Representation and Presence: Divine Names in Judaism and Islam*

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Abstract

Divine names are linguistic objects that underlie the grammar of religious language. They serve as both representations and presentations of the divine. As representations, divine names carry information pertaining to God's nature or actions, and his unique will, in a manner that adequately represents him. As presentations, divine names are believed to somehow effect divine presence in proximity to the believer, opening a path of direct connection to God. This paper seeks to analyze the interaction between presentation and representation concerning divine names in major trends within Judaism and Islam, from the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an to medieval theological debates. It aims to demonstrate how central currents within both traditions shaped the intricate relation between divine presentation and representation through the prism of divine names. Whereas positions in philosophy of language focus on either the representational or the presentational functions of proper names, Jewish and Islamic theologies suggest ways to combine the two functions with regard to divine names.

Keywords

divine names, YHWH, Allāh, *al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā,* Jewish theology, Islamic theology

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Introduction

Divine presence is believed to appear in various areas of human life—in public spheres (such as temples and tabernacles)[1] and in a variety of private spheres: sensual, cognitive, spiritual, and emotional.[2] It may appear without being summoned and effect revelatory experiences, and it can appear as a result of premeditated human action. Accordingly, divine presence is both acknowledged and promoted within religious systems through a host of means—ritualistic, linguistic, contemplative, aesthetic, and more. Recent conceptual work on monotheistic religions pays special attention to the role of the human body, on the one hand, and that of the icon, on the other, as means of expressing and promoting divine presence.[3] Less conceptual attention has been paid to a third vehicle—that of divine names.[4]

Divine names are linguistic objects that belong to the grammar of religious language; that is, they make the very existence of such language possible rather than merely functioning within it. They comprise physical qualities, both graphic and phonetic, alongside semantic qualities, the latter being the focus of the pages that follow. These names function as both representations and presentations of the divine.[5] As *representations*, divine names aim to carry information pertaining to

[1] See, e.g., Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (trans. Carol Cosman; Oxford's World Classics Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 25–46, 221–29; Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (trans. Rosemary Sheed; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996) 388–409; Michael B. Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013) 12.

[2] William James, *Variety of Religious Experiences* (1902; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); Emil L. Fackenheim, *The God Within: Kant, Schelling, and Historicity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (trans. J. W. Harvey; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926). For updated discussions of these topics, see Robert H. Thouless, *An Introduction to the Psychology of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971); Andrew R. Fuller, *Psychology and Religion: Eight Points of View* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994); *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Arnold J. Mandell, "Toward a Psychobiology of Transcendence: God in the Brain," in *The Psychobiology of Consciousness* (ed. Julian M. Davidson and Richard J. Davidson; Boston: Springer, 1980) 379–464.

[3] Arthur A. Vogel, *Body Theology: God's Presence in Man's World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-texte* (trans. Thomas A. Carlson; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Jonathan Garb, *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); *Religion and the Body: Modern Science and the Construction of Religious Meaning* (ed. David Cave and Rebecca Sachs Norris; Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[4] Some exceptions are extant, e.g., Robert J. Wilkinson, *Tetragrammaton: Western Christians and the Hebrew Name of God; From the Beginnings to the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Tzachi Weiss, "On the Matter of Language: The Creation of the World from Letters and Jacques Lacan's Perception of Letters as Real," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 17 (2009) 101–15; Naomi Janowitz, *Icons of Power: Ritual Practices in Late Antiquity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

[5] Henri-Dominique Saffrey, "New Objective Links between the Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus," in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought* (ed. Dominic J. O'Meara; Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern 3; Albany: SUNY Press, 1982) 369, n. 29: "Language in composing the names of the gods expresses their nature and makes them present intellectually."

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God's nature or actions, and his unique will, in a manner that adequately represents him uniquely.[6] In this sense, divine names are comparable to pictorial representations. As *presentations*, divine names are believed to somehow effect divine presence in proximity to the believer, opening a path of direct connection to God. In this sense, divine names are functionally comparable to a local representative of a multibranch corporation; they are a particular channel to a greater whole.[7]

In this paper I seek to analyze the interaction between presentation and representation concerning divine names in a selection of key texts within Judaism and Islam. Far from aiming at a comprehensive survey of all positions regarding divine names in Judaism and Islam, I offer a philosophical analysis of a specific strand in both traditions,[8] laid out in three phases. First is the scriptural phase, in which the initial problematics and potentialities of naming God appear in a nuclear manner. Second is the oral or homiletic layer of interpretation, in which initial reflection over scriptural treatment of divine names appears, adding preliminary conceptual order to scriptural references. In the third and most elaborate phase, I examine medieval authors who do not fit neatly in either purely rationalistic or purely mystical traditions but instead integrate elements of both.

In the first part of the paper, I briefly present key positions in the philosophical debate on proper names, in order to clarify the conceptual distinction between representation, or speaking *about* God, and presentation, or speaking *with* God, within the specific context of divine names. In parts two to four, I offer a comparative discussion of the three hermeneutical phases mentioned above. Based on these examinations, in the fifth and final part of the paper, I offer several broader suggestions on how representation and presentation interact within Judaism and Islam. I argue that in both religions there appears a model of symbiotic rather than dichotomous relation between representation of the divine and the promotion of divine presence, where one informs the possibility of the other rather than contrasting with it. More specifically, whereas most positions in philosophy of language focus on either the representational or the presentational functions of

[6] See Moshe Idel, "Torah: Between Presence and Representation of the Divine in Jewish Mysticism," in *Representation in Religion: Studies in Honor of Moshe Barasch* (ed. Jan Assmann and Albert I. Baumgarten; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 197–235, at 230, 235.

[7] Cf. Idel's argument (ibid., 205–35) that for various medieval thinkers the Torah is conflated with God.

[8] For a general comprehensive survey on divine names in Islam, see Daniel Gimaret, *Les noms divins en Islam* (Paris: Cerf, 1988); Louis Gardet, "al-Asmāʾal-Ḥusnā," *Encyclopédie de l'Islam*, 714–17. For a general survey on the meaning of YHWH in the Jewish tradition, see Haim H. Ben-Sasson, *Understanding YHWH: The Name of God in Biblical, Rabbinic, and Medieval Jewish Thought and Philosophy* (Jewish Thought and Philosophy; trans. Michelle Bubis; Palgrave Macmillan: 2019). Charting a comprehensive history of the concept of divine names would necessarily view ancient Jewish notions as origin and Islamic as development. Such a history would focus on the details and aim to expose causal relations within both traditions and between them. See such discussions in Yonatan Negev, "The Islamic Concept of God's Greatest Name (*ism allāh al-aʿẓam*): A Comparative Study of Sunni and Shīʿi Sources" (MA thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2017) 7–17.

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proper names, certain Jewish and Islamic theologies suggest ways to combine the two functions with regard to divine names. In so doing, they resemble specific strands of Christian sacramental theology concerned with the role of the icon.[9]

Philosophers of Language on Proper Names

The primary function of most proper names in natural language is to refer to something or someone, either present or not. Put technically, a proper name serves as a means to refer in language to a specific "this" without the need of it being directly present.[10] The mechanism by which words refer or attach to objects or entities outside of language, be they concrete or noncorporeal, is a mysterious one. Modern philosophers of language generally divide into two groups when addressing this mystery: those who believe that names are a form of *description*; and those who believe that names are *rigid designators*, a means of pointing at the named entity without describing it.

A. Names as Descriptions

The position that proper names do not attach themselves to objects directly, but that they are properly descriptions, can be traced back to Aristotle.[11] As descriptions, according to this position, proper names mediate between word and object. One of the pioneers of this position in modern philosophy, Gottlob Frege, demonstrated its plausibility by the following example: astronomers found out that Hesperus, the evening star in ancient astronomy, is in fact identical to Phosphorus, the morning star; both denote, so it turns out, the planet of Venus as spotted in the sky at different times. If the description or "sense" behind a name (its *Sinn*, in German) were of no importance, all this astronomical discovery would amount to is that "Venus" is Venus.[12] Far from pronouncing a trivial identity of a celestial body to itself, however, the discovery that two mental descriptions in fact refer to the same object and have the same "reference" (*Bedeutung*) was an enormous astronomical achievement. Frege argues (and with him Bertrand Russell and others), therefore, that it is the mental or cognitive descriptions that are decisive for a proper name's meaning. These mental representations serve as vital mediators between name and object.

[9] See Marion, *God without Being*, 1–52.

[10] For similar articulations of the role of proper names within Muʿtazilite philosophy of language, see Sophia Vasalou, "'Their Intention Was Shown by Their Bodily Movements': The Baṣran Muʿtazilites on the Institution of Language," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 47 (2009) 201–21, 209. Cf. positions by medieval commentators Rashbam and Abraham Ibn Ezra in Martin Lockshin, *Rashbam's Commentary on Exodus* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 37–38; Abraham Ibn Ezra, "Sefer ha-Shem," in *Yalkut Abraham Ibn Ezra Reader* (annotated texts with introductions and commentaries by Israel Levin; New York and Tel Aviv: Matz, 1985) 427.

[11] See Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione* (trans. J. L. Ackrill; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 16a3–16a26.

[12] Gottlob Frege, "Sense and Reference," *The Philosophical Review* 57 (1948) 209–30.

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B. Names as Rigid Designators

The second position, represented most notably by Saul Kripke, argues that the referring power of a name lies in it being a "rigid designator," i.e., a word that manages to point directly at the named object through a historical and causal chain.[13] Viewed this way, no other cognitive content is needed for a name to function properly. A name is just like a finger pointed at the object; and its ability to point at the named entity in the latter's absence is achieved by a "chain" of speakers "handing down" the first event of direct pointing and naming in which speaker and object were both present. In this model, a proper name refers to its object by means of an original act of "baptism," in which a thing was directly pointed at (or adequately defined) and given a name. Think of the standard meter in Paris as an example of such baptism. From that moment onward, a historical chain is formed, carrying the meaning of the name to other speakers. Whoever wishes to use a certain name successfully must learn how a certain community of interlocutors uses it, namely, to whom or what they intend to point when this name is used. According to this causal-historical theory, there is a clear and distinct difference between proper names and definite descriptions of the type "the *x* that is qualified by *p*," for definite descriptions may convey information about the named entity that is true or false. Yet a proper name, according to Kripke's theory, simply points at the entity in a direct way, devoid of any mediating content. It makes the named entity linguistically present.

One view, then, understands proper names as established on descriptions, the other as established on quasi-direct pointing. Adapted to theological language, these two positions express two religious motivations: wishing to speak *about* God (in descriptive terms) and seeking ways to speak *to* God (i.e., to point to him directly).

Scriptural Beginnings

The name YHWH (יהו-ה) appears more than 6,800 times in the Bible, rendering it the most common divine appellation in this corpus.[14] YHWH denotes the living, dynamic personality of God.[15] When humans call upon God in the Bible, it is the name YHWH that they usually invoke—in prayer, song, supplication, and even sacrificial offering. YHWH is indeed the most common divine name in the Hebrew Bible, but it hardly ever appears as a privileged or "proper" divine name. Rather, in almost all biblical narratives it appears alongside other names interchangeably.[16]

[13] Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1980) 48–49, 75–78, 106–7.

[14] See Moshe H. Segal, "El, Elohim, and YHWH in the Bible," *JQR* 46 (1955) 89–115. Second Temple literature shows a heightened sensibility to the sacredness of YHWH. See Joseph Heinemann's elaborate discussion of this phenomenon in *Prayer in the Talmud* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1977) 77–78. Cf. Bilha Nitzan, *Qumran Prayer* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 106–12, 313 (n. 10, 16); Joseph M. Baumgarten, "A New Qumran Substitute for the Divine Name and Mishnah Sukkah 4.5," *JQR* 83 (1992) 1–5; Steven T. Byington, "אדני and יהוה," *JBL* 76 (1957) 58–59.

[15] See *TDOT* 7:136.

[16] The fact that it appears so often throughout the Bible indicates, however, that, at the latest when

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Our discussion will center on the only explicit reflection on the meaning of YHWH in the Bible, which appears in Exod 3:13–15.

The narrative of the burning bush (Exod 3) ranks as one of the most complex and enigmatic in the entire Hebrew Bible.[17] At its center lies the possibility of renewing divine presence among the Israelites, to which the redemption from bondage in Egypt serves as a prerequisite. In this narrative, at a phase when divine presence is but a promise for the future, the Name serves as proxy for both Moses and God to reflect their hopes, doubts, and concerns: "And Moses said unto God: 'Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them: The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me: What is His name? what shall I say unto them?'"[18] Moses's question implies that God's name is a means of reassuring the enslaved Israelites of God's promise for redemption or its validity. God's answer comes in a threefold manner:

> And God said unto Moses: "'ehyeh 'ašer 'ehyeh"; and He said: "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel: 'ehyeh hath sent me unto you." And God said moreover unto Moses: "Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel: YHWH, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you; this is My name for ever, and this is My memorial unto all generations."

The first name God reveals to Moses is commonly and erroneously translated as *I am that I Am.* However, it should most probably be translated as "I will be that which I will be."[19] This name exposes God's insistence on his own indeterminate future, free to become whatever he will become. This indeterminacy or freedom, however, provides but a conditioned promise of presence to the Israelites, one that hinges on God's unknown future. Readjusting this contingency, God hands down the name YHWH, a third-person future form of the verb "to be," namely, "he who will be."[20] God's name forever and his memorial unto all generations is therefore not one of indeterminate future but rather a promise for unconditioned presence:

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the corpus was edited, the Hebrews' worship centered on a divine being whose proper name was YHWH. See, for example, Martin Leuenberger, "Jhwhs Herkunft aus dem Süden. Archäologische Befunde–biblische Überlieferungen–historische Korrelationen," *ZAW* 122 (2010) 1–19; *TDOT*, 5:502.

[17] See, e.g., Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1995) 61; Roland de Vaux, "The Revelation of the Divine Name YHWH," in *Proclamation and Presence: Old Testament Essays in Honour of Gwynne Henton Davies* (ed. John I. Durham, J. Roy Porter; Louisville: John Knox, 1970) 48–75.

[18] All Hebrew Bible quotations are from JPS Tanakh 1917.

[19] Latin Christianity, which followed the canonized Septuagint and Vulgate, established a highly metaphysical understanding of these verses. In other Jewish translations into the Greek, such as Thedotion's, the metaphysical ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν of the Septuagint is abandoned in favor of ἔσομαι (ὅς) ἔσομαι that is far closer to what we suggest here. See Wilkinson, *Tetragrammaton*, 68–74. See also Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin: Schocken, 1936) 135–67, 184–210.

[20] As implied by Rashbam, n. 10 above.

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YHWH's meaning is "he who will be present." Indeed, what Moses asks for and what God gives him is a way that the people might experience God, through a name.

When reflecting on the meaning of God's name in Exod 3, the Hebrew Bible arguably views this name as containing apparent descriptive content. Yet the description that is encapsulated in YHWH is not a description of God but of his relation to humankind. More specifically, the *meaning* of YHWH as it is expounded by the Exodus tradition describes the possibility of *using* the name as a means of addressing God. The name represents the possibility of God's original redemptive presence, but it also establishes the existence of a relational attitude to God, a human accessibility to divine presence.

In the variety of Islamic traditions, God's names are a central mode of his presentation and representation, running the entire gamut from art (calligraphy) and folklore (prayer beads) through daily liturgy to theology and mysticism. The particular significance of divine names in both contemplation and practice (such as *dhikr*) originates in the Qur'an. In addition to extensive use of the term "Name of God" (*ism-allāh\ismu llāh*) in a plethora of contexts, as well as the ongoing reference to God through various divine names, primarily Allāh, the Qur'an consciously reflects on the names' significance in several places. Such is the following verse: "The Most Excellent Names (*al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*) belong to God: use them to call on Him, and keep away from those who abuse them" (Q Aʿrāf 7:180).[21] While frugal, Qur'anic reflection on the role and function of divine names fixes two key characteristics about them: 1) that there is not one but a plurality of names; and 2) that these most beautiful names are intrinsically tied to practice, and specifically to worship (*ʿibāda*) or liturgy. In some traditions, the divine names were already handed down to Adam, as implied in Q Baqarah 2:30–32. Further reinforcing the liturgical significance of divine names, the Qur'an asserts their interchangeability: "Say [to them], 'Call on God [Allāh], or on the Lord of Mercy [*al-Raḥmān*]—whatever names you call Him, the best names belong to Him'" (Q Isrā' 17:110). A constituent element of the significance of divine names lies for the Qur'an in their ritualistic power, as vehicles for promoting divine presence among the believers.

Yet the Qur'an is also sensitive to the representational tension that is encapsulated in speaking about God's personhood. In the Qur'an, the attributes of God are consistently called God's "most beautiful names" (Q 7:180; 17:110; Ṭā-Hā 20:8; Hashr 59:24).[22] God is not only the single god in terms of exclusive lordship, He is also essentially different than created reality: "There is nothing like unto Him, He is the All Hearing, the All Seeing" (Shūrā 42:11).[23] Divine alterity is coupled and simultaneously juxtaposed with the belief in his exclusive and even immanent

[21] Cf. Q 17:110; Q Ṭā-Hā 20:8. All citations are from the Oxford World's Classics edition, 2005.

[22] Gerhard Böwering, "God and His Attributes," *EQ* 2:316–31.

[23] Compare to Ibn al-ʿArabī's rendition of "likeness," e.g. , *Futûhât*, 2.408,11,28 (William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1989] 50).

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lordship, which sees and hears. Indeed, divine names figure in the Qur'an as key ritualistic means to promote divine presence. Yet in the Qur'an, their descriptive content must somehow evade the misconception that there is something earthly in his likeness, and at the same time affirm that God can both hear and see. The fact that, linguistically, God's most beautiful names are attributes seemed to convey certain descriptive content about his nature, which Scripture determined to be wholly other. Having attributes also implied that God's simplicity and oneness are compromised, for he then might carry accidental qualities that are other than his essence. In the course of time, the tension between God's transcendence and unity and divine names with their attributive content would become a crucial one for Muslim theologians, as the question of improper representation carried heretical implications.[24]

Oral Hermeneutics

On the issue of naming God, Scripture sowed the seeds of future debates and at the same time delineated the boundaries of future interpretive positions. The concise references to divine names in both the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible exposed a tension between presentation and representation. The oral exegesis that emerged in each tradition following the canonization of Scripture invested efforts in regulating the arena of divine names, while offering a hierarchy of their different functionalities.

In the Hadith, the number of divine names, ninety-nine, was fixed. The sages of Hadith also complemented the original direct liturgical function relegated to the divine names with a contemplative one: "It was narrated from Abū Hurayrah that, the Messenger of Allāh said: 'Allāh has ninety-nine names, one hundred less one. Whoever learns[25] them will enter Paradise.'"[26] Hence, from Islam's inception and early stages, God's names were thought of as effective not only in fulfilling the duty of worshiping him, but they also became instruments for potential attainment of his true knowledge. The implied descriptive potential encompassed in the most beautiful names was brought into sharp relief in exegesis.

[24] Following Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian apophatic convictions. See Ilaria Ramelli, "The Divine as Inaccessible Object of Knowledge in Ancient Platonism: A Common Philosophical Pattern across Religious Traditions," *JHI* 75 (2014) 167–88. For a survey of the essence-attribute debate among the various Islamic theological schools, see Binyamin Abrahamov, "Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the Knowability of God's Essence and Attributes," *Arabica* 49 (2002) 204–30. Nader El-Bizri ("God: Essence and Attributes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* [ed. Tim Winter; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008] 121–40) marks the appearance of these theological trends and the ensuing theological paradoxes as early as the 7th cent. CE. See also Franz Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam* (trans. Emile Marmorstein and Jenny Marmorstein; London & New York: Routledge, 1994) 1–16, 75–162.

[25] Precise verb usage here varies in different editions.

[26] *Sunan Ibn Majah*, Book of Supplication, 10 (Hadith 3861).

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To the interchangeable names of God that appear in the Hebrew Bible (אלהים, שדי, עליון, אל, יהו-ה צבאות, *YHWH*),[27] rabbinic literature added a series of new names, such as *Master of the Universe*, *The holy One Blessed be He*, המקום and רחמנא.[28] Yet for the rabbis, one name—YHWH—stood out in its uniqueness.[29] The Midrash provides a hermeneutical key to understanding the biblical interchangeability between the two most common divine names, Elohim and YHWH: "Whenever Scripture says YHWH, that is the measure of mercy. . . . Whenever Scripture says Elohim, that is the measure of judgment."[30] This identification of YHWH with mercy ought to be understood in light of a systematic rabbinic effort to mark YHWH as a privileged name for the divine, in a separate class from other biblical and rabbinic appellations. By setting YHWH apart, any assertion regarding this name becomes an assertion about the central mode of God's involvement with creation, not a partial or secondary one. God's name means mercy, and mercy in rabbinic literature is the tendency to alleviate suffering and suspend judgment.[31] It is a relation of intersubjective presence. For the rabbis then, God's name discloses that an essential part of his identity is one defined not in metaphysical but rather in dialogical terms linked to divine concern and personhood. As in Exod 3, here too, the divine name YHWH receives a clear descriptive interpretation. Yet here, too, this description is not of God himself; it is a description of God's willingness to be accessible through the name. God's name according to the Sifre means *He who can be addressed and would respond compassionately.* For the rabbis, YHWH is a representation of the possibility of God's presence, to be achieved by addressing him via the Name.

[27] See *TDOT* 7:136.

[28] See Haim H. Ben Sasson and Moshe Halbertal, "The Name of God and the Quality of Mercy" (Heb.), in *Festschrift for Yehuda Liebes* (ed. M. Niehoff, R. Meroz, and J Garb; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute Press, 2012) 53–69.

[29] See *Mek. d'Rabbi Ishmael*, Jethro 11; *Mek.* d'Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai 20:21; *Sipre Zuta* 6:27; *m.Soṭah 7:6; t.Ber. 6:22; t.Ta'an.* 1:11*; m.Yoma* 3:8; 4:2; 6:2; *Sipra* Acharei *Mot* 2:4; *t.Ber.* 3:22; *t.Mak.* 5:9; *m.Soṭah* 1:4; *m.Mak.* 3:6; *Sipra* Kedoshim 3:6; *m.Sanh.* 7:8; *Mek.*, Tractate Nezikin, 5; *m.Sanh.* 10:2; *m.Ta'an.* 3:9; *m.Sanh.* 7:5; *Sipra* Emor 14:14; cf. *m.Sanh.* 10:1; *Lev. Rab.* 32; *Ecc. Rab.* 3:11:3; *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 11:12, 211; *Deut. Rab.* 10:10; *Sipra* Kedoshim 2:6; *Sipre Zuta* Nasso 6:27; *m.Zebaḥ.* 4:6; cf. *Sipra*, Dibbura di-Nedava, 14; *Sipre Num*., 143; *Sipra*, Dibbura di-Nedava 2; *Mek.* d'Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai 12; *m.Tamid* 7:2; *Sipre Num.* 39:25; *t.Ber.* 6:20; *m.Šebu.* 4:13.

[30] *Sifpre Deut*. 26:24. Cf. *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (trans. Reuven Hammer; Yale Judaica Series; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 49. Full citation: "Whenever Scripture says YHWH, that is the measure of mercy, as it is said: 'YHWH, YHWH, God, merciful and gracious' (Exod 34:6). Whenever Scripture says Elohim, that is the measure of judgment, as it is said: 'the cause of both parties shall come before God\Elohim' (Exod 24:8), and it is said: Thou shalt not revile God\Elohim [nor curse a ruler of thy people] (ibid., 27)." My analysis follows that of Ben-Sasson and Halbertal, "The Divine Name," 53–69.

[31] On mercy within rabbinic tradition, see *m. 'Abot* 2:13; *t. B. Qam.* 9:11; *Mek.* d'Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai 3:6; *Sipre Num.* 77:134; *Sipre Zuta* 12; *Sipre Deut.* 29, 326; *t. Ber.* 4:16; *m. Ketub.* 9:2. Cf. Seneca, *Clem.* book 2, 3:1–2.

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Medieval Debates: Between Mysticism and Philosophy

It is only in the Middle Ages that a systematic debate over the meaning of divine name(s) emerges. Medieval philosophers begin to question how a divine name's referential status can be established, how it was handed down, and what it refers to.[32] The idea that no name can fully capture the transcendence of God was far from novel at the time. Similar notions appear already in the aforementioned verses of the Qur'an or in the Babylonian Talmud.[33] Medieval thinkers were, however, the first to frame the basic tendency to conceptualize God by setting him apart in language, within a systematic metaphysical and linguistic position. According to this view, language not only facilitates knowledge about God but can also hinder and mislead. The names of God are therefore examined as part of a broader debate about the extent to which language can enable us to know God at all.[34]

Two juxtaposed approaches to the issue of presentation and representation of God through his name(s) are generally acknowledged in the scholarship of medieval theology: the rationalistic strand, on the one hand, and the mystical one, on the other.[35] Before focusing on a third possible approach, it is worth briefly presenting the first two approaches as a backdrop on which a third can be more clearly discerned.

[32] This shift is connected to the contemporary philosophical and theological atmosphere, and especially to the rising influence of Aristotelian and Neoplatonist ideas, which gradually made their way into the world of Jewish philosophy and exegesis. As far back as Plato's *Parmenides*, we find the argument that the One from which all being emanates cannot be perceived by the mind, nor can it be described or named; Plato, *Parm.* (Fowler ed., vol. 12, 142a): "'Then the one has no name, nor is there any description or knowledge or perception or opinion of it.' 'Evidently not.' 'And it is neither named nor described nor thought of nor known, nor does any existing thing perceive it.'" Several scholars have noted the influence of this text, especially via Proclus's interpretation, on early Christian theology. See, for example, Dirk Westerkamp, "Naming and Tetragrammatology: Medieval Apophatic Philosophy and Its Double Helix," in *Jewish Lifeworlds and Jewish Thought: Festschrift Presented to Karl E. Grozinger on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday* (ed. N. Riemer; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012) 110–24, at 110–11; Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 167–70. On the philosophical sources of Pseudo-Dionysus, see Westerkamp, "Naming and Tetragrammatology."

[33] See *b.Ber.* 33b; *y.Ber.* 9:1.

[34] The integration of Neoplatonist thought into monotheistic theology spread further than the ancient Greek-speaking world, first to Christianity and later to Islam and Judaism. See Richard Walzer, *Greek into Arabic: Essays on Islamic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam*, 1–12; Cristina D'Ancona, "Greek into Arabic: Neoplatonism in translation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* (ed. Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 10–31.

[35] See, e.g., Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' Guide* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) 191–248; Shlomo Pines, "Dieu et l'Etre selon Maimonide. Exégese d'Exode 3,14 et doctrine connexe," in *Celui qui est. Interprétations juives et chrétiennes d'Exode 3, 14* (ed. A. de Libera and E. Zum Brunn; Paris: Cerf, 1986) 15–24; Gershom Scholem, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah" (trans. S. Pleasance), *Diogenes* 79 (1972) 59–80; *Diogenes* 80 (1972) 164–94; Moshe Idel, "Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names," in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typologies* (ed. RA Herrera; New York: Lang, 1993) 97–122.

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In the Islamic sphere, a variety of medieval debates evolved over the precise number of names,[36] the status of the name Allāh,[37] the proper order of these names and their adequate division into categories,[38] and their origin qua names of God.[39] Notwithstanding these debates, a universal agreement among all schools identified these names as divine attributes (*ṣifāt*), which carried Aristotelian connotations in Arabic *falsafa* and *kalām* discourse.[40] As such, defining the representational value of divine names, as well their limitations, became a central mission of Islamic theologians and philosophers, especially among Sunni rationalist schools.[41]

The fact that God's most beautiful names are all attributes raised an acute question concerning the adequacy of their descriptive content and, as a result, their ability to serve as representations of the divine. Islamic rationalist theologians heralded monotheistic purity, placing *tawḥīd* (unity) at its core.[42] To represent God in terms by which we describe created reality is a blunt form of linguistic idolatry (*shirk*), strictly forbidden and to be fought against.[43]

In attempting to overcome this theological obstacle, Islamic *kalām* and *falsafa* thinkers offered a wide range of responses. One such response was that after the resurrection humans will acquire a sixth sense, enabling them to know God;[44] another was that God's attributes and essence are one and the same, both unknowable to humankind;[45] another still was that God's essence and attributes are distinct from one another.[46] If the ninety-nine most beautiful names do not describe

[36] See Gardet, "al-Asmāʾ al-Ḥusnā."

[37] Duncan B. Macdonald, "Allāh," *EI*[1].

[38] The primary division of divine attributes, prominent Ashʿarism and other schools, involves two main categories—action-related (*ṣifāt al-afʿāl*) and essential (*ṣifāt al-dẖāt*). See also El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes"; Joseph Van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Century of the Hijra* (vol. 4 of *A History of Religious Thought in Early Islam*; Leiden: Brill, 2016) 476–511; Daniel Gimaret, "Muʿtazila," *EI*[2]; Harry A. Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) 112–234, remains one of the most penetrating discussions on the topic of divine attributes in Islamic theology.

[39] On the origin of the names—divine or human—see Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, 37–50. El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," 121–38.

[40] See Ibrahim Madkour, "La logique d'Aristote chez les Mutakallimun," in *Islamic Philosophical Theology* (ed. Parviz Morewedge; Albany: SUNY Press, 1979) 58–69.

[41] Abrahamov, "Knowability of God," 204, suggests Gahm ibn Safwan (d. 746/129) as the first theologian to reflect on the question.

[42] On *tawḥīd* and the *Shahāda*, see William H. Chittick, "Worship," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, 222.

[43] See G.R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 66–87.

[44] See Abrahamov, "Knowability of God," 205, n. 4.

[45] Baṣran Muʿtazila, and see Vasalou, "Their Intention"; Werner Diem, "Arabische Grammatik und Islamische Theologie oder 'Wie gewaltig ist doch Gott!,'" *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 164 (2014) 609–52. See also the discussion below on understanding names and attributes as signs of acts, the latter comprehensible to human cognition.

[46] E.g., Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God* (trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher; Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1995) 37; Abrahamov, "Knowability of God," 209.

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God's *essence*,[47] they are not attributes of his nature or being. These names, rather, recount relational attributes of God. They are descriptions of certain aspects of God's relationship with his created world, or a set of actions he performs with relation to this world.[48]

Parallel moves can be traced among Jewish rationalists as well. Three prominent negative theologians (among others)—R. Bahya Ibn Paqudah, R. Abraham Ibn Daud and Maimonides—approach the divine name within the Aristotelian conception of language as a descriptive mechanism. Ibn Paqudah resolves the theological difficulty of assigning to God a (descriptive) name by limiting, as much as possible, the role of YHWH as a proper name. In his reading, the divine name serves primarily as a linguistic "placeholder" for God in Scripture, making it easier for humans to accept the biblical content and remain faithful to God as a tradition.[49] Relying on the same principles, R. Abraham Ibn Daud takes this approach one step further and casts a shadow over the notion that the name YHWH is God's proper name. He views YHWH as a shared name (homonym) that also denotes God's angels. YHWH does not refer specifically to God, and therefore is not a proper name at all.[50] Unlike Ibn Paqudah and Ibn Daud, Maimonides retains the referential power of YHWH, yet also the philosophical assumption that God cannot be described and that language cannot positively express meaningful theological content. He achieves this by divorcing the name YHWH from the domain of human language, conceptualizing it as a linguistic vessel devoid of descriptive content.[51] According

[47] Allāh is an exception, but may be also descriptive and relational. This might be related to its possible identification with the Greatest Name; see Negev, *God's Greatest Name*, 26.

[48] See Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 9–10; see also idem, "The 'Bi-la Kayfa' Doctrine and Its Foundations in Islamic Theology," *Arabica* 42 (1995) 365–79.

[49] R. Bachya ben Joseph ibn Paquda, *Duties of the Heart* (trans. Dabiel Haberman; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1996) 1:63–160.

[50] Abraham Ibn Daud, *The Exalted Faith* (trans. Norbert M. Samuelson; Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses 1986) book 2, 233.

[51] Maimonides adopts the core of Avicenna's differentiation between essence and existence. For both thinkers, existence is an accidental addition to essence. Essence, in line with Aristotle, is both a concrete individual thing and the universal "what" that defines its true being (e.g., a human being's essence as a rational animal). The fact that a specific essence—a form—was brought to actuality in a specific matter to create an individual substance is what Maimonides refers to here as "accidental." This event happens due to an agent outside of the essence—i.e., God—who caused informed matter of all kinds to be as it is, and causes existence by his will, thus reinforcing its "accidental" nature. Existence in all things other than God, then, is what "happens" to the thing, from the outside, and does not simply latently exist in the thing's essence. In God's case, "existence is not merely actual but necessary" (Alexander Altmann, "Essence and Existence in Maimonides," *BJRL* 35 (1953) 294–315, esp. 303). For an in-depth discussion of Avicenna's views, see Fazlur Rahman, "Essence and Existence in Ibn Sina: The Myth and the Reality," *Hamdard Islamicus* 4.1 (1981) 3–14; Altmann, "Essence and Existence," 295–97. See also Josef Stern, "Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language," in *Maimonides and the Sciences* (ed. Robert S. Cohen and Hillel Levine; Boston Studies in the Philosophy and History of Science; Boston: Springer, 2000) 173–226; Yossef Schwartz, "Über den (missverstandenen) göttlichen Namen. Sprachliche Momente negativer Theologie im Mittelalter," in *Kultur nicht Verstehen. Produktives Nichtverstehen*

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to Maimonides, the Name is etymologically nonderivative and does not lend itself to subject-predicate sentences. As such, Maimonides asserts that the name YHWH is a rigid designator of God—it has no descriptive capacity whatsoever but refers to God directly.[52]

Growing scholarly attention has also been paid to mystical treatments of divine names in both Islamic and Jewish medieval traditions. In both religions, medieval mystics seek to converge the representational and presentational value of divine names. Mystical trends, mainly but not exclusively within Shiʿism, stress the essential part of divine names: these are regarded as primordial entities, which manifest in the imams, and in the primordial, cosmic, metaphysical entity—the Cosmic Imam—that is the manifestation of God knowable through the imams.[53] The names are also often described as divine organs of such a cosmic entity.[54] If the divine names are but organs of God, there is no discernable difference between presence and representation. Similar implications derive from practices and theories of mystical union through divine names.[55]

Jewish kabbalists move on similar tracks. For them, YHWH's meaning is expounded via three principal interpretive trends. In the first, the Name is seen as a powerful theurgical instrument utilized when mystical intention (כוונה) ascends to heaven. The mystic ought to combine the Name's four letters in her mind and thereby heal the fractures of divine worlds. The second trend identifies the name YHWH with a central *sefirah*, usually תפארת, rendering it a theosophical cornerstone of the Godhead. The third trend is the mystical view that each of the four letters that compose the Name contains its own references, and that together they create a concise yet full map of the divine world of *sefirot*. Together, these three trends form a coherent view of the connections between the Name and its divine bearer as a special *pictorial* relationship.[56] For the mystics, the name YHWH is not a conventional means for denoting God in speech; instead, it is a detailed picture of the divine world. As a picture, the Name not only depicts the intricate dynamics

und Verstehen als Gestaltung (ed. Juerg Albrecht et al.; Zurich: Edition Voldemeer, 2004) 149–60.

[52] Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (trans. with an introduction and notes by Shlomo Pines, introductory essay by Leo Strauss; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) 148. For opposing readings of Maimonides's position on divine names, see M. Narboni, *Be'ur le-sefer Moreh nebuḵim* (Om Press, 1946).

[53] See Negev, *God's Greatest Name,* 20; on essential views of the most beautiful names within Shiʿism, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shiʿism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam* (trans. David Streight; Albany; SUNY Press, 1994) 30–31, 44–45. On the concept of divine self-disclosure and its connection to the most beautiful names in Sufi traditions, see Sawai Makoto, "The Divine Names in Ibn ʿArabī's Theory of the Oneness of Existence" (MA thesis, American University in Cairo, 2014) 20–34.

[54] See Negev, *God's Greatest Name,* 20; Amir-Moezzi, "Shiʿite Doctrine," *EI*[3]; idem, "Aspects de l'imamologie duodécimaine I. Remarques sur la divinité de l'Imam," *Studia Iranica* 25 (1996) 193–216.

[55] Najm al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn 'Umar Kubrā, *Fawā'iḥ al-jamāl wa fawātiḥ al-jalāl*, 82, paragraph 16.

[56] See Haim H. Ben-Sasson, "The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah Revisited," *JR* 98 (2018) 1–28.

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of the divine world, but it can also point at mystical paths to approach it. Here, too, the representational reaches near full identity with divine presence itself.

Yet, in both Jewish and Islamic circles there emerges a third way, avoiding strict nominal rationalism, on the one hand, and full nominal mysticism, on the other. Following Abul Ela Affifi,[57] Sarah Stroumsa and Sara Sviri term this strand of thought "mystical philosophy," and it is of relevance to the present discussion as well.[58] This approach rejects rationalist denial of adequate representation and its skepticism about presentation. At the same time, it refrains from the mystical attempt to identify representation with presence. R. Judah Halevi (d. 1141), Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111/505), and Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240/637) are all proponents of this approach.[59]

A. YHWH in the Kuzari: Naming and Personal Presence[60]

Yochanan Silman discerns two formative phases in Halevi's intellectual evolution, both of which appear in the *Kuzari* as stages in a person's theological odyssey.[61] According to Silman, in Halevi's earlier thought—as in the earlier parts of the *Kuzari*—God is depicted as a transcendental deity confined within his own being. This view corresponds to Aristotelian ideas that were common in Halevi's time. Yet later, according to Silman, Halevi develops a different conception of God, according to which God has stepped out of his detached transcendence, became involved in history, and is even accessible to human beings not only intellectually

[57] Abul Ela Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Muhyid Din-Ibnul Arabi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939).

[58] Sarah Stroumsa and Sara Sviri, "The Beginnings of Mystical Philosophy in al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra and His Epistle on Contemplation," *JSAI* 36 (2009) 201–53. Supporting views abound: see, e.g., M. E. Marmura, "Al-Ghazālī," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy*, 137; Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (3rd ed.; New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 253–61.

[59] On the intellectual connections between Halevi and Ibn al-ʿArabī and their affiliation with mystical philosophy, see Stroumsa and Sviri, "Beginnings of Mystical Philosophy," 211: "The neoplatonic world-view of Ibn Masarra is typically Andalusi, as can be seen from a comparison with such writings . . . from later periods, those of the Muslim authors al-Batalyawsi and Ibn Tufayl as well as of Jewish authors such as Ibn Gabirol and Judah Ha-Levi. This type of Andalusi 'mystical philosophy,' which owes so much to neoplatonism, culminated in the highly sophisticated oeuvre of Ibn al-ʿArabi, an oeuvre which weaves together mysticism with philosophy and in which neoplatonic notions and structures are undeniably present."

[60] See Daniel Lasker, "Rabbi Judah Halevi as a Biblical Exegete in the Kuzari" (Heb.), in *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Mediaeval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai* (ed. M. Bar-Asher et al.; Jerusalem; Magnes, 2007) 179–92, at 190; Warren Z. Harvey, "Judah Halevi's Interpretation of the Tetragrammaton" (Heb.), in *Word Fitly Spoken,* 125–32; Yochanan Silman, *Philosopher and Prophet: Judah Halevi, the Kuzari, and the Evolution of His Thought* (SUNY Series in Judaica: Hermeneutics, Mysticism, and Religion; Albany SUNY Press, 2012) 103–5, 173–82, 187–96.

[61] Yochanan Silman, "Judah Halevi's Interpretation of the Tetragrammaton" (Heb.), in *Word Fitly Spoken*, 125–32; idem, *Philosopher and Prophet,* vii–ix.

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but also experientially.[62] In his early thought, Halevi defined the human-God relationship in ontological terms. Later, however, Halevi developed a dialogical theology that culminates in the notion of prophetic connection.[63] In this phase, it is not *being* that marks the relationship of the divine with humankind and with the world, but rather *presence.* This theological leitmotif, which runs throughout the *Kuzari*, is powerfully expressed in Halevi's position on divine names in general, and on YHWH in particular.[64] For Halevi, YHWH functions as any ordinary proper name—that is, as a designating element that fixes the specific identity of an individual:

> This is as if one asked: Which God is to be worshipped. . . . The answer to this question is: YHWH, just as if one would say: A. B., or a proper name, as Reuben or Simeon, supposing that these names indicate their true essence [i.e., the truth of their uniqueness]. (*Kuzari*, 4:1)[65]

Yet, contrary to proper names such as Reuben or Simeon that designate specific individuals and indicate their true essence, God's true essence cannot be known. Accordingly, Halevi implies that the biblical appellation אהיה אשר אהיה is no name at all. Its primary purpose is evasion: "Its tendency is to prevent the human mind from pondering over an incomprehensible but real entity. When Moses asked: 'And they shall say to me, What is His name?' the answer was: Why should they ask concerning things they are unable to grasp?"[66] The name אהיה however, along with YHWH, also carries significant positive content beyond its apophatic evasiveness. Relying on a rabbinic homily,[67] Halevi locates in the name אהיה God's commitment to a unique relationship with this selected congregation. In this additional interpretation, Halevi distinguishes between the concepts of *being* and *presence*.

[62] On Halevi's Arabic sources, see Ehud Krinis, "The Arabic Background of the Kuzari," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 21 (2013) 1–56.

[63] See Silman, *Philosopher and Prophet,* 134–36, 226, 326–28.

[64] Ibid., 327.

[65] A slight change in translation from Hirschfeld. Hirschfeld's rendition: "This is as if one asked: Which God is to be worshipped, the sun, the moon, the heaven, the signs of the zodiac, any star, fire, a spirit, or celestial angels, etc.; each of these, taken singly, has an activity and force, and causes growth and decay? The answer to this question is: 'The Lord,' just as if one would say: A. B., or a proper name, as Ruben or Simeon, supposing that these names *indicate their personalities*." Whether the name YHWH was coined by humans, as implied from section 4 of the *Kuzari*, or rather is a transcendental name coined by God Himself remains an open question. Cf. *Kuzari* 2:2, 83: "All names of God, save the Tetragrammaton, are predicates and attributive descriptions, derived from the way His creatures are affected by His decrees and measures."

[66] *Kuzari*, 4:3, 202.

[67] *Exod. Rab.* 3:6: "R. Jacob b. R. Abina in the name of R. Huna of Tzippori: God said to Moses: 'Tell them, in this servitude I will be with them, and in the continuing servitude I will be with them!' Moses said to God: 'I should tell them this? An evil is sufficient in its time.' God replied: 'No: Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: "Ehyeh has sent me to you." I am [only] revealing this to you, but not to them.'"

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Whereas God's true being[68] is inaccessible to human knowledge, his presence[69] is promised to the congregation: "'אהיה אשר אהיה' the present one, present for your sake whenever you seek me. Let them search for no stronger proof than My presence among them."[70]

Halevi goes further in this discussion to propose intriguingly that YHWH "is a name exclusively employable by us [Jews], as no other people knows its true meaning."[71] According to Halevi, only those who had prior acquaintance with a person or entity can properly use their name. Therefore, only Jews, the descendants of the ancient Israelites who had encountered God at Mount Sinai, can know the Name's true meaning. For Halevi too, then, the divine name's true meaning is one that marks the possibility of addressing God. Yet his important innovation is that the Name not only marks the possibility for addressing God but is already the result of prior dialogue between humans and the divine, grounding the Name's meaning in its own existence.

God, according to Halevi, cannot be represented adequately. Yet God can be, and in fact is, present among the selected congregation of his believers. His name YHWH bears witness to divine presence because it serves as documented proof to the occurrence of such presence in the past. Its use forms a causal chain, which reaches all the way to the revelation at Sinai, where the divine was present in public in an immediate manner. As such, the name represents neither God nor the manifold expressions of his presence within creation. It vouchsafes such presence and makes its reappearance possible.

YHWH, for Halevi, is not a description of God or his attributions; rather, it is a description of whether human beings can speak *to* God. The representational content describes the possibility of the appellative or dialogical, the attributive serves the designative. The name YHWH opens the possibility to speak *about* God only inasmuch as one can speak *to* God.

B. Al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-ʿArabī: Relational Naming and Self-Naming

The causal connection between knowledge of God and religious practice (worship of God) is a prominent motif in the writings of al-Ghazālī, who wrote: "Knowledge is realizing servanthood, God's lordship and the path to worship."[72] This unobvious

[68] Originally חקיקת אלד'את. See Joshua Blau, *Dictionary of Mediaeval Judaeo-Arabic Texts* (Heb.) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2006) 230.

[69] Originally אלחאצ'ר, which should be literally rendered "the Present."

[70] *Kuzari*, 4:3.

[71] Ibid.

[72] *Al-Ghazālī on Condemnation of Pride and Self-Admiration: Kitāb dhamm al-kibr wa'l-ʿujb, Book XXIX of The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Iḥyā' ʿulūm al-dīn*) (trans. Mohammed Rustom; Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2018) 47. Far from being trivial, this close connection between knowledge and worship, between addressing God and investigating his nature, provoked ongoing heated debates. Muʿtazilite thinkers insisted that legitimate use of human reason concerning God's simplicity and transcendence results in a necessary denial of any descriptive content in the names, whereas Sunni traditionalists, particularly Ḥanbalites, embraced Qur'anic anthropomorphisms and

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connection reflects powerfully in dealing with divine names as well. In the thought of mystical philosophers, the rationalist distinction between divine names as (false) descriptions of God and divine names as (true) descriptions of his action is taken a step further. As such, the names describe neither God nor his actions; rather, they describe God's fingerprint in the world in ways that bridge the gap between presence and representation.[73] Al-Ghazālī writes in his treatise on the names of God:

> Similarly you should understand that creatures differ in knowledge of God most high in proportion to what is revealed to them from the things known of God—great and glorious: the marvels of His powers and the wonders of His signs in this world and the next, and in the visible and invisible world. In this their knowledge of God—great and glorious—is enhanced, and their knowledge comes close to that of God most high.[74]

God himself cannot be represented, for any representation is tantamount to idolatry.[75] Yet according to al-Ghazālī, divine names are not at all representations of God but are *representations of God's presence*, a documentation of continuous divine revelation. The notion that divine names are ultimately representations of divine presence and not of the divine itself can clarify their connection with the notion of Allāh's "signs," *āyāt-allāh*. These signs are both linguistic and nonlinguistic.[76]

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rejected the notion that human reason may be applicable to investigating divine names and attributes. Yet even within the different schools of *kalām*, and certainly among Muslim philosophers, the negation of all rational speculation about the meaning of divine attributes and names was mostly rejected. Al-Ash'ari himself argued that knowledge is necessary for proper worship, as it safeguards the correct aiming of human worship to its true divine destination. At the crux of this debate lies the tension between knowledge of the names, on the one hand, and knowledge of their concordant attributes, on the other. See El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," 121–40.

[73] Chittick "Worship," 229–30.

[74] Al-Ghazālī, *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names,* 44. Elsewhere, al-Ghazālī argues further in favor of the possibility of a contemplative seeing of God by human beings. On this, see Binyamin Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of al-Ghazâlî and al-Dabbâgh* (New York and London; Routledge, 2003) 63–68. See also al-Ghazālī's distinction between a *mithāl* (image) and *mithl* (resemblance). God does not have a *mithl* (a perfect resemblance), but God does have a *mithāl* (a sufficient resemblance); A. Hughes, "Imagining the Divine: Ghazali on Imagination, Dreams, and Dreaming," *JAAR* 70 (2002) 33–53, esp. 42–43.

[75] For the difference between idolatry as erroneous representation and idolatry as inappropriate representation, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (trans. Naomi Goldblum; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 37–50.

[76] Far from being miraculous or spectacular, those signs are found in abundance throughout all avenues of life and the cosmos, from the human soul to innate nature. The Qur'an asserts this point on numerous occasions, for example: "Another of His signs is that He created spouses from among yourselves for you to live with in tranquility: He ordained love and kindness between you. There truly are signs in this for those who reflect. Another of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. There truly are signs in this for those who know" (Q Rūm 30:21–2). Cf. Q Hūd 11:99: "It is He who sends down water from the sky. With it We produce the shoots of each plant, then bring greenery from it, and from that We bring out grains, one riding on the other in close-packed rows. From the date-palm come clusters of low-hanging dates, and there are gardens of vines, olives and pomegranates, alike yet different—watch their fruits as they grow and ripen! In all this there are signs for those who would believe"; Q Fuṣṣilat 41:53:

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The essential affinity between the Qur'an and reality as two divinely created compositions that bear witness to God's authorship finds expression in that, as in reality, the discrete components of the Qur'an, the verses, are also called *āyāt*, for they too are signs of divine action.[77] As signs of God's action that are embedded in reality, *āyāt* serve as a cipher, a secret text inscribed into the texture of the world, from which human beings may learn of God's presence.[78] According to Ibn ʿArabī, another mystical philosopher, this creates a strong functional affinity between divine names and nonlinguistic *āyāt.* Just like the names, all other *āyāt* are representations of God's presence, albeit nonlinguistic ones. Thus the world, just as the Qur'an, is a text authored by God, on which his signs or fingerprints remain. The connection between signs and names is close, to the extent that some, including Ibn ʿArabī, assert that God's signs are in fact nonlinguistic synonyms of his names:

> The Qurʾān calls God Independent of the worlds. We make Him independent of signification. It is as if He is saying, "I did not bring the cosmos into existence to signify Me, nor did I make it manifest as a mark of My existence [*wujūd*]. I made it manifest only so that the properties of the realities of My names would become manifest.[79] I have no mark of Me apart from Me. When I disclose Myself, I am known through the self-disclosure itself. The cosmos is a mark of the realities of the names, not of Me. It is also a mark that I am its support, nothing else."[80]

In the thought of Ibn al-ʿArabī, the *āyāt* serve as a representational mechanism of a particular kind.[81] Similar to the contemplation of divine names and their representational content, the signs of divine creation and lordship in general are also a means to perceive divine presence through its representations.[82]

Turning back to al-Ghazālī, the concept of *akhlāq* suggests a step further beyond the contemplative and into actual promotion of divine presence within the created world. According to the principle of *al-takhalluq bi-al-akhlāq,* humans ought to

"We shall show them Our signs in every region of the earth and in themselves, until it becomes clear to them that this is the Truth. Is it not enough that your Lord witnesses everything?" Cf. Q 2:164. See Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) 1–45, 154–56; See also Binyamin Abrahamov, "Signs," *EQ* 5:2–11.

[77] See the elaborate discussion in Michael Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy in al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra, Ibn al-ʿArabī and the Ismāʿīlī Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014) 94–96: "It is important to remember that in Ibn al-ʿArabī's mystical-metaphysical worldview, creation is a product of the Divine names, a locus for their manifestation."

[78] See Wa'el B. Hallaq, "Ibn Taymiyya on the existence of God," *AcOr* 52 (1991) 49–69.

[79] In Ibn al-ʿArabī, the term 'reality' (*ḥaqīqa*) denotes a divine archetype for created things. These "realities" find expression in divine names. For example, the reality of life as we know it in our world is the divine name "Alive." See Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 134–39.

[80] Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futûhât*, 2.541–11 (Cairo, 1911). See Chittick's discussion in *Self-Disclosure of God: The: Principles of Ibn al-ʿArabī's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998) 11.

[81] Compare Ibn al-ʿArabī's assertion that the divine names are *nisab*, relationships with the cosmos. See Ibn al-Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (vol. 8; Beirut 1999) 14 and onward.

[82] See Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futûhât*, 2.558. Cf. Qaiser Shahzad, "Ibn al-ʿArabī's Contribution to the Ethics of Divine Names," *IS* 43 (2004) 5–38.

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adopt God's attributes as epitomized in his ninety-nine most beautiful names, translating these into an ethical and religious manual.[83] Al-Ghazālī translated this principle as a prescription in which human beings must identify the human element of worship within each divine name—*ḥaẓẓ al-ʿabd min al-ism*.[84] The main part of al-Ghazālī's treatise on the most beautiful names contains subdivisions titled "counsel," in which al-Ghazālī underscores the *akhlāq* valence of each name. It is there that he explicates how believers can and ought to partake in the specific attribute to which the name at hand refers. For example:

> Counsel: Man's share [*ḥaẓẓ*] in the name *al-Raḥmān* lies in his showing mercy to the negligent, dissuading them from the path of negligence towards God—great and glorious—by exhortation and counselling, by way of gentleness not violence, regarding the disobedient with eyes of mercy and not contempt; letting every insubordination perpetrated in the world be as his own misfortune, so sparing no effort to eliminate it to the extent that he can—all out of mercy to the disobedient lest they be exposed to God's wrath and so deserve to be removed from proximity to Him.[85]

When realized, then, human internalization of divine names (attributes) turns them into moral and religious behavioral compasses, resulting in a comprehensive process of *imitatio Dei*. In this process, the human agent herself becomes a sign of God, an iconic medium by which his ways are manifest in created reality. A similar concept is found in Ibn al-ʿArabī's perception of the "perfect man": "within the perfect man, [God] has brought into existence all [*jamiʿ*] the divine names as well as the true essence of that which is found outside of him in the big world."[86] Furthermore, in Ibn al-ʿArabī's view, every act of a human being is caused by the influence of one of God's names relevant to the nature of the act, one of the "realities" cited above.[87] Both Ibn al-ʿArabī's perfect man and al-Ghazālī's *akhlāq* demonstrate how divine names are not mere representations of divine presence; they can also serve as a means to promote such presence, embodied in human action.

[83] As Negev, *God's Greatest Name*, 19, n. 67, mentions, this concept was attributed in Hadith (most probably inauthentic) to the Prophet, and used extensively later. See also Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, 24–25. This concept strongly resonates with a midrash homily from *Sipre Deut*. 49, and was later developed by Maimonides in his *Code* (De'ot 1:6) as well as in the *Guide* (iii, 52). However, as a result of the clear distinction between God's attributes and his single proper name YHWH, the equivalent to *akhlāq* in Maimonides is less connected to the issue of divine names and divine representation in comparison to Islamic thought. On *akhlāq* in Abraham Maimonides, see Nathan Hofer, "Training the Prophetic Self: Adab and Riyāḍa in Jewish Sufism," in *Ethics and Spirituality in Islam: Sufi adab* (ed. Francesco Chiabotti et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2017) 325–55.

[84] See Negev, *God's Greatest Name*, 21; Al-Ghazālī', *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names*, 47–50.

[85] Al-Ghazālī', *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names*, 54.

[86] Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futûhât* 1.176.7. See further discussion in Ebstein, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 163–64.

[87] See Binyamin Abrahamov, *The Sufis' and Ibn al-'Arabī's Attitudes Towards the Pillars of Islam* (Jerusalem: Idra Publishing, 2019) 165–76. I thank the article's anonymous reviewer for this helpful point.

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Whereas the aforementioned approach overcame the problem of linguistic representation of the divine by redefining the identity of the represented entities, the second approach found among mystical philosophers deals with the authority and authorship of representation. Different theological schools debated whether it was humans who generated God's ninety-nine most beautiful names according to inductive reasoning (*ʿaql*) or whether it was God himself who handed down the names according to preconcerted determination (*tawqīf*).[88] Whereas the first position largely coincides with the relational views mentioned above, the latter position of *tawqīf* offers another perspective on the question of divine representation and its legitimacy.[89]

One possibility for understanding *tawqīf* in the context of divine names is that the names' descriptive content is legitimate, thanks to the authority of God. Under this view, God holds the ultimate and exclusive epistemic authority over his representations. Knowing himself, God is the only one who can determine that a certain description holds true for him or his relation to created reality.[90] If divine names are only legitimate because God authorized their usage, and they would otherwise be a prohibited form of representation,[91] their descriptive content would have little if any meaning. Yet we have seen that, along with other divine signs, the descriptive content of divine names is key to their theological role. Authority alone cannot account for divine self-naming, or *tawqīf*.

A second possibility is understanding the legitimacy of divine self-naming as grounded in the idea of *self-presentation*.[92] When God names himself and provides

[88] See Gardet, "al-Asmāʾ al-Ḥusnā"; Gimaret, *Les noms divins,* 37–50; Mustafa Shah, "Classical Islamic Discourse on the Origins of Language: Cultural Memory and the Defense of Orthodoxy," *Numen* 58 (2011) 314–43.

[89] See for example Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futûhât*, 2.232.28: "He is not named except He has named himself. Even if it be known that a name designates Him, since conditionality (*tawqīf*), in ascribing is to be preferred." Cf. Ozgur Koca, "Said Nursi's (1876–1960) Analysis on the Exegetical Significance of the Divine Names (*asmâ al-ḥusnâ*) Mentioned in the Qur'an," *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 14 (2015) 43–55. See also El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," 121–40, esp. 130, quoting al-Ashʿari: "The face is an attribute that God ascribed to Himself and only God knows its significance." As already implied in scholarship, *tawqīf* might have developed as a rationalist set of regulations, against those who applied more liberal policies on the legitimacy of invoking God by names that do not originate in Scripture. Yet their enduring theological significance goes beyond traditional restrictions of using noncanonical divine names. See Negev, *God's Greatest Name*, 20 and passim.

[90] According to this notion, the Qur'an's inner (and esoteric) meaning (*bāṭin*) functions on a level ontologically other than the outer (or exoteric) one (*ẓāhir*), in which the straightforward meaning of the text is decisive. Whereas the straightforward meaning of various names entails likeness between earthly and divine attributes, when referring to God, those attributes in fact mean something wholly different, known to God alone.

[91] See Paul A. Hardy, "Epistemology and Divine Discourse," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 289–300.

[92] The question of whether human beings are permitted to denote God by names that attest to his perfections yet were not sanctioned directly by God is a matter of stark controversy. Al-Ghazālī', for example, sanctioned the use of such names; *Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names,* 177–81. See Gimaret, *Les noms divins*, 37–50, for a comprehensive survey.

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these self-proclaimed names to human believers, he designates these names as effective means for addressing him linguistically. In so doing, he introduces himself, so to speak.[93] Self-naming is an essential yet partial phase in the process of legitimizing descriptive names. Only after complementing the act of self-naming with the act of handing these names down to humans do these names become legitimate. When God names himself and hands these names down to humans, he marks a path by which humans can address him. Under this understanding, the ninety-nine most beautiful names carry, alongside their descriptive role, a dialogical role.[94] When God named himself and gave these names to humans, he gave them a means not only to ponder his lordship and creative supremacy but also a means to address him properly. The same can be articulated liturgically: by naming himself and giving these names to humans, God is not only the object of praise but can also become the addressee of human supplication. Thus, divine self-naming becomes a gesture of divine love.[95] It ensures that not only can the divine names describe God's relation to the world and to humans, as mentioned above, but they are also *true* names, in that they refer directly to God and, when proclaimed or invoked, can actually reach him. As such, the self-proclaimed ninety-nine divine names are not representations at all; they are means of presentation. This idea resonates strongly in Ibn al-ʿArabī's cosmology of divine self-disclosure, *tajalliyāt*.[96] Here, God's divine names are in fact the intermediary presence (*ḥuḍūr*) between God's unknowable essence and this phenomenal world: "After the knowledge of the divine names and of self-disclosure (*tajalliyāt*) and its all-pervasiveness, no pillar of knowledge is more complete."[97] In their straightforward meaning, then, God's ninety-nine names are descriptions of divine attributes and belong to the representational realm. Both Ibn al-ʿArabī and al-Ghazālī, however, found ways to uncover deep dialogical aspects of these names, exposing their presentational status. The ninety-nine names in this strand are thus a way for Muslims to talk *about* God, but, as a result, they are also a way for Muslims to talk *to* God and to be with God mentally and spiritually. A Muslim speaks to God by speaking of him.

[93] Self-naming refrains from viewing divine names as divine self-manifestations as some mystical positions, especially within the Shiʿa, maintained.

[94] Recall Q Baqarah 2:31–33: "He taught Adam all the names [of things], then He showed them to the angels and said, 'Tell me the names of these if you truly [think you can].' They said, 'May You be glorified! We have knowledge only of what You have taught us. You are the All Knowing and All Wise.' Then He said, 'Adam, tell them the names of these.' When he told them their names, God said, 'Did I not tell you that I know what is hidden in the heavens and the earth, and that I know what you reveal and what you conceal?'"

[95] See Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futûhât* 2:326.12, quoted and analyzed in Chittick, *The Sufi Path*, 180; idem, "The Divine Roots of Human Love," *Journal of Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 17 (1995) 55–78. Cf. the mystical aspect of divine love with relation to divine names in Schimmel, *Deciphering*, 104.

[96] See Makoto, *The Divine Names*, 20–34.

[97] Ibn al-ʿArabī, *al-Futûhât*, 2:309.17, and compare 3:162.23: "God possesses Nondelimited Being, but no delimitation prevents Him from delimitation. On the contrary, He possesses all delimitations, so He is nondelimited delimitation." See also Claude Addas, "The Experience and Doctrine of Love in Ibn 'Arabi," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 32 (2002) 25–44.

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Conclusion

Islamic thinkers inherited from the Qur'an and the Hadith ninety-nine names, the ostensible meaning of which is attributive. In rationalistic traditions, the most beautiful names presented a challenge: how to reconcile the tension between the names' descriptive valence and God's absolute simplicity and ontological otherness. For the mystical philosophers discussed here, the challenge was a different one: namely, how to cultivate the rich potentialities of religious action and thought that can be made possible by the creative use of these names. In this mystical-philosophical trend of Islamic tradition, proper representation was thus accepted as a necessary condition for effective presentation. Islamic tradition implies that speaking with God is achieved, albeit assisted, by speaking of God.

The Jewish tradition singled out, from an early stage in its development, the name YHWH to stand above all other divine names. This made it possible for theologians such as Maimonides to argue that YHWH carries no descriptive content, and therefore actually succeeds in pointing to God without any representational content. Yet, another Jewish theological tradition expressed in the influential writings of R. Judah Halevi and drawing on canonical biblical and homiletic materials, moved in a different direction. This direction does in fact locate within the name YHWH rich descriptive-representational content. However, within this tradition in its various expressions, the name YHWH does not describe God's nature, nor even God's relation to creation. This distinct Jewish tradition expounds the descriptive content of YHWH as disclosing the very possibility of addressing God and forming a dialogue with him. It is a description of the possibility of presence.

This discussion has highlighted that the relationship between theology and religious practice is not only analogous to the relationship between speaking about God and speaking to him. It is also analogous to the relationship between cognitive representation of God and the various means of promoting his presence. Rather than serving as strict representations or means of promoting divine presence, divine names are linguistic objects that serve both functions. Both Jewish and Islamic traditions formulated various ways to calibrate the tension and potential of this dual aspect. Despite the divergence in scope and style between Islamic and Jewish theological traditions, their understandings of the role and status of divine names hold a deep insight in common. In both traditions, and unlike prevalent positions in the philosophy of language, the representational does not stand in contrast to the presentational. Rather, it enables divine presence and gives way to it.

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