*takalluf*].” (Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī 1977, p.47.) He also narrates that al-Nisābūrī (d.879) visited Junayd in Baghdād and served him with great attention and much ado. Junayd disapproved of this conspicuous behavior, and said, “*Futuwwah* [chivalry] is the renunciation of *takalluf*.” (Abū al-Najīb al-Suhrawardī 1977, p.47) Najm al-Dīn Kubrā has a similar distaste with *takalluf*. See Kubrā in Meier 1999, p.84; p.88.

“beneficent” and “benefitting,” and “speaker” and “listener.”¹⁷⁹⁸ The stable, monological merciful flow of guidance and excessively desirous discursive speech transforms into a multilateral, dialogical exchange, and overflow, of divine desire. The polished mirror of the heart is not graciously reflecting the divine light to the unpolished ones; now the polished mirrors are facing each other.

The genre of “discourses” is an excellent example of speech that follows the moral principles of the hierarchical *ṣuḥbah*, because *ṣuḥbah* in these vivid records appears as the discourse of the master and the active listening and benefitting of the desirers. Few questions are asked, mostly to be answered quite authoritatively, and sometimes as a harsh rejoinder to the questioner. Indeed, most discourses of Rūmī are the records of how multilateral communicative circles of companionships end with the emergence of the authoritarian discourse of the *shaykh*. In one case, Rūmī visits Amīr Parvāna, who was present in most of Rūmī’s documented discourses. (Their correspondences reveal that Rūmī asked various favors of Parvāna for his disciples, whom he generally refers as his “children.”) Surprised at this unexpected blessing, Parvāna happily and kindly asks Rūmī the occasion of this visit [*īn luṭf cha būd?*]. This question initiates a long discourse beginning with the importance of the embodied meeting of the souls, which are already united.¹⁷⁹⁹ On another occasion, the Amīr converses with Sulṭān Valad when waiting for Rūmī, and the conversation is interrupted with the arrival of Rūmī and his authoritarian discourse.¹⁸⁰⁰ Some discourses describe the political and military elite visitors of Rūmī, such as the Nā’ib, Amīr, or the son of the Atabeg talking unhappily about various aspects of Mongol rule.¹⁸⁰¹ These conversations abruptly transform into Rūmī’s authoritarian discourses. The contribution of other participants is not

¹⁷⁹⁸ I avoid employing binaries of activity and passivity or gender binaries, because they are very complicated in the shaykh and disciple relationship as well. Despite its passive depictions associated with femininity, the disciples are *active* listeners, and they generally obtain masculine qualities to be transcended only by attaining the feminine qualities that the shaykh possesses. (Malamud (1996) omits this key point. Cf. Kugle 2007, pp.103-121.) The master, on the other hand, is primarily *passive*, merely mediating the divine discourse and the audience, having already annihilated [*fanā’*] their individual agency and lower soul in the now fully activated divine agency. Famous Kubrāwī master Najm al-Dīn Rāzī was famously called “the wet-nurse” [*Dāya*]. Gender and agency embodied two intricately connected binary relations that cannot simply vindicate the reproduction of male-dominant discourses.

¹⁷⁹⁹ Rūmī 1969, p.32; Rūmī 2000, #5, p.34.

¹⁸⁰⁰ Rūmī 1969, p.51; Rūmī 2000, #10, p.68.

¹⁸⁰¹ See Rūmī 2000, #3, 7, 17.

only minimized, but also deliberately omitted and unrecorded.¹⁸⁰² It is not worth recording the dialogical *ṣuḥbah* between the master and disciples or among disciples, because the best transmission of divine desire or the unveiling of truth is assumed to happen primarily in the unilateral overflow of the desirous discourse from the master, not in the informal multilateral exchange between people from different sides of the spiritual threshold. Thus the discourses, which are worth recording for the wayfarers, begin exactly where the dialogical conversation between the *shaykh* and disciples ends.¹⁸⁰³

The *ṣuḥbah* between peers on the other hand embodies a complementary form of the transmission of truth and discursive desire. Formalities become markers of insincerity not only among advanced peers, but among peer novices. It is against the etiquette of fellow disciples, who are generally referred as “brethren” [*ikhwān*], to display toward each other artificial hospitality or generosity. The institution of Sufi ethics [*adab*], which aims to steer the companions to perfection cancels itself and negates all hierarchical boundaries between companions.¹⁸⁰⁴ In 1196, when Ibn al-‘Arabī had already attained great fame in Seville, he asked his silent and extremely respectful friends Abū al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Ṭufayl, Abū al-Qāsim al-Wā‘iz, Abū Bakr Ibn Sām, Abū al-Ḥakam ibn al-Sarrāj whether they would like to hear about his composition titled the *Guidance in Flouting the Usual Courtesies*. When they expressed their interest, he pushed his foot into the lap of Abū al-Ḥusayn, the host, telling him to massage it. Then all understood the meaning, and behaved, from then on, in a more relaxed manner.¹⁸⁰⁵ The rules of manners, regulations, and social hierarchies were to be

¹⁸⁰² At the beginning of Discourse #7, both Badī’ al-Zamān Furūzān-far’s Persian edition and Arberry’s English translation unfortunately drop the sentence “in addition, Mavlānā said a lot of useful [*favā’id*] things on this topic, such as what follows.” Trivial it may appear, it is this sentence that displays how the other things said by the other participants, if any, were omitted and not recorded. Like other important signifiers of the original context, Furūzān-far puts this sentence to the footnote in favor of a smoother discourse and in expense of the originality of the record. (Rūmī 1969, p.41 fn6.)

¹⁸⁰³ In an excellent study on Naqshbandī Sufism in modern Turkey, Silverstein underlines the fundamentally discursive dimension of *ṣuḥbah* (cf. Silverstein 2007). Instead of the term “conversation” that Silverstein uses, I rather prefer the broader term “discourse,” exactly because the hierarchical *ṣuḥbah* is in monological structure rather than a conversation. *Ṣuḥbah* begins where conversation ends.

¹⁸⁰⁴ “*Adab* was not concerned about human boundaries that we constructed in Sufi orders and by the law; rather, it was an instrument aimed at *transcending all boundaries*, whether imagined or understood.” (Huda 2004, p.481; emphasis mine.)

¹⁸⁰⁵ Ibn al-‘Arabī 1971, p.30.

removed for the genuine companionship of peers. As al-Sulamī (d.1021) famously wrote, “the manners among the brethren is to dispense with manners.”¹⁸⁰⁶ Rūmī’s son, Bahā’ al-Dīn repeated the same theme, writing that the *adab* of lovers is the negation of *adab*. No barrier or hierarchy should remain before the unification of the companions. According to the “*etiquette for the aspirants*” writers, if while one is undertaking a supererogatory fast one finds oneself in a company where people eat together, one must rather break the fast, because joining the companions and pleasing the heart of the brethren has priority.¹⁸⁰⁷ Supererogatory worship [*nāfila*; pl. *navāfil*]¹⁸⁰⁸—a key component of Sufi practice and famously the way whereby the divine reality displaces the ego and becomes the agent in human action—is secondary to the discursive act of communal gathering with the brethren. They are one soul, and mirrors for each other, which will be polished through embodied, discursive companionship.

Just as you shy away from your brother or sister, so you should excuse them for shying away from you. The pain you feel comes from those faults, and they see the same faults. [The Prophet said] “the believer is a mirror of believers,” but he did not say “the disbeliever is a mirror of disbelievers,” not because disbeliever does not have a mirror, but because they are not aware of the mirror of their self [*mir’āt-a khūd*].¹⁸⁰⁹

¹⁸⁰⁶ *Tark al-adab bayna al-ikhwān min al-adab*. (Al-Sulamī 1977, pp.52-53 (Arabic text), p.48 (Turkish translation).)

¹⁸⁰⁷ Al-Sulamī traces this practice back to the Prophet (al-Sulamī 1977, p.19 (Arabic text), p.27 (Turkish translation).) Also see al-Makkī 2001, Ch.40; Kubrā in Meier 1999, pp.82-83; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1414/1994, p.121 (for an English translation, see Ibn al-‘Arabī 1971, p.129.); al-Sulamī 1977, p.26 (Arabic text), p.31 (Turkish translation).

¹⁸⁰⁸ God said: “My servant draws near to Me by nothing more dear than the religious obligations [*furūd*] that I have imposed upon him, and My servant continues to draw near Me by willing acts of devotion [*nawāfil*] such that I love him. Then, when I love him, I become the ear with which he hears, the eye with which he sees, the hand with which he grasps, and the foot with which he walks.” This famous sacred report of supererogatory practices [*ḥadīth al-nawāfil*] had a key normative role in the organization of Sufism. (See Chittick 1989, pp.325-331.)

‘Umar al-Suhrawardī criticizes the Qalandarīs for performing only the obligatory practices and omitting the supererogatory ones, which are the key tools for approaching God [*qurbīyah*]. (‘Umar al-Suhrawardī 1939, p.57.) This insensitivity towards the supererogatory practices is apparently a major reason why al-Suhrawardī considers Qalandarīs beyond the pale of Sufism. For Ibn al-‘Arabī, the *nawāfil* were among the necessary conditions of *walāyah*. (See Addas 1994, p.44.) For others, see al-Kharrāz 1937, p.8, 49 (Arabic text), p.6, 40 (English translations); al-Bidlīsī 1999a, p.28; Ibn Barraġān 2015, #472, 536, 576, 691.

¹⁸⁰⁹ Rūmī 1969, p.37; Rūmī 2000, #6, pp.43-44.

The disciples are bound via multiple reciprocal moral relations stronger than the blood-ties.¹⁸¹⁰ For al-Makkī and al-Sulamī the reciprocal love among companions for the sake of God [*maḥabbat fī-llāh*] is a key aspect of Sufi manners that should have primacy over blood-ties and self-interest [*manfaʿat*].¹⁸¹¹ They are united in their soul: no matter what their number would be, the Sufi brethren should be counted merely as a single witness in the court.¹⁸¹² In what follows, note that the sacrifice [*fadā*] in the way and service of the companions is identical with that in the way of God according to Rūmī:

“The believers are like a single soul [*nafs wāḥidah*].”¹⁸¹³ The believers are like a single body [*yak tan*]. If one member feels pain, all the others are distressed. An eye gives up its seeing, the ear its hearing, the tongue its speech—all get united [*jamʿ shudan*] there. Companionship [*yārī*] is to sacrifice oneself for one’s companion; to plunge into danger for the sake of the companion. For all are headed towards one and the same [*yak*] goal and all are drowned in one and the same sea. This is the effect of faith and a provision of submission [*islām*]. What is the load the body carries compared to that load that the soul [*jān*] carries? “There is no harm; surely unto our Lord we are turning.”¹⁸¹⁴ Once the believer sacrifices one’s self to the Real [*Ḥaqq*], why should they give a thought to distress and danger, to hands and feet? As they are voyaging to the Real, what use do they have for limbs?¹⁸¹⁵

¹⁸¹⁰ Chamberlain 1994, p.110.

His female Sufi master Fāṭimah bint al-Muthannā (fl.late 12th CE) claimed a stronger blood-tie with Ibn al-ʿArabī than his biological mother. “When my mother came to visit her, Fāṭimah said to her, ‘O light [*Nūr*], this is my son and he is your father, so treat him filially.’” (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1971, p.26.) Ibn Miskawayh (d.1030) also claimed the same blood-tie between the Philosophy master and disciple. (Ibn Miskawayh 2011, p.371.)

¹⁸¹¹ al-Makkī 2001, Vol.3, p.1557; al-Sulamī 1977, pp.89-91 (Arabic text), pp.75-77 (Turkish translation).

¹⁸¹² Nurbakhsh 1978, p.106. Al-Makkī writes that friends who travel together are “united in one heart [*ittafaqu bi-qalb wāḥid*] and “they are all in one state [*wa humm wāḥid ʿalā ḥāl wāḥid*]. They are like one human being [*ka-ʿabd wāḥid*].” (Makkī 2001, Vol.3, p.1531.)

¹⁸¹³ Ḥadīth. Cf. Q.31:28. Also see Rūmī 2015, Vol.4, #414-421.

¹⁸¹⁴ Q.26:50.

¹⁸¹⁵ Rūmī 1969, pp.199-200; Rūmī 2000, #46, pp.318-319.

The subversive *ṣuḥbah* among masters, in the same vein, is the most perfect means of divine union, their hearts being polished through various disciplined practices, the most perfect of which is the practice of speech and active listening [*samāʿ*] to the divine discourse, dance being a form of it.¹⁸¹⁶ The spiritual path towards divine union, for Rūmī, has an end, which marks the spiritual maturation of the disciple and arrival at the spiritual threshold. While the path has an end, the travel does not; the infinite journey *in* God (or *with* God) begins where the journey *to* God ends.¹⁸¹⁷ The disciple surpasses the threshold by annihilating the ego [*nafs*], the emptiness of which will be filled by divine agency and desire. The master, who has passed beyond this threshold, has a polished heart that reflects the perpetual flow of divine mercy and love. The mirror reaches its apotheosis by becoming totally invisible, only mediating the influx of divine love and reflecting the desires of the yet-to-be polished disciples who look at it:

Shaykh Sarrazī¹⁸¹⁸ was seated one day amongst his disciples. One of the disciples had a longing for some roasted sheep's head [*sar-i buryān*]. The Shaykh called to his servant, saying, "Bring him some roasted sheep's head." "How did you know that he wanted roasted sheep's head?" the disciples asked. "Because it is now thirty years since such desires have left me," the Shaykh answered, "and I have purified myself of all desires." I am beyond them [*munazzaham*], and I have become formless [*bī-naqsh*] as a polished mirror. When the thought of roasted sheep's head

¹⁸¹⁶ Kapchan 2007, p.43.

Al-Kalābādhī traces these different forms of listening to Junayd:

I heard Abū al-Qāsim [Junayd] al-Baghdādī say: "Audition is of two kinds. One class of man listens to discourse, and derives therefrom an admonition: such a man only listens discriminately and with his heart present. The other class listens to music, which is the food of the spirit: and when the spirit obtains its food, it attains its proper station, and turns aside from the government of the body; and then there appears in the listener a commotion and a movement. (al-Kalābādhī 1993, p.178. Here I followed Arberry's translation. See al-Kalābādhī 1935, p.167.)

¹⁸¹⁷

If I have described at length the station of the seekers [*maqām-i sālikān*], how can I explain the states of those who have attained [*aḥvāl-a vāṣilān*]? They have no end—only seekers have an end. The end of the seekers is attainment. What could be the end for those who have attained union [*vaṣl*], a union with no separation [*farq*]? No ripe grape returns to an unripe grape. No mature fruit ever becomes raw again. (Rūmī 1969, p.142; Rūmī 2000, #28, pp.223-224)

¹⁸¹⁸ See Furūzān-far in Rūmī 1969, p.294.

entered my mind, whetted my appetite and became a desire, I knew it belonged to our friend, for no image is left in the mirror.

Any image appears in the mirror is the image of another.”¹⁸¹⁹

Unpolished hearts imitate the practices, follow the demands, and listen to the discourses of the master whose lower soul has vanished, allowing for the manifestation of excessive divine love and agency.¹⁸²⁰ The excess flows via the mediation of the master to the overwhelmed disciple. The master is a passive mirror who reflects the divine will, love and mercy via *ṣuḥbah*. If the peers are advanced Sufis instead of disciples, perfect mirrors are placed in front of each other. The excess of divine love has not a third place to pour out, but it reflects back from the perfect mirror of the companion flowing back to the master. Mirrors appear in the other mirror as the perfect image of the divine beloved. The “companion” transforms into the beloved, where the distinction between human beloved, divine beloved, and lover vanishes.

Ṣuḥbah and Apotheosis

One of the most unfortunate misconceptions in the scholarship on Rūmī is the misplaced effort to locate the binary between the human beloved and divine beloved in his poems as if Rūmī considered the divine beloved an independent object alternative to the human beloved.¹⁸²¹ For the majority of context,

¹⁸¹⁹ Rūmī 1969, p.55; Rūmī 2000, #10, pp.76-77.

¹⁸²⁰ It seems that somebody from Rūmī’s circle went to Egypt seeking knowledge, and maybe even another Sufi master. With a tone of disappointment, Rūmī claims that he is indeed the perfect mirror for the seekers, instead of other shaykhs:

Sayf al-Bukhārī left us and went to Egypt. Everyone likes [*yuḥibb*] a mirror, and is in love [*’ishq*] with reflections of their own attributes and attainments. But our friend misses the truth of his own face [*ḥaqīqat vajhihi*]. He supposes that the veil [*burqa*] is the face, and the mirror of the veil is the mirror of his face. Uncover your face, so you can find me [*tujidnī*] as a mirror of your true self and you realize that I am a mirror. (Rūmī 1969, p.181; Rūmī 2000, #43, p.286)

¹⁸²¹ An assumed distinction between the human beloved and the divine beloved as two alternative objects ends up with an artificial categorization of Rūmī’s poetry. What Farhadi categorizes as devotional prayers [*munājāt*] to God can be rather read as a yearning to the apotheosized Shams. (Farhadi 2010, pp.103-104.)

There are a small number of poems Rūmī penned within the genre of secular love poetry and with an appeal to the imagery in its topography, as his father and his son also did. The three poets that Rūmī liked to read, Mutanabbī (d.965), Sanā’ī, and ‘Aṭṭār penned monumental examples in this genre as well. Most of Rūmī’s poems, especially the ones which explicitly name a human beloved do not distinguish the human from the divine beloved. The name of the human beloved is not expressed in the classical Persian love poetry. Thousands of poems devoted to

including the devotional ones, the binary will not work. Rūmī's presumed identity as a secular humanist, or the supposed role of "homosexuality" in his intimate relationship with Shams arise from similar misconceptions about divine union and human beloved in Rūmī.¹⁸²² Shams embodies Rūmī's apotheosized, perfect companion of *ṣuḥbah*, thus his human-divine beloved that led to the erasure of Rūmī's identity in his ecstatic poems. Rūmī signs his poems with the penname "Shams" or its variations, as an indicator of the negation of Rūmī's identity in the discursive unity with of Shams, rather than a union with God as such. The *Dīvān* embodies an excessive desire for the *ṣuḥbah* of Shams, not an ontological union with God.

The divinization of the enigmatic Shams, on the other hand, should not misdirect us to seeing here a fetishized object of desire. Rūmī has similar poems of excessive desire for Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn or "the light of truth" [*ziya' al-Ḥaqq*] Ḥusām al-Dīn, who became Rūmī's most intimate companions after he finally conceded Shams' departure of no-return.¹⁸²³ According to the witness of Sulṭān Valad, Rūmī mentioned of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn with the following lines:

*That Sun of Religion [Shams al-Dīn] of whom we always spoke
Has come back to us! Why do we slumber?
Changed into new clothes, he has returned
To flaunt and strut and show his beauty...*¹⁸²⁴

Indeed, a poem in the *Dīvān* signed with the name "Shams al-Tabrīzī" seems to have been actually written for this "new Sun [Shams]," Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn!

*He changed clothes and appeared again
It's the same wine, though the glass has changed*

...

*The white Greek [Rūmī] disappeared
When the black Ethiopic age began*

...

*Proclaim: the Sun of Truth of Tabrīz [Shams al-Ḥaqq al-Tabrīzī] has
arrived!*¹⁸²⁵

Shams or Ḥusām al-Dīn are written to the perfect discursive mirror via which Rūmī experiences the excess of divine love.

¹⁸²² See e.g. Barzan 1995.

¹⁸²³ E.g. Rūmī 2015, Vol.1, #428, 1149, 1807, 2934; Vol.2, #2282, Vol.3, #2110, Vol.4, #1, 16. Also see Lewis 2000, p.215-223.

¹⁸²⁴ Sulṭān Valad in Lewis 2000, p.206.

¹⁸²⁵ Rūmī 1376/1998, #650, pp.274-275; F. Lewis 2000, pp.206-207.

While Rūmī's excessive love for Shams or Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn seems unusual, his love for Ḥusām al-Dīn was nothing less. The purpose of writing the entire *Maṣnavī*, claims Rūmī repeatedly, was Ḥusām al-Dīn himself; his *Maṣnavī* was a "humble" gift given to this gentle king (by a poor slave).¹⁸²⁶ Ḥusām al-Dīn becomes the object of divine union towards whom Rūmī's excessive desire is channeled:

Thou, Ḥusām al-Dīn, the radiance of Truth,
You are my object in this *Maṣnavī*.
The whole *Maṣnavī* in its branches and roots is thine.
[...] In all its expressions my object is thy mystery;
In composing it my object is thy voice.
To me thy voice is the voice of God.
Never parted be the lover from beloved!
The union [*ittiṣāl*] between the lord of human and the spirit
of human
Is beyond description or analogy [*bī-takyīf bī-qiyās*].¹⁸²⁷

Not God, but these names, one by one, became Rūmī's embodied divine mirror of excessive desire and companions of divine union. This apotheosizing intimate companionship requires the presence of embodied discursive contact, without fetishizing these sacred bodies.¹⁸²⁸ Rūmī is not an ecstatic lover of an abstract God nor the sexualized body of Shams, but the mirror-companionship of his father, Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn, Shams, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, and Ḥusām al-Dīn sequentially, as his writings testify.

Rūmī's apotheosizing approach to the beloved mirror-companion, indeed, seems to be vaguely transmitted to his son as well. Sulṭān Valad's apotheosizing poems of excessive love are directed first to Rūmī, and to Ḥusām al-Dīn after the death of his father. When Ḥusām al-Dīn passed away and Sulṭān Valad became the master of the order, his poems and writings focus on an unnamed "elect saint" [*valī-ya guzīn*] who is the pole [*quṭb*] of the universe through whose polished heart God dispenses existence, mercy and love. Sulṭān Valad dramatically keeps the name of this sacred beloved, Karīm al-Dīn Bektemur (d.1292), secret until Bektemur takes to his deathbed.¹⁸²⁹ In these cases of divine love, the excessive desire is directed towards the embodied, discursive companionship with peers,

¹⁸²⁶ Rūmī 2015, Vol.6, #1-8; Lewis 2000, p.220. Also see Rūmī 2015, Vol.5, #1-16.

¹⁸²⁷ Rūmī 2015, Vol.4, #754-760; with my slight modifications.

¹⁸²⁸ Cf. Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī 1969, #58, pp-225-228.

¹⁸²⁹ Interestingly the later Mawlawī tradition and the hagiographies do not recognize Bektemur as the head of the order between Ḥusām al-Dīn and Sulṭān Valad.

who will serve as the mirror of the self, as the locus of divine influx of mercy and love, and thus, as the apotheosized beloved where the ego is to be annihilated for the divine union.¹⁸³⁰ Not only thousands of Rūmī's poems, or his discourses, but also his letters show such an excessive desire for the recipient, ranging from friends, like Akmal al-Dīn Ṭabīb (d.late 13th CE) to his immediate family, such as his daughter-in-law, son-in-law and son. A letter to Ḥusām al-Dīn illustrates this excess:

As it [our separation] has lasted so long, we have been obliged to be content with the lofty, subtle and noble imagination of that beloved [‘Azīz]. ... We contented ourselves with the imagination of the imagination [*khayāl-a īn khayāl*] of that sublime truth. May even that imagination last forever, without interruption! These few words just came to be written [*navashta āmad*] heart-freely [*bī-dal*], hand-freely [*bī-dast*], neither drunkenly nor soberly [*na hushyār na mast*]. I won't apologize, as in his blessed conscience [*zamīr*] I have somebody present there without intermediary [*bī-vāsiṭa*]. He will convey my apology better than I can, more eloquently, correctly, guiltlessly. *May God unite us with His unity beyond all unities* [*yajma' baynanā warā' al-jam' jam'an min 'indahu*]. *To Him belongs the unity beyond all unities* [*warā' kull jam'*]; *a unity superior to the former one* [*in pre-existence*], *higher, purer, sweeter, beyond ending* [*lā-nihāyah*] *and beyond purpose* [*lā-ghāyah*]! *So be it* [*āmīn*], *o Lord of creation!*¹⁸³¹

This overflow of excessive desire is not limited to his beloved companions, family or disciples, but it subversively extends to the political and military elite, who embody the larger community of the “clients” [*muḥibbūn*]. We witness in the record of a discourse how Rūmī welcomes Amīr Parvāna to the convent [*khānaqāh*], emphasizing the unity of their souls that further builds up via embodied discursive companionship.¹⁸³² A comparison of Rūmī's letters with the

¹⁸³⁰ “[Rūmī] viewed Ṣalāḥ and Ḥusām al-Dīn as mirrors in and through which his spirituality could find reflection. Perhaps Sultān Valad (and Ḥusām al-Dīn?) similarly saw himself in Karīm al-Dīn and therefore chose to focus his spiritual energies on him.” (F. Lewis, p.234.)

¹⁸³¹ Rūmī 1937, #128, p.134; Rūmī 1963, #130, p.196 (the italicized part is in Arabic).

¹⁸³²

My greater desire is to see my friends [*dūstān*], to gaze my fill upon them, and they on me, excessively [*sīr sīr*]. For, when friends see deeply into one another here, below, and they are raised into the other world after become very familiar here, they quickly recognize one another there. Knowing how closely

normative manners of official epistolary [*inshā'*] literature and other letters written in his time testifies how Rūmī is deliberately violating all normative writing formalities and its hierarchies in favor of a bolder expression of the sincere desire for a union with the recipient.¹⁸³³ Be it in the form of poetry, letter, sermon or discourse, Rūmī makes it clear that God is too transcendent to become the direct object of desire. The communion with God is only possible via *ṣuḥbah* with the heart of the companion that reflects God's immense light that cannot be confronted directly.¹⁸³⁴ It is the discursive, embodied companionship with peers that organizes the process of self-purification on the way of divine union:

If you find fault in your brother or sister, the fault you see in them is within yourself. The world is a mirror, and you see there your own image [*naqsh*]. "The believer is a mirror of believers." Get rid

they were together [*bā-ham*] in the world of mortality, their reuniting [*ba-payvandand*] brings great joy." (Rūmī 1969, p.52; Rūmī 2000, #10, pp.69-70.)

¹⁸³³ Turan's *Official Documents on the Saljūqs of Rum [Türkiye Selcuklulari Hakkında Resmi Vesikalar]*, first published in Turkish in 1958 introduces a variety of official writings, primarily in Persian, including *inshā'* books. Ḥasan ibn 'Abd al-Mu'min al-Khūyī (d.ea.14th CE)'s *Ghunyat al-Kātib wa munyat al-tālib* (wr. in 1309), *Nuzhat al-Kuttāb* written before the *Ghunyat*, and *Qawā'id al-Rasā'il wa Farā'id al-faḍā'il* as well as Abū Bakr ibn Zakī al-Dīn (d.af.1283)'s *al-Tarassul ilā al-Tavassul* are briefly introduced here. Turan shows that *al-Tarassul ilā al-Tavaṣṣul* was not penned by famous Saljūqī Amīr Badr al-Dīn (d.1282), but by his student, Ibn Zakī al-Dīn. He also argues that *al-Tarassul ilā al-Tavaṣṣul* and *Ravzat al-Kuttāb wa Ḥadīqat al-Albāb*, known to be different *inshā'* works, are indeed the same book. See Turan 1988, pp.22-27, 147-150, 172-175.

Golpinarli compares Rūmī's style with Khūyī's *Nuzhat*, *Ghunyat* and *Qawā'id* in the introduction of his edition of Rūmī's *Letters*. Golpinarli concludes that Rūmī's letters to the Sulṭāns, amīrs and deputies [*nā'ib*] violate the normative principles of official writing in favor of a more intimate, informal writing style. (See Golpinarli in Rūmī 1963, pp.xiv-xvi.)

¹⁸³⁴ The Selimaga manuscript (MS.190a) in Istanbul, which neither Furūzān-far nor Arberry consulted in their editions of *Fīhi Mā Fīh*, contains a discourse of Rūmī that succinctly explains this idea:

Perfection [*kamāl*] demands that human beings incline towards others. Human being should strive for perfection, not the opposite. ... You incline towards the knowledge of God. You focus on God's ipseity, attributes, or actions... What you don't know is that you will be disgruntled in this way, for that idea or imagination can never be true of God. So come and fall in love with us; desire us! Stop imagining and pondering on ipseity, attributes, this, or that, and turn towards perfection.

of those faults in yourself, because what bothers you in these faults bothers you in yourself.¹⁸³⁵

The Maṣnavī famously narrates “the story of the contention between the Greeks [Rūmī] and the Chinese in the art of painting and picturing,” where the Chinese painters occupy themselves with doing their best to create the most beautiful painting. The Greek artists on the other hand, just focus on polishing their wall. Once the curtain between the two is removed, the Sulṭān sees the most splendid paintings on the wall painted by the Chinese artists. However, the reflection of these paintings on the polished wall of the Greek painters is much more beautiful. “Those Greek artists are Sufis,” concludes Rūmī, as they are the masters of polishing their heart.¹⁸³⁶ The reflections of images in the mirror of the heart are more beautiful than their perceptive appearance, because it is the divine, angelic essence of human being where the reality [*ḥaqīqat*] and the true origins of appearances are manifest.¹⁸³⁷

¹⁸³⁵ Rūmī 1969, p.36; Rūmī 2000, #6, p.42. Also see ‘Ayn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī in Papan-Matin 2010, p.218.

¹⁸³⁶

They perfectly polished their hearts and purified themselves from greed, cupidity, avarice and hatred. That purity of the mirror is, beyond doubt, the heart which receives images innumerable. Moses (the perfect saint) holds in his bosom the formless infinite form of the Unseen (reflected) from the mirror of his heart.¹⁸³⁶ Although that form is not contained in heaven, nor in the empyrean nor in the sphere of the stars, nor on the earth, because all those are bounded and numbered. Yet is it contained in the heart: know that the mirror of the heart is boundless.¹⁸³⁶ Here the understanding becomes silent or else becomes perplexed: is the heart God, or indeed is God the heart? The reflection of every image shines everlasting from the heart alone, both with plurality and without. Unto everlasting every new image that falls on the heart is appearing therein without any imperfection. They that polish their hearts are not bound by scent and color: they behold the beauty at every moment without tarrying. (Rūmī 2015, Vol.1, #3467-99; Vol.4, #1358-72.)

A story in Aflākī shows that the artists of Rūm were indeed held unrivalled in painting. (Aflākī 2002, #540, pp.382-383; Aflākī 2001, #537, pp.124-125.) Ibn al-‘Arabī also narrates a very interesting anecdote about his encounter in Konya with a Greek painter, who ultimately kissed Ibn al-‘Arabī’s forehead to show his appreciation of the aesthetic perception of the shaykh. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1971, pp.40-41.)

In the version of Ibn Khaldūn, who cites Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, the rivalry was between Indian and Chinese artists. In opposition to the version of Rūmī, here the Chinese artists are described not as the ones who strived to paint the wall with colors, but as the polishers of their wall. (Ibn Khaldūn 1996, pp.61-62.)

¹⁸³⁷ See Rustom 2010.

In the *ṣuḥbah* of unequals, the excess of divine beauty unilaterally overflows as a reflection to the unpolished hearts. In the excessively desirous, discursive companionship of peers, however, perfectly polished walls, or mirrors are looking to each other. If the mirrors are polished well via the communal, embodied, discursive practice, then the differences will melt away in the excess of divine love.¹⁸³⁸ The image, its real owner, and the mirror where the image reflects become one, coincident with the unity of the two mirrors facing each other. The heart is the mirror that reflects divine love to the companion, and the reflected divine love of the companion back to the companion. The heart is the image of divine reality reflected in the mirror of the companion. The completely polished heart is also the divine owner of the image, as there nothing but the owner once the mirror realizes its non-existence, while presence is only that of the human/divine beloved.¹⁸³⁹ The mirror, the image appearing in the mirror, and the owner of the image together manifest excessive love in the discursive

¹⁸³⁸ It is worth remembering that the apologue has been interpreted in symmetrically opposite way since the early and influential works on “Persian Mysticism,” such as the German protestant theologian Tholuck’s *Bluthensammlung* (pbl.1825) or the English meditative writer R. A. Vaughan (d.1857)’s *Hours with the Mystics* (pbl.1856). Accordingly, the story narrates an individualistic, “simplifying, purifying process which shall remove from the mind everything earthly and human.” (Vaughan 1893, Vol.2, p.12.)

¹⁸³⁹ For Rūmī, the ecstatic sayings [*shatahāt*] of al-Biṣṭāmī or al-Ḥallāj do not represent antinomian arrogance, as opposed to Shams’ virulent and repeated claims. Rūmī also disagrees with Ibn al-‘Arabī, who tended to view *shatahāt* as reckless utterances of imperfect, irresponsible mystics (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2007w, p.408; also see Ernst 1993). Instead, they embody the paragon of modesty in self-annihilation and the affirmation of God’s presence, where the mirror is so well-polished that it disappears and only the owner of the image remains in it.

Consider that utterance “I am God [*anā al-Ḥaqq*].” Some people think this is a great pretension [*da’vā*], but “I am God” is in fact a great humility [*‘aẓīm tavāzu*]. Those who say, instead, “I am a servant of God” affirm [*iṣbāt*] that two exist, themselves and God. But those who say, “I am God” annihilated their self [*khūd rā ‘adam kard*] and have cast themselves to the winds. They say, “I am God” meaning, “I am not, God is all [*man nīstam, hamā ūst*]. *There is no existence but God* [*juz khudā rā hastī nīst*]. I have lost all separation. I am nothing [*hīch*].” In this the humility is greater. This is what ordinary people don’t understand. When they render service in honor of God’s glory, their servanthood is still present. Even though it is for the sake of God, they still see themselves and their own actions as well as God—they are not drowned in the water. That person is drowned when no movement, nor any action belongs to them, all their movements spring from the movement of the water. (Rūmī 1969, p.58; Rūmī 2000, #11, pp.83-84)

companionship of peers, and unite in a dazzling perspective shift.¹⁸⁴⁰ The divine attributes, both positive and negative, become manifest in this divine unity of the beloved, lover and love.¹⁸⁴¹

D. Divine Attributes: Apotheosis and Apophasis

I have highlighted Sufi *ṣuḥbah* as a discursive communal relationship of guidance towards and wayfaring on the path of divine union regulated by moral principles informed by the spiritual levels of the participants. In line with wider Khurāsānian Sufism, Rūmī's corpus approaches divine union with an emphasis on *ṣuḥbah* rather than the inward quest of the isolated ascetic. The approximation to divine unity is coterminous with the discursive union of peers. This fundamental social consciousness of urban Sufi etiquette and morality in thirteenth century Khurāsān and Anatolia encourage the companions to transgress the hierarchical boundaries, and unite with divine bones of love much stronger than blood-ties or religious affiliations. Therefore the hierarchies are not ubiquitous in all forms of *ṣuḥbah*, and their presence is not so much an expression of the master's authority or a social obstacle for the disciple as a regulation of effective and beneficent flow of the divine discursive desire. In Rūmī's circle, the term "oneness" [*vaḥdat*], employed primarily to refer to seclusion or solitude¹⁸⁴² or to individual ontological communion with God, is subverted with a consistent reference to the desirous unity of companions. The discursive unity between the companions is coterminous with the realization of the divine union with God. In this conception of divine unity, the heart does not reflect God's light to oneself—it reflects the reflection of the divine light on the companion's heart. In this doubling of light, the companion becomes inseparably the apotheosized divine image of the beloved, its mirror, and the lover. This is the drunken "stage of non-stage" that Rūmī celebrates: consciousness and agency fade away in the ecstasy of unity. Rūmī becomes Shams; Shams reaches human perfection [*kamāl*; apotheosis] as God's perfect mirror, and God becomes the agent that expels the remains of the self in Rūmī and Shams, filling them to overflowing with divine love and agency. Neither "Rūmī" nor "Shams," who are

¹⁸⁴⁰ Cf. Sells 1994, pp.63-89.

¹⁸⁴¹ "I am the one whom I desire, whom I desire is I" [*anā man ahwā wa man ahwā anā*]. (al-Ḥallāj in Ernst 1993, p.11) Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn anonymously quotes a parallel phrase: "what you are seeking and desiring is nothing but you, not something else." (Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn 1973, p.57.)

¹⁸⁴² Landolt 2012. E.g. al-Bidlīsī 1999b, p.30; al-Kharrāz 1937, p.59 (Arabic text), p.48 (English translation).

now annihilated in discursive communion, but the divine attributes manifest themselves at this point through the desires, discourses and bodies of the unified perfect mirrors.¹⁸⁴³

Rendering the heart a perfect mirror for the divine reflection (and the discursive reflection of the reflection via *ṣuḥbah*) means emptying the soul of the rust of lowly desires. This practice of polishing is a distinct negation of worldly qualities. The discursive companionship of the perfect beloved, even just for a word, is enough to polish the mirror of the heart, perfecting the lover by negating all worldly qualities. Ḥusām al-Dīn narrates that once Rūmī asked him “How are you” [*chūnī*]; just this one word of the perfect beloved without qualities [*bī-chūn*] was enough to render Ḥusām al-Dīn himself devoid of all qualities [*bī-chūn*].¹⁸⁴⁴ The Greek painters did not need any color, as the act of polishing yielded a colorlessness that entails all possible colors by passing beyond them. “Colorlessness is the root of colors, picturelessness the root of pictures, wordlessness the root of words.”¹⁸⁴⁵ The divine beloved reflected in the mirror is transcendent, and the attributes that the perfected soul attains are negations of

¹⁸⁴³ The worldly binaries are transcended with the divine union of the perfect lovers. If somebody slanders at them, the slander indeed becomes praise for them. As they are beyond good and evil, every discourse on good and evil becomes an indicator to the gnostics’ transcendence of them. Even their “greatness” cannot be comprehended within anthropomorphic standards: “The greatness of the saints [*buzurgī avliyā*] means nothing in this world. By God, yes, they have an elevation and greatness, but it is cause-free and quality-free [*bī-chūn va bī-chagūna*].” (Rūmī 1969, p.122; Rūmī 2000, #24, p.187.)

Ibn al-‘Arabī made the same argument for God on the applicability of divine attributes. Accordingly, the nobility or lowliness arise either from the conventional customs [*‘urf*] or from the verdict of the law-giver [*ḥukm al-shāri’*]. (Ibn al-‘Arabī 2007c, p.215.)

¹⁸⁴⁴

Seven complete years went by after the death of my shaykh [Mavlānā] and I never saw him in a dream.

Who seeks a sign of you who are devoid of signs?

Who finds your place, since you’re devoid of place?

And I remained in this state of perplexity. Suddenly one day I was walking in the garden. I beheld the door of the ninth heaven open up and Mavlānā spoke to me, saying: “Chalabī Ḥusām al-Dīn, how are you [*chūnī*]?” And I saw nothing else. In the grace [*laṭāfat*] of the qualitative state [*chūnī*] of the one without qualities [*bī-chūn*] having asked “how are you [*chūnī*],” it is years now since I have become devoid of qualities [*bī-chūn*] and go about in a state without qualities [*bī-chūnī*]. (Aflākī 2002, #588, p.410; Aflākī 2001, #585, p.170.)

¹⁸⁴⁵ Rūmī 1983, p.23.

the worldly binaries. The positive and negative qualities that the companions attain are apophatic in the discursive companionship of peers.

Apotheosis of Desires

In line with the general Sufi topography of his time, countless examples demonstrate that the mercy, benevolence, love or wrath of the perfected human soul is in fact a manifestation of the divine mercy, benevolence, love or wrath for Rūmī. In one example, Rūmī makes Amīr Parvāna wait for a while, and Parvāna thinks that this is part of disciplining his soul and experientially learning that making ones visitors wait is not very polite. “No,” says Rūmī and compares this to a divine action: “God does not accept the prayer of His beloved ones, because He likes to hear their appeal, desire and prayers at His doors. So is my love for your presence here.”¹⁸⁴⁶ There are, however, more elusive examples of the apotheosis in Rūmī’s corpus. One of them is related to the problematic attribute of God, “the Ambusher,” or with Arberry’s translation of the Qur’ānic verse, “the Deviser:” “and when the unbelievers were devising against thee, to confine thee, or slay thee, or to expel thee, and were devising, and God was devising; and God is the best of Devisers.”¹⁸⁴⁷ While no doubt all the beautiful names belonged to God,¹⁸⁴⁸ “the Ambusher” did not appear very beautiful to the human understanding, but it could also not be outright discarded since it appeared in the sacred discourse, the Qur’ān. Ibn al-‘Arabī for example claimed that “the Ambusher” is indeed a beautiful name of God the wisdom of which transcended human understanding. Still, Ibn al-‘Arabī warned that we should not use this name to refer to God, as it would be against the customs or the law; only God could name Himself with this attribute.¹⁸⁴⁹ For a wide variety of Sufis including

¹⁸⁴⁶

Two beggars come to the door of a certain person. One is highly loved and sought after, while the other is disliked. The owner of the house says to a slave, “Give that hated one a piece of bread quickly and without delay, so he will leave right away.” To the other beloved beggar the owner makes promises, saying, “The bread is not yet baked. Wait patiently until the bread is properly cooked and baked. (Rūmī 1969, pp.51-52; Rūmī 2000, #10, pp.69-70)

¹⁸⁴⁷ Q.8:30. Also see Q.3:54: “And they devised, and God devised, and God is the best of devisers.”

¹⁸⁴⁸ See Q.7:180: “To God belong the Names Most Beautiful; so call Him by them, and leave those who blaspheme His Names—they shall assuredly be recompensed for the things they did.”

¹⁸⁴⁹

“Among the names are those which can appropriately be designated and those which cannot. For example, the Splitter [of the Dawn] [*al-fāliq*] and the

Abū Madyan (d.1198),¹⁸⁵⁰ al-Shushtarī (d.1269),¹⁸⁵¹ al-Simnānī (d.1336),¹⁸⁵² ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī,¹⁸⁵³ ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī,¹⁸⁵⁴ ‘Aṭṭār¹⁸⁵⁵ among many others,¹⁸⁵⁶ “the Ambusher” is among the reviled characters [*al-akhlāq al-madhmūmah*] even for the aspirants. A Turkish poem attributed to Aflākī, Rūmī’s own biographer, employs the term in reference to Satan’s deceptions.¹⁸⁵⁷ Rūmī on the other hand, follows al-Junayd,¹⁸⁵⁸ and does employ this controversial attribute with reference to God: God ambushes human beings in order to show mercy and deliver them against their own will.¹⁸⁵⁹ More interestingly, Rūmī applies the same weirdly divine attribute to the Sufi companions who become God’s perfect mirror; “they ambush the people, but only for the sake of their felicity, not in order to receive something.”¹⁸⁶⁰ The cunning of the Sufi master

Appointer [*al-jā’il*] have been designated, but the “Mocker” [see Q.2:15] and the “Derider” have not been revealed. Nevertheless, it is He who mocks whomsoever He will of His servants. He deceives and derides whomsoever of them He will, since He has mentioned this [in the Qur’ān]. Yet He is not named by anything of this sort.” (Ibn al-‘Arabī in Chittick 1989, p.42)

Also see Ibn al-‘Arabī 2007t, p.215; Sells 1994, p.101.

¹⁸⁵⁰ Abū Madyan 1996, pp.94-95

¹⁸⁵¹ al-Shushtarī 2004, p.61.

¹⁸⁵² Elias 1995, p.67.

¹⁸⁵³ ‘Umar al-Suhrawardī 1996, p.80.

¹⁸⁵⁴ ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Kāshānī 2010, p.42.

¹⁸⁵⁵ Landolt 2006, pp.12-13.

¹⁸⁵⁶ See al-Kharkūshī 1999, p.52; al-Sulamī 2015, p.91, 125; al-Sīrjānī 2012, p.337.

¹⁸⁵⁷

Nefsi öldür uyma şeytan mekrine

Şeytanı terk eyleyen Raḥmān bulur (Aflākī in Tavukcu 2002, p.100.)

¹⁸⁵⁸ Cf. al-Junayd 2003, p.36.

¹⁸⁵⁹ “God is Ambusher [*Makkār*]; He shows beautiful forms in the abdomen of bad forms so that we will learn not to claim, out of arrogance and vanity, the beautiful ideas and actions as our own.” (Rūmī 1969, p.19; Rūmī 2000, #1, p.11.)

¹⁸⁶⁰

If the saints seek worldly rank and office, it is for this purpose [*gharaz*]: they desire to snare those worldlings, who do not have the vision to see their true elevation, with a trap of worldly rank [*dām-a dunyā*]. Through this they may find their way to the higher worlds, and fall into the trap of divine grace [*dām-a ākhīrat*]. ... The saints beguile [*mī-farībān*] people in order to bestow gifts on them, not to take anything away. When someone lays a trap [*dām*] and catches little birds to eat and sell, that is called cunning [*makr*]. But if a king lays a trap to capture an untutored and worthless hawk, having no knowledge of its own

was a clear subversion of the roles determined in the normative *ādāb al-ṣuḥbah* which firmly stipulated that the master must never deceive the disciple.¹⁸⁶¹

Similarly, apotheosis makes the attribute of divine will [*irādah*] a quality of the perfected souls. Their actions express the divine will:

[They] have died before death,¹⁸⁶² and have become like doors and walls. Not even a hair's tip of separate existence remains in them. In the hand of absolute power [*dar dast-a qudrat*] they are captivated like a shield—the shield doesn't move under its own power, and that's the meaning of "I am the Truth [*anā al-Ḥaqq*]." The shield says "I am nothing at all, the movement comes from the hand of God."¹⁸⁶³

To narrate this sense of passive mediation of the divine agency, Rūmī employs metaphors of dead bodies drowned in the ocean of mercy: the agency behind the movement of the corpse is not its own will, which has been annihilated, but

true nature, to train it to his own forearm so that it may become ennobled, that is not called cunning. Though to outward appearance it is cunning, yet it is known to be the very acme of caring and generosity [*'ayn-a rāstī va 'aṭā va bakhshish*]. (Rūmī 1969 pp.38-39; Rūmī 2000, #6, p.47)

Rūmī also employs the metaphor of cunning to explain the relationship between the master and the disciple. The disciple "sat covertly watching for his prey, but that prey was watching him in his hidyhole, and his cunning. ... He cannot be trapped without his free consent [*ikhtiyār*]." (Rūmī 1969, p.156; Rūmī 2000, #34, p.245.)

¹⁸⁶¹ "The shaykh must never deceive, in keeping with the prophetic saying: 'he who deceives is not one of us'." (Farah 1974, p.89.)

¹⁸⁶² Q.8:17. Rūmī cites this verse many times.

So sever the head of (your) selfness, O sword of 'Alī.
Become self-less- a Darvīsh-like annihilated one.
When you become self-less, everything you do (will be)
"You did not throw when you threw," (and)
you will be secure [from self-will].
The responsibility is (then) with God, not with the appointed
trustee. The details of it are in plain view in (the books of)
religious law. (Rūmī 2015, Vol.6, #1522-1524.)

Also see Rūmī 1969 p.149; Rūmī 2000, #31, p.235; Rūmī 2015, Vol.1, #3789, where he makes the same point.

¹⁸⁶³ Rūmī 1969, p.88; Rūmī 2000, #16, p.131.

the agency of the divine ocean.¹⁸⁶⁴ God's friends are "like bowls on the surface of the water. The direction a bowl moves is controlled not by the bowl, but by the water."¹⁸⁶⁵ Once the ego and its agency are erased, the seeker passes not only beyond evil, but also good. They have no contribution in the perpetual service, mercy and blessings [*barakat*] that they provide, because no agent except God is actually operating there.

This is what ordinary people don't understand. When they render service [*bandagī*] in honor of God's glory, their servanthood is still present. Even though it is for the sake of God, they still see themselves, their own actions, and God. They are not drowned in the water. One is drowned if no movement or action remains in that person. All their movements should be the movements of the water.¹⁸⁶⁶

Apotheosis of human being is realized with its negation in divine union. Having their egos annihilated in the human/divine beloved, divine lovers become the embodiment of the divine will. The divinized perfection of human agency is attained via its very annihilation.

Apotheosis of the Discourse

The discourses of perfected souls do not express the desires of the ego, which has already been immersed in the divine ocean.¹⁸⁶⁷ Their speech expresses the divine agency, and disperses mercy. As Aflākī narrates, Shams claimed that even his curse brings blessing to its addressee. Like the Qur'ān, or the prophetic sayings, the discourses of Shams and Rūmī attain endless hermeneutical layers. Rūmī claims that his discourse is produced by the divine will in accordance with

¹⁸⁶⁴ Cf. Ibn al-'Arabī's chapter on Noah (1946, Ch.3, pp.68-74), where the people of Noah adhered to their idols (knowing that not only the god of Noah but also the idols were different manifestations of the transcendent, divine truth), and drowned in the ocean (of mercy).

¹⁸⁶⁵ Rūmī 1969, p.174; Rūmī 2000, #41, p.274.

¹⁸⁶⁶ Rūmī 1969, p.58; Rūmī 2000, #11, pp.83-84. Such references to drowning as a metaphor for the apotheosis of agency, can be found in the works of al-Niffarī, Najm al-Dīn Kubrā, and 'Aṭṭār, among others. (D. Martin 1992, p.238, 244fn45.) This form of divine agency was quite popular in thirteenth century Sufism and found expression in Baqlī and Ibn al-'Arabī as well, with differences in nuances. Both narrate how Abū Yazīd Bisṭāmī's blew on an ant he had killed, and it revived. Ibn al-'Arabī comments that God blew when he blew, and it was like Jesus' miracles as recorded in the Qur'ān. (Ernst 1993, p.14.)

¹⁸⁶⁷ "If you hear speech coming through a wall, you know that wall isn't speaking and that voice belongs to someone else. The saints [*avliyā'*] are like this." (Rūmī 1969, p.88; Rūmī 2000, #16, p.131.)

the addressee's level on understanding and individual needs.¹⁸⁶⁸ This is the main aspect that distinguished Rūmī's verbal speech from that of Shams, whose discourse was famous for not changing in accordance with the audience, and thus, it was perceived to be disturbing for most of the time. Both Rūmī and Shams are aware of this difference. For Shams, this very stability in every context was a sign of the perfection of his discourse indicating his sober, complete control of the divine speech that is mediated via his tongue.¹⁸⁶⁹ Any lack in human agency, intoxication or contextual change was thus a sign of imperfection of the discourse. Truth does not change in accordance with the audience.¹⁸⁷⁰ On the other hand for Rūmī, who began preaching at an early age, the presence of divine discourse depends on the annihilation of human agency. Thus speech is never under Rūmī's complete control when he utters it; its influx overwhelms and controls him as the waves control the corpse, not the other way around.

Speech I am given is not in my control, and therefore I am pained, because I would like to counsel [*mav'aza*] my friends but speech does not come as I want it to. This brings pain. But since speech is higher than I, and I am its captive [*maḥkūm*], I am happy. For, the

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Speech [*sukhan*] comes according to the attainment of the listener. Speech is like water that flows from its master [*mīr-āb*]. How can the water know where it will be sent—into the cucumber-patch, the onionbed, or the rose-garden? But I know this: when water comes in torrents, there the lands are thirsty and extensive. But if only a little trickle flows, that land is small—a little orchard, or a tiny courtyard. The Prophet said, “God inspires wisdom [*ḥikmat*] in the tongue of the teachers [*lisān al-wā'izin*] according to the aspirations of the student.” (Rūmī 1969, p.126; Rūmī 2000, #25, p.195)

¹⁸⁶⁹ With an interesting twist, Shams claims that he has trained many pupils, and God has inspired him “to use words to train people so that they may be delivered from themselves and go forward.” Accordingly, “when Mavlānā has some God-given words, he speaks them without being concerned with whether or not anyone will benefit.” (Shams 2004, #29, p.192.) Shams claims that his speech guides the audience without even making them aware of this deliverance.

¹⁸⁷⁰ Rūmī's discourses refer to this difference as well.

It is better not to question Darvīshes [*faqīr*], since this obliges them to invent a lie. For if an anthropomorphist [*jismānī*] questions a Darvīsh, the Darvīsh must give some answer. But how can they be completely truthful with someone incapable of understanding? The anthropomorphist's mouth and lips are not able to receive such a delicate morsel. So the Darvīsh must answer people according to their capacity and experience, namely by inventing an answer that sends them away. (Rūmī 1969, p.139; Rūmī 2000, #27, p.219)

In the case of Rūmī himself, the disparity between the level of divine discourse and the audience is mediated by the thickness of the discourse.

speech of God brings life wherever it reaches, and leaves sublime traces [*āṣār-hā-ya 'aẓīm*]. “And when you threw, it was not you who threw, but God.”¹⁸⁷¹ The arrow that leaps from the bow of God, no shield or breastplate can stop. Therefore I am happy.¹⁸⁷²

Speech attains its perfection in its own negation in the *ṣuḥbah* with the divinized beloved. Immersed in the excessive influx of love, the self-annihilated companions manifest divine attributes in this pre-verbal divine union. Thus it is ineffable and incomprehensible:

That one has taken on the characteristics of the king in accordance with “attain the morals of God [*takhallaqū bi-akhlāq Allāh*],” and “I [God] become their hearing and sight.” This is an extremely majestic station [*maqāmī ast sakht 'aẓīm*]. Indeed it is unsayable, insofar as the majesty of it cannot be comprehended by spelling out M-a-j-e-s-t-y. If even a small trace of this majesty penetrated the world, the letter “M” would be unwritable, the sound “M” would be unpronounceable, nor could any hint or symbol remain. The whole city would be devastated by the hosts of lights. “Kings, when they enter a city, disorder it.”¹⁸⁷³

The divine discourse of the perfect Sufis operates at many layers, while the original meaning remains veiled and unknowable, unless they want them to be known. Rūmī cites the Qur’ānic verse “they encompass [*idrāk*] nothing of His knowledge save what God will,”¹⁸⁷⁴ and argues that in the same way “nobody can comprehend the masters without their free consent [*ikhṭiyār*].”¹⁸⁷⁵ Approaching people at the level of their understanding, they continue their multi-layered discourses. The forms of these discourses are apparently easy to understand, even too casual some disappointed intellectuals argued. Despite their shallow appearance, however, none of these words are truly understood,¹⁸⁷⁶ but they keep imparting divine mercy and guidance. A record

¹⁸⁷¹ Q.8:17. See Rūmī 1969, p.89; Rūmī 2000, #16, p.131; Rūmī 2015, Vol.1, #3789, Vol.6, #1522-1524.

¹⁸⁷² Rūmī 1969, p.235; Rūmī 2000, #59, p.384.

¹⁸⁷³ Rūmī 1969, p.42; Rūmī 2000, #28, p.223.

¹⁸⁷⁴ Q.2:255.

¹⁸⁷⁵ Rūmī 1969, p.156; Rūmī 2000, #34, p.245.

¹⁸⁷⁶ “If these words [*sukhan*] seem repetitious to you, it is only because you did not understand them in the first time, so I must say it every day.” (Rūmī 1969, p.135; Rūmī 2000, #26, p.212)

narrates that Parvāna departs after a long discourse with Rūmī. “He did not understand,” says Rūmī behind him, but it is fine, because the main purpose, the embodied desire, is transmitted.¹⁸⁷⁷ As long as transmitted in conceptual forms, the meaning will remain veiled and “virgin” in these very appearances. Except for the participants of the divine union, divinely-originated discourses are incomprehensible and their truth is unknowable:

This speech [*sukhan*] is in another language! Beware! Do not say, “I have understood.” The more you understand and grasp this speech, the farther you will be from understanding its transcendence. Its understanding comes in not understanding [*bī-fahmī*]. All your troubles, misfortunes and disappointments arise from such understanding. This understanding is a chain [*band*] for you. You must escape it to gain anything at all. You say, “I filled my sheep-skin in the ocean, but the ocean was too great to be contained in my sheepskin.” That is absurd [*muḥāl*]. If you say, “my sheep-skin was lost in the ocean,” that is excellent!¹⁸⁷⁸

The coterminous unification of the mirror, the image, and the reality manifested in/via the mirror is an invasion, violence to the human ego. In an overwhelming twist, it erases the ego with the influx of the divine light reflected, and infinitely re-reflected from and to the embodied companion. The unity of their souls marks the end of verbal exchange. Now the *ṣuḥbah* moves to a pre-verbal level: no utterance is needed as the unity in the level of meaning is realized beyond the form.

This speech [*sukhan*] is for those who need [words] to understand [*idrāk*]. But what use of it for those who understand without speech? For those who understand the heavens and earth are all

Shams makes the same argument almost verbatim with Rūmī: “If I should say them [my words] a hundred times, each time another meaning would be understood from them, and that root meaning would stay virgin.” (Shams Tabrīzī 2004, #50, p.32.)

¹⁸⁷⁷

Amir who has just left our company—though he did not understand in detail what we were saying, yet he realizes in general that we were calling him [*da’wat*] to God. I take the wagging of his head, his smile of affection and his flush of love [*mīhr va ‘ishq*] as a sign of his understanding. If people from the country come into the city and hear the call to prayer, though they do not know in detail the meaning of the call, still they understand its purpose [*maḡṣūd*]. (Rūmī 1969, p.86; Rūmī 2000, #15, p.129)

¹⁸⁷⁸ Rūmī 1969, p.130; Rūmī 2000, #26, p.201-202.

speech, borne from the speech “[God says] ‘Be,’ and it is.”¹⁸⁷⁹
Whoever hears a whisper, what need have they for shouting and
screaming?¹⁸⁸⁰

Meaning swells like a balloon in the verbal speech and passes beyond the form by a discomfiting burst. Discourse is thus not abandoned by its verbal negation; it is carried forward to its apotheosis at the pre-verbal, pre-conceptual ontic unity of God and companions, of love, the lover and the beloved whose identities transform with a dazzling perspective shift.¹⁸⁸¹ The reason for the need for words is the presence of otherness between the companions in the *ṣuḥbah*.¹⁸⁸² The need for words disappears with the vanishing of otherness in the discursive divine union. The apotheosis of speech is in its negation, as Shams explains by employing most human-oriented, sexual terms:

Words are for the other. If they’re not for the other, of what use are they? ... If it were not for the other, what was all this conversation about? When unification and presence are established, how can you see conversation? Yes, there is talk, but without letters and sound. And, at the moment when there is that talk, there is separation, not union, for in union there is no room for talk, whether it is without letters and sounds or with letters and sounds. Yes, the bride talks with the groom. But, at the moment of penetration [*dukhūl*], there’s no room for talk.¹⁸⁸³

Verbal communication among lovers is compared to the foreplay the climax of which is its negation. The apophatic divine union is attained not only with discursive companionship, but it is also distinctly human-oriented.

Apotheosis of the Embodied Self

Those who have attained apophatic divine union by the multi-lateral, communal act of polishing attain apophatic qualities. Rūmī claims with reference to Burhān al-Dīn and to Shams that their ipseity cannot be known. Accordingly, their

¹⁸⁷⁹ A verse repeated in the Qur’ān in various forms. See Q.2:117; 3:47; 6:73; 16:40; 19:35; 36:82; 40:68.

¹⁸⁸⁰ Rūmī 1969, p.35; Rūmī 2000, #6, p.39.

¹⁸⁸¹ Cf. Sells 1994, pp.73-78.

¹⁸⁸² Also see ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #4578-4580.

¹⁸⁸³ Shams Tabrīzī 2004, #185, p.130. “There is no vocabulary for union [*jam*].” (‘Afīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī 1989, Vol.2, p.562.) For the apotheosis of speech in its negation, see Najm al-Dīn Kubrā 1993, p.35; ‘Aṭṭār [undated], #4577-4587; al-Kalābādī 1993, p.140; al-Kalābādī 1935, pp.117-118; Schimmel 1975, p.73; Wilcox 2011, p.109.

unknowability cannot be reduced to the unknowability of the divine, angelic soul which is shared by every human being. Even if one attains the “eye of the heart” that sees things “as they are,” they will remain unknowable and invisible. They join the invisible godly people [*rijāl al-ghayb*] who know each other and are in perpetual pre-verbal, disembodied *ṣuḥbah*. Even the saints [*avliyāʾ*] cannot see them unless they please, i.e., unless God pleases, because their agency is completely immersed in that of the divine:

There are certain lovers of God, who, because of their great majesty and the jealousy [*ghayra*] of God, do not show themselves openly, but they cause disciples to attain important goals and bestow gifts upon them. Such mighty and lofty ones are precious, and coy [*nāzanīn*]. Someone said: “Do the great ones come before you?” Rūmī answered: There is no “before” left in us. It has been a long time since I have had any “before.” If they come, they come before an image they believe to be me.¹⁸⁸⁴

Accordingly, no one could actually see Rūmī, but only their own selves, reflected by Rūmī as his veil.¹⁸⁸⁵ Rūmī is veiled by the images of his companions. One cannot see the polished mirror except through what it reflects. Or, one cannot see the polished mirror, but only what it reflects. The ipseity of the perfected soul is unknowable in the same way a perfect mirror is invisible.¹⁸⁸⁶ Having transformed into perfect mirrors, divine companions become invisible to the public gaze. What appears as Rūmī, Shams, or Ḥusām al-Dīn are only their bodies that reflect back to the companions their own spiritual stations. Similar to the perfection of will beyond human agency and of discourse beyond concepts, the bodies of divine companions are perfected beyond the flesh. Body attains its apotheosis in disembodiment—its erasure in invisibility. The apophatic God has apophatic mirrors, which are not.

E. Summary: Back to the Birds

Divine unity in Rūmī has an apophatic dimension more intricate than its classical depictions as the experience of an ineffable union with God as such. In Rūmī’s apophatic depictions of divine union, the divine beloved is also inseparably the embodied human beloved. The thousands of love poems Rūmī wrote were not dedicated to an objectified God, but to God’s perfect human-mirror wherefrom excessive divine light, love and discourse flowed back and forth inducing severe

¹⁸⁸⁴ Rūmī 1969, p.56; Rūmī 2000, #10, p.78.

¹⁸⁸⁵ Rūmī 1969, p.48; Rūmī 2000, #9, p.64.

¹⁸⁸⁶ For the parallel invisibility of Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī in Ibn al-ʿArabī’s eyes, see Ernst 1993.

floods and thunderstorms that overwhelmed him. The urban Sufi companionship and normative Sufi etiquette channeled the wayfarers towards this apophatic divine union such that agency, discourse and bodies attain their apotheosis in their very negation. With the realization of the union, the negative attributes of God, along with the positive ones, manifest in the now absent mirror of the companions' hearts. This conception of divine union, situated within the context of Khurāsānian Sufism from which Rūmī draws, is very different from the standard, theocentric conception of divine union.

The mirror metaphor is a unique way of pointing to the coincidence of the discursive communion with the beloved companion and the union with God. “‘After all,’ I said, ‘what is a mirror for? That everyone may know what and who they are.’ ... The mirror of the soul is the face of the beloved companion.”¹⁸⁸⁷ Is there any other metaphor to talk about this discursive, embodied, apophatic union of divinized mirror-companions? Rūmī’s constant play with the name of his most famous perfect mirror, “Shams,” and “sun” [*shams*] gives some hints, and pulls us back to ‘Aṭṭār’s *Conference*—the supposedly “pantheistic,” theomaniac work par excellence. *The Conference of the Birds* is typically read as a solitary journey “to a divine mystery that ultimately stands *at the core of one’s being*.”¹⁸⁸⁸ A recent book makes the following, classical summary of ‘Aṭṭār’s work: “*Conference of the Birds* is an allegory in which the birds of the world take wing in search of Truth, only to find it *within themselves*.”¹⁸⁸⁹ According to the author, insofar as truth is to be found inside and not in the objectification of an absolutely transcendent God, ‘Aṭṭār’s book is not only *pantheistic*, but also destructive to the very *essence* of Islam—to the search for God and the *theocentric worldview*.¹⁸⁹⁰ In this thrice twisted depiction, (i) divine union must be necessarily oriented towards an objectified God in order to be “Islamic,” (ii) ‘Aṭṭār picks the way of pantheism, (iii) by choosing the introverted trip to one’s inside.

¹⁸⁸⁷ Rūmī 2015, Vol.2, #94, 96.

¹⁸⁸⁸ Heck 2014, p.52.

¹⁸⁸⁹ Starr 2013, p.xxi, my emphasis.

¹⁸⁹⁰

Many have found in Attar’s work a pervasive pantheism. While this is certainly true, it is much more. In his quest for God, ‘Aṭṭār brushed aside the Muslim preoccupation with God’s unity, which turns out to be the same as multiplicity; with submission—the very essence of Islam; and even with eternity, for God is beyond eternity as well. (Starr 2013, pp.441-442)

By situating Rūmī within the historical context of Khurāsānian Sufism, I rather argued that divine union in Rūmī’s context is a communal, embodied, discursive, human-oriented process regulated by the moral principles of companionship and Sufi etiquette. Instead of a union with God as such, Rūmī directs his divinely originated excessive love to his companions some of whom play the role of the perfectly polished apophatic mirrors where the divine and human beloved coincide. Shams explains this view succinctly, with a surprise ending:

A friend [*valī*] of a friend of God is a friend of God. The face of the Sun [*Shams*] is always toward Mavlānā because Mavlānā’s face is toward the Sun. The back of the Sun is toward others, it’s face is toward the heavens. No book is more useful than the forehead of the friend. But not every person is a perfect friend. One person is one-tenth [*’ashr*] of a friend and another is a half of one-tenth of a friend. For otherwise that person would end up withdrawing in seclusion. Thus *every friend is like a thirtieth [sī-pāra]. The gatherer [jāmi’] of these thirtieth’s is God.*¹⁸⁹¹

Shams’ “thirtieth,” here is not only a reference to the friends who become mirrors for each other, but also to the famous Persian appellation of the transcendent discourse, i.e., *the Qur’ān*, which is traditionally divided into thirty equal pieces to be recited within a month. The same statement of Shams, in other words, can be read as the union of thirty companions composing not only one perfect mirror, but also as the perfect discourse, the holy Qur’ān. Eventually, *no book is more useful than the forehead of the perfect companion*. The simultaneous call for leaving seclusion for the companionship for the apophatic apotheosis, of course, finds repercussions in Rūmī’s writings as well. In the *Maṣnavī*, “thirty” indicates the number of sufficient companions, while one perfect beloved companion could replace them.¹⁸⁹² But more importantly, a perfect companion is not only sufficient for being a perfect mirror for excessive desire, but also the perfect *discourse*. In a famous poem, performed today by M. R. Shajariān (b.1940), Rūmī says:

You are in seclusion with the *Sī-pāra* [i.e., the thirty-piece, the Qur’ān]

¹⁸⁹¹ Aflākī 2002, #38, p.439; Aflākī 2001, Vol.2, #38, p.213; my emphasis.

¹⁸⁹² Rūmī 2015, Vol.6, #386-400. Also see *ibid.* Vol.5, #1867.

I have become *sī-pāra*; please leave the seclusion!¹⁸⁹³
 Is Rūmī merely crying that he became shattered in the absence of the divine beloved, and also claiming that he is rather the perfect embodied divine discourse, which unites all thirty pieces of the Qur’ān in his mirror-body? Rūmī makes here the same word-play with *Si-para* [“thirty pieces,” or “the Qur’ān” in its entirety] that ‘Aṭṭār made with *Sī-murgh* [“thirty birds,” or “the Phoenix” in its entirety]. It is not clear whether Shams or Rūmī has ‘Aṭṭār’s thirty birds in their mind when they refer to the “thirty pieces of the Qur’ān,” or the “thirty companions,” whose divine union coincides with their apophatic apotheosis in their communal companionship. In any case, the divine beloved has no other face than that of the immediate, embodied companion. As Rūmī recalls the prophetic saying, “whoever desires to sit next to God, let them sit with lovers of God.”¹⁸⁹⁴ Notwithstanding its classical depictions, ‘Aṭṭār’s *Conference* presents one of the best metaphors for this embodied, discursive, communal conception of divine union.

¹⁸⁹³ “*Sī-pāra ba kaf dar chillah shūdī; sī-pāra manam tark-a chillah kun!*” (Rūmī 1376/1998 #2095, p.785.)

¹⁸⁹⁴ Rūmī 1969, p.166; Rūmī 2000, #38, p.261. For a note on the *ḥadīth*, see Furūzān-far in Rūmī 1969, p.344.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation had two primary aims: to give a critical introduction to the current study of Sufi apophysis, and to provide contextual approaches to apophatic performances in pre-modern Sufism. We have observed that the two questions are strictly connected to each other. “Apophysis” and “negative theology” are situated in the contemporary study of Islam within Sufism, instead of its common-sense residence, theology or philosophy. Pre-modern Christian and Jewish negative theologians associated themselves with Muslim theologians and philosophers. In addition, Islamic theology was univocally associated with divine otherness and transcendence until 1950s, when theological negativity carried unfavorable meanings. Today, it is rather Ibn al-‘Arabī (d.1240) and Rūmī (d.1273), two thirteenth century Sufis, who are mostly cited within the contexts of Muslim apophaticism and negative theology. A better understanding of apophaticism in thirteenth century Sufism, and a critical historical perspective towards the contemporary study of apophaticism inform each other, and go hand-in-hand.

A review of the contemporary study of apophaticism and negative theologies not only pushes us towards an in-depth, contextual study of negativity in thirteenth century Sufism, but also merits a second-order analysis in itself. The first two chapters were devoted to this critical history of “apophysis” as a scholarly concept. In the first chapter I showed how the term “apophysis” in the last centuries was employed as a comparative philosophical or a theologically problematic term, which should be situated within dialectics, or as a replacable rhetorical figure of speech parasitic to positive discourse. These scholarly traditions have been dwarfed since the 1970s by the rise of postmodern radical negativity, equipping “apophysis” with moral values, such as agency, critical thinking, pluralism, and self-reflexivity. The scholarly attention at this point swiftly shifted from its perennial focus on Islamic theology to pre-modern Sufism. In other words, the scholarly trends in the study of apophysis are shaped by the demands of modernity—a term of self-description in a narrative of moral progress.¹⁸⁹⁵ The study of religion not only reshapes the standards of being modern, but also interpretively selects those who qualify it and those who do not. Insofar as it is no longer Islamic theology or philosophy, but mainly Sufis of the distant past who are associated with apophaticism and its modernizing values, a closer analysis of these Sufis will give us a better understanding of not only apophaticism in Islam, but also the assumptions made in the contemporary study of religion.

¹⁸⁹⁵ Keane 2007, p.201.

In the second part, I asked the broad question, “what is negative theology,” in order to pin it down with reference to Islam in general, and medieval Sufism in particular. I argued that “negative theology” is a blanket term that tends to confuse various theological questions. Moreover, the term reduces the rich field of theology into a single question—into theomania, and its negation. As modern religionists, we have not been able to imagine a “negative theology of religious leadership,” “negative theology of theodicy,” or “negative theology of eschatology,” precisely because the term “negative theology” spans the entire field of theology, reducing it to the divine nature. With a case study from the last decade of the twelfth century, I demonstrated that pages of negations might not count as “negative theology” depending on the specific theological problem. In our case study, the Mu‘tazilites had a *negative theology of divine attributes*, but the majority of them were far from following a *negative theology of divine essence*. Many Sufis, on the other hand, adopted a negative theology of divine essence, yet their approach to the divine attributes was far from, and even critical to, being purely negativist. Following medieval Muslim scholars themselves, I differentiated the questions of the “divine essence” and “divine attributes,” and demonstrated that a negativist position toward one of these questions does not ineluctably guarantee a negativist position on the other. This analysis displayed that negative speech is contextual, at least in the sense that an apophatic approach to a specific theological question does not automatically prove apophaticism on another theological question.

The third part, in four chapters, introduced different negative theologies of the divine essence that circulated among thirteenth century Sufis. Here I introduced the emergence, and historical development of four prominent negative theologies of the divine essence: Ismā‘īlī apophaticism, philosophical apophaticism, paradoxical apophaticism, and *bilā kayfa* apophaticism. These broad traditions marked families of negative language performances that share not only historical networks and linguistic strategies, but also various assumptions on epistemology, language, and cosmology. In other words, I have argued that apophatic speech affirms various cosmological or epistemological assumptions in order to operate. Ismā‘īlī apophaticism, for example, required the acceptance of its unique cosmology that deepened divine hiddenness. Similarly, paradoxical apophaticism demanded the careful matching of the binaries in given theological discourses, and their subversion through a dialectical logic. The specific paradoxes that were employed, and their performative dimensions were determined by the specific theological context in

each unique case. The performative implications of paradoxical apophaticism, such as the “healing with paradoxes” [*mu’ālajah bi-l-aḍḍād*] as in the case of Kubrāwī Sufis, were set, and regulated by theological, mystical and social institutions.

The topic of regulating apophatic speech was further elaborated in the fourth part. Here I analyzed Rūmī’s apophatic approach to the divine union. Divine union indicated the perfection of human logos, companionship, embodiment, and desire in their own negations within the face-to-face, discursive companionship of fellow wayfarers, instead of isolated inwardly quests. I showed that this discursive, communal conception of the apophatic union was channeled, bounded, and regulated, by the larger Central Asian institutions such as Sufi wayfaring, discursive companionship [*ṣuḥbah*], and Sufi ethics [*adab*]. In theoretical terms, apophasis, like any speech performance, must affirm the logical, terminological, or performative norms of the specific discursive formation that it negates. As Foucault puts it, “a proposition must fulfil some onerous and complex conditions before it can be admitted within a discipline; *before it can be pronounced true or false it must be ‘within the true’.*”¹⁸⁹⁶ The inherent affirmativity in any given speech performance challenges the hasty association of apophasis with broad themes like critical thinking and morality. *Bilā kayfa* apophaticism, with its conservative and sometimes anti-intellectual versions, further undermines such ethicalizing roles that post-modernity attributes to negative speech.

The plurality of medieval negative theological positions on a single question within the vast field of theology has wider theoretical implications. First, it reminds us that a given discursive formation yields itself to negation neither in a single, nor in infinite ways. Medieval Sufis shared some of these apophatic paths with non-Sufis, non-Muslims, and even anti-Sufis. Depending on the context, a given scholar could adopt more than one of these apophatic paths. We are familiar with such shifts between multiple apophatic positions from Plotinus (d.ca.270).¹⁸⁹⁷ In other words, the available apophatic paths were not mutually exclusive, and it was possible to swing between them. Second, it challenges the efforts to construct single, unified negative theological traditions within religious systems. The singular employment of the term “negative theology” overlooks the diversity, and sometimes conflicts, among various theological positions.

¹⁸⁹⁶ Foucault 2005, p.323; my emphasis.

¹⁸⁹⁷ Sells 1994, pp.16-22; Kars 2013, p.276.

Third, and more elusively, we have seen that the negative theological positions among scholars and mystics from different religious backgrounds had strong overlaps. For example, Rabbi Moses Maimonides (d.1204) and al-Baṭalyawī (d.1127) followed the same philosophical negative theological strategies in approaching the divine ipseity. Yet, Nethanel al-Fayyūmī (d.1165), the head of the Jews in Yemen, followed a negative theology of the divine essence that was arguably much closer to that of the Ismāʿīlīs than to Maimonides. Such trans-religious theological networks have highlighted the intellectual porosities not only between Sufism, mysticism and philosophy, but also between religious traditions. In brief, there is no “Islamic negative theology,” for three reasons. First, “negative theology” is a blanket term that confuses various theological questions and negativities. Second, there were numerous negative theological positions regarding a single theological question. Finally, negative theological positions that Muslims adopted were shared with, and informed by, non-Muslims. “Intellectual history characteristically disregards any national, religious, cultural and economic borders and intellectual symbiosis was often norm rather than the exception in medieval and pre-modern time.”¹⁸⁹⁸ Negative theologies were an integral component of this shared intellectual heritage.

¹⁸⁹⁸ Schmidtke 2008, p.25.

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