


people would be led astray or that they would not be spurred to prepare for the eschaton through transforming their lives and living out the kingdom in this present evil age. In fact, it seems to me that this might actually encourage a subject to rely on God more and to refocus their attention on their spiritual life. For example, let us imagine there is a college football player trying to get drafted into the National Football League; we can call him John. John practises football every day. He also continually lifts weights and eats appropriately. Nonetheless, John can sometimes feel drained and he needs more motivation. A visit from a professional football player – say the former starting defensive end of the Kansas City Chiefs, Michael DeVito – would probably re-energize him to continue practising hard in preparation for a future career. In the same way, Jesus appearing visible to everyone in every generation would probably do precisely this. It would energize the Church to complete its mission.

I propose that Levering instead endorse something akin to the thesis of sceptical theism and motivate the thesis by appealing to the Thomistic conception of God. God is not a being but is Being. He is metaphysically simple and can only be known analogically. Our thoughts are not like God's thoughts and our ways are not like His ways. We are simply not in the position to judge whether God, if He exists, would probably will there to be more evidence for His Son's resurrection. This especially seems to be the case if we follow the Thomistic tradition and reject the view that God is a moral agent.

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Aydogan Kars *Unsayings God: Negative Theology in Medieval Islam*.
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 9780190942458.

Adogan Kars has written an important book not only for Islamic intellectual history, but also for religious studies and philosophy of religion in general. He combines expertise in Islamic philosophy with contemporary philosophical and theological discussions to address the apophatic tradition of medieval Islam, with a view to filling gaps in modern studies on Islamic apophaticism, correcting what he deems 'unwarranted connotations' of negative theology, such as its common associations with 'mysticism' and 'antidogmatism' (22), and illustrating

the transdisciplinary nature of apophatic positions and their overlap among scholars of different intellectual backgrounds.

In examining apophaticism in Islam, Kars rightly highlights the richness of the Islamic literature of the medieval period – which spans different disciplines, contexts, and schools of thought – and the multiplicity of theological questions articulated therein. Such literature yields ‘a variety of possibilities’ (2), ranging from ‘paradoxicality’, ‘double negation’, ‘silence’, and ‘perpetual negation’ (5), and thus renders it more reasonable to speak of negative theologies than of an unqualifiedly singular negative theology. Two theological questions, the questions about divine attributes and the nature of divine essence, underlie fundamental negativist theologies in Islam: negative theology of divine attributes and negative theology of divine essence. Essential to the latter is the principle of the unknowability of God’s essence, ipseity. Kars proposes to focus on negative theology of the divine essence, which, being ‘discourse-dependent’ (22), results in significant varieties. On this consideration, Kars eventually challenges the assumption held by some modern thinkers that negative theology, which is a discourse of the unlimited, turns out to be ‘radically negative’, arguing that apophasis is ‘a discourse with limits’ (296).

Kars masterfully reconstructs four apophatic approaches of divine essence. *Unsayings God* consists of four chapters, in addition to an introduction, which sets out the conceptual and methodological frameworks and perspectives of the study, and a conclusion, which links the findings to contemporary philosophical and theological discussions. Each chapter discusses an apophatic approach in its intellectual and historical contexts, considering development, interaction, and debates among various intellectual schools.

The first approach, the ‘double negation’ of classical *Isma‘ili* theologians, consists in negating all descriptions of divine essence, including thingness, existence, and cause, whether meant affirmatively or negatively, on account of its absolute unknowability and incomparability. It aims at removing God beyond discursivity and both positive and negative discourses, thereby expressing God’s ‘transcendence’ (38). As an approach for glorifying God, double negation uniquely goes hand in hand with a cosmology that places God’s essence beyond the universal intellect and its immediate source, the creative divine word. That word is itself unknowable, insofar as it is ‘a self-contained’ one (35), and so does the essence lying beyond it, the essence of God, surpass it in transcendence. Kars convincingly argues that these logical and cosmological features delegitimize reducing *Isma‘ili* apophaticism to Neoplatonism.

The second approach, philosophical apophaticism, comprises a ‘family’ of apophatic positions that express divine transcendence through a negativist speech on attributes and establish the unknowability of the divine essence and the necessary dissimilarity of God to all creatures. Kars shows that philosophical apophaticism manifests in various forms. One form that permeated early theological writings and the writings of al-Kindi, most importantly *On First Philosophy*, converted the non-Quranic negative term ‘*lam-yazal*’, denoting endlessness, into ‘a proper

name' for God (77). Al-Kindi, according to Kars, uses this 'negative designation' for God to express the dissimilarity of God to creatures and the inapplicability of human knowledge of creatures to Him.

Unfortunately, Kars's attempt to integrate *lam-yazal* within the framework of negative theology is not immune to critique. It overshadows the fact that *lam-yazal* appears in al-Kindi's *On First Philosophy*, not particularly as 'a proper name' for God, but as an adjectival clause generally expressing eternity and immutability. Thus, in examining the nature of celestial spheres, al-Kindi employs the negative of the formula *lam-yazal*, together with another negative formula denoting *ex nihilo* ('*an lays*: literally: from not). These are but two examples of many negative formulas used by al-Kindi for different, obviously, non-apophatic ends. The supposition that *lam-yazal*, mainly an adverbial formula, as Kars himself notes, developed to be used as a proper name for God is inexplicable. On such supposition, *lam-yazal* could validly replace the name Allah (the Arabic word for God), for example in the profession of faith, as in saying there is no god but *lam yazal*. I am nearly certain that such use of *lam yazal* does not exist. Kars misleadingly relies on al-Ash'ari's *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyin* to document the use of *lam yazal* in the nominal form, while in this treatise *lam yazal* emerges particularly as either an adverbial or an adjectival clause. In fact, al-Ash'ari's account that some philosophers referred to God as 'Aynun Lam Yazal and they did not add anything' (76) does not make *lam yazal* anything more than an adjectival clause. On the whole, Kars's presentation of *lam yazal* as a proper name for God that entails negative theology is unconvincing.

Beyond this, Kars further explains that al-Kindi's philosophical apophaticism, which is closely connected to a negative proof of God's existence as the only existent that is utterly incomparable, poses implications for human knowledge about God: not only is the essence of God thought to be unknowable, but also non-discursive, including mystical, apprehension of His essence is rendered unlikely, due to the material aspect of the human intellect. These implications persist in later theological and philosophical writings, including the writings of Ibn Sina, which variably show that discursive thought (*fīkr*) – as distinct from intellection ('*aql*) – and all positive and negative attributes about God, including unity and oneness, as understood by way of analogy (*qiyās*), do not in fact offer true access to God's essence.

Still within the framework of philosophical apophaticism, Kars considers the apophatic approach of the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Bajjah and many contemporaries. That approach involves a recognition of both the limitation of the discursive thought about God and the possibility of attaining a sort of direct apprehension of the Active Intellect, the last of a chain of separate intellects emanated from God, through divine assistance. Noting Ibn Bajjah's dissatisfaction with the assumption that the human soul can enter into a mystical union with God whereby it attains non-discursive apprehension of the divine essence, Kars challenges the equation of philosophical apophaticism with Neoplatonism. For all

the emphasis that philosophers place on the inaccessibility of the divine essence via discursive analysis, the non-discursive intellection of philosophical apophaticism is not mystical.

The third approach is paradoxical apophaticism. Theological discussions of divine essence employ a number of paradoxes, for example the doctrine maintaining that 'divine attributes are neither God nor other than God' (157) which some theologians introduced to permit ascribing attributes to God without impugning the unity of His essence. The most vivid instantiation of paradoxical apophaticism appears in the Sufi discourse about God's essence, most importantly by al-Ḥallāj, Naṣīr al-Dīn Qūnawī, and Ibn 'Arabi, where variable versions of the formula 'x-not-x', as in describing God as 'first-last' and 'hidden-manifest', are abundantly in play (170).

On logical terms, Kars argues that paradoxical apophaticism, despite apparently violating the fundamental Aristotelian Law of Non-contradiction, is not meant to discourage applying Aristotelian rules of logic or downplay their substantive value in the domain of speculation. Rather it serves to stress the limitation of propositional logic with respect to matters that transcend its system of names and terms. As an alternative, the path of paradox works within systematic rules of dialectical logic, ultimately positioning divine essence beyond knowability, discursivity, and propositional binaries. Another advantage of paradoxical apophaticism is that it offers 'a balanced approach' (163) to the dispute over God's transcendence and immanence, expressed in the binary terms *tanzih* (glorifying) and *tashbih* (asserting similarity), by placing God beyond both the negative and positive discourses of *tanzih* and *tashbih* respectively; the former being criticized for limiting the essence of God, and rather implying the inaccessibility of God's essence by stressing its absolute dissimilarity to creatures, and the latter for notoriously violating the Quranic notion of divine transcendence. Paradoxical apophaticism gained a rather performative dimension in the thirteenth-century Sufi literature, most importantly in the Akbari circle, where the unsayability of the divine essence, then seen as a praise for God, was performed by applying 'binaries of negation and affirmation to the daily self-disciplining practice of invoking the profession of faith' (191). Kars notes that these binaries differed depending on the norms and practices of the negated discourse.

While it is important for a study of negative theology in the Islamic intellectual tradition to deal with the influential theologian and Sufi Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī, the way Kars occasionally turns to him for explaining the path of paradox appears rather unfitting. Kars quotes al-Ghazālī's saying in *al-Maṣṣad al-'asna* that the propositions 'I know God' and 'I do not know God' are true. Kars sees in this an example of 'uniting contradictories', 'a paradox on (un)knowing the divine essence', and explains that 'Al-Ghazālī points out that any statement concerning God can be as true as its negation' (162). Putting aside the latter unacceptable generalization, it is surprising that Kars speaks of a paradox here while the quotation he offers emphasizes al-Ghazālī's immediate resolution: 'if the aspects of the

proposition are different, then the negation and affirmation can be both true' (162). By this, al-Ghazālī nullifies any sense of contradiction. We further read al-Ghazālī's clarification in *al-Maqṣad al-'asna* of the specific aspects that entail affirmation and negation respectively: God's attributes of action and essence. God is known insofar as we know from the order and magnificence of the universe that there is a providential, all-knowing, and all-powerful Creator. But, considering His essence, God is unknown.

Lastly, Kars introduces 'amodal apophaticism' by exploring different hermeneutical approaches to Qur'anic depictions of God against the backdrop of the theological principle of *bilā kayfa*, accepting the Quran's depictions of God 'without asking how' (206). Muslim scholars employed this principle variably. While traditionalists used it in support of 'transcendent anthropomorphism', a conception of God combining the notions of divine otherness and corporeality, others, most importantly Ḥanafis, developed it into what Kars calls the '*bilā kayfa* apophaticism' (213). The *bilā kayfa* apophaticism is closely related to a fundamental theory about the nature of divine revelation. Maintaining that the Quran is the uncreated speech of God, theologians like al-Māturīdī and al-Tawhīdī insist on the inaccessibility of verses addressing His nature to the created people and the necessity of cancelling interpretative and discursive discourses about God. Another tendency to revelations about God involves a tension between the *bilā kayfa* apophaticism and interpretivism. Such tension prevails in early Sufi literature, but, as Kars illustrates, it progresses more in favour of anti-interpretivism in canonized Sufi manuals in Baghdad and Basra. In the West, by contrast, interpretivism gains dominance, while other apophatic approaches remain in play.

Unsayng God is a serious study of negative theology in medieval Islam. Focusing on the fundamental theological question of the nature of God's essence, it suitably moves beyond broad studies of theological and philosophical debates over the relation of God and His attributes to profound approaches to epistemological and logical difficulties stemming from the recognition of the limitation and finitude of human reason and language with respect to God. Kars remarkably discusses the nature and extent of the interaction between intellectual schools of Islam. The enormity of sources is impressive, but the specific sources of some quotations are either missing or inaccurate (e.g. 76, 104, 173). This study should be valuable to academic readers in religious studies, Islamic intellectual history, and philosophy of religion.

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