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The Unknown and Known God in the Abrahamic Religions

Znani in neznani Bog v abrahamskih religijah

Abstract: This study interrogates the portrayal of the duality of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam by the German theologian Rudolf Otto. Otto argues that God is essentially unknowable, but to forge a relationship with God, the Abrahamic traditions rationalise God. This process of rationalisation is, according to Otto, virtually non-existent in Islam, is in its early stages in Judaism, and reaches its peak in Christianity. The present study argues that Otto's analysis is flawed because he does not recognise the nuances that exist within each tradition. Further, Otto pays scant attention to the Jewish and Islamic traditions. This study seeks to remedy some of these oversights by highlighting the diversity of opinion within the Abrahamic traditions, and by focusing on specific mystical trends in Judaism and Islam. Kabbalism in the Jewish tradition through the work of the interpreter of Jewish mysticism Gershom Scholem, and Sufism in the Islamic tradition through the work of the mystic Ibn 'Arabi are explored. The study finds that, even though there are exceptions, the Kabbalists generally placed less of an emphasis on the personalness of God, as Otto believed, but the Sufi tradition of Ibn 'Arabi's school places equal emphasis on the majesty and mercy of God as aspects of God's knowability, contrary to Otto's assertion.

Keywords: God, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Kabbalism, Sufism, Ibn 'Arabi, Rudolf Otto

Izveček: Ta študija preučuje, kako nemški je teolog Rudolf Otto obravnaval upodabljanje dvojnosti Boga v judovstvu, krščanstvu in islamu. Otto je trdil, da je Bog v bistvu nespoznaven, vendar pa abrahamske tradicije Boga racionalizirajo, da bi vzpostavile odnos z njim. Za Otto ta proces racionalizacije v islamu praktično ne obstaja, v judovstvu je v zgodnjih fazah, v krščanstvu pa doseže vrhunec. Ta študija trdi, da je Ottova analiza pomanjkljiva, ker ne upošteva odtenkov, ki obstajajo znotraj vsake tradicije. Poleg tega Otto judovski in islamski tradiciji posveča le malo pozornosti. Ta študija skuša popraviti nekatere od teh nepazljivosti, tako da poudarja raznolikost mnenj znotraj abrahamskih tradicij in se osredotoča na specifične mistične smeri v judovstvu in islamu. Raziskana sta kabalizem v judovski tradiciji skozi delo razlagalca judovske mistike Gershoma Scholema ter sufizem v islamski tradiciji skozi delo mistika Ibn 'Arabija. Študija ugotavlja, da so kabalisti, čeprav obstajajo izjeme, na splošno manj poudarjali osebnost Boga, kot je menil Otto, medtem ko sufijski tradicija šole Ibn 'Arabija enako poudarja veličastvo in usmiljenje Boga kot vidika Božje spoznavnosti, kar je v nasprotju z Ottovo trditvijo.

Ključne besede: Bog, krščanstvo, islam, judaizem, kabalizem, sufizem, Ibn 'Arabi, Rudolf Otto

Introduction

This study interrogates the portrayal of the duality of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam by the German theologian Rudolf Otto. Otto delineates the non-rational and rational aspects of God in his seminal work on the topic, *Das Heilige* (1924). This work has been described as »probably the most widely read German theological work of the twentieth century«, which has »enjoyed a degree of popularity that has rarely been accorded to any academic work in theology or religious studies« (Gooch 2000, 1). Indeed, Eric Sharpe declares that *Das Heilige* »aroused an immediate and lasting response in the mind of the twentieth century and now holds near canonical status as one of the books which every student of comparative religion imagines himself or herself to have read« (Sharpe 1986, 161).

Nevertheless, his work contains some deficiencies that this study aims to address. One of the major failings of Otto's work is that he pays scant attention to the Jewish tradition, and especially the Islamic tradition. Even in the tradition that Otto deals with in most detail – the Christian tradition – there is a tendency to treat the entire tradition as a monolith and not acknowledge the diversity within the tradition. In the Jewish and Islamic traditions, which are clearly not Otto's main concern, this tendency to monolithise is magnified. However, Otto must be granted some grace because his work makes clear that his primary focus is the phenomenology of religion and not systematic metaphysics. Therefore, he may be forgiven for not exploring the diversity within each tradition. Yet some of his observations that seek to generalize his phenomenological experience to the entire Christian tradition, and then contrast it against a supposed monolithic Jewish or Muslim experience, must be called out for their subjectivity and superficiality.¹

This study acknowledges the diversity within Christian, Jewish, and Islamic mystical interpretations, and narrows the focus of enquiry to the specific mystical trends within the traditions that Otto most conspicuously neglects; namely, Jewish mysticism and Islamic mysticism. In the former, Kabbalism, and in the latter, Sufism are explored, but to circumvent Otto's error, both

1 I am extremely grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.



mystical trends are interrogated through specific thinkers, so as not to assume generality within each mystical tradition. This study, thus, scrutinizes the duality of God in Kabbalism through the work of the first professor of Jewish mysticism and pioneer of Kabbalah studies, Gershom Scholem (1941), and it does the same in Sufism through the mystical worldview of perhaps the most important Sufi in the Islamic tradition, Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240) (Chittick 2007; Chodkiewicz 1993; Corbin 2008; Knysh 1999; Landau 2008). In doing so, it engages with the ontological structure of God as described by the most well-known interpreter of Kabbalism on the one hand, and on the mystical worldview of arguably the most influential Sufi on the other. Prior to interrogating the known and unknown God in these traditions, however, we must present Otto's conceptual outlook of the divine.

Background

Religions generally, and the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in particular, have a fundamental problem. This problem is aptly described by Scholem in his masterful work on Jewish mysticism:

[I]n its classical form, religion signifies the creation of a vast abyss, conceived as absolute, between God, the infinite and transcendental Being, and Man, the finite creature (Scholem 1941, 7).

There is an inherent futility in the task of trying to comprehend an essentially apophatic Being, and yet religion is forever engaged in this endeavour. Scholem expresses the duality of religions that seek comprehension set against an incomprehensible God:

The great monotheistic religions live and unfold in the ever-present consciousness of this bipolarity, of the existence of an abyss that can never be bridged (Scholem 1941, 8).

What religions, especially the Abrahamic religions, do, then, to attempt to bridge this abyss between the essential apophysis of divinity and the intrinsic religious curiosity of humankind, is to employ analogy, as Otto explains,



The nature of God is [...] thought of by analogy with our human nature of reason and personality; only, whereas in ourselves we are aware of this as qualified by restriction and limitation, as applied to God the attributes we use are »completed«, i.e. thought as absolute and unqualified. (Otto 1924, 1)

The attributes of God, thus, become »rational«, and, by extension, so does God Himself, and, indeed, the religion that conceives of God in such a way. The definition of »rational« is:

- (1) the concepts (in this case, the attributes of God) are attained/attainable intellectually,
- (2) the concepts can be analysed intellectually, and
- (3) the concepts are definable through language. (Otto 1924, 2)

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam place heavy emphasis on describing God through analogy because this is the only way in which God can be »rationalised«. However, as Otto points out, this rationalisation does not eliminate our fundamental problem:

[S]o far are these »rational« attributes from exhausting the idea of »deity«, that they in fact imply a non-rational or supra-rational Subject of which they are predicates. They are »essential« (and not merely »accidental«) attributes of that subject, but they are also [...] *synthetic* essential attributes. (Otto 1924, 2)

The innate apophysis of God is underscored all the more because the attributes that are predicated of God are acknowledged as »synthetic«, and not applicable to God's non-rational, true essence. Nevertheless, the reason these »rational« attributes are foregrounded, especially in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic mysticism, is that »otherwise, Mysticism could only exist in an unbroken silence, whereas what has generally been a characteristic of the mystics is their copious eloquence« (Otto 1924, 2). Indeed, Scholem alludes to the strange paradox in the mystical tradition of the Abrahamic religions in which the mystics



continuously and bitterly complain of the utter inadequacy of words to express their true feelings, but, for all that, they glory in them; they indulge in rhetoric and never weary of trying to express the inexpressible in words. (Scholem 1941, 15)

Otto believes that the over-intellectualisation of God through emphasis on the »rational« God, known through the attributes of analogy, is a characteristic of Christianity. He explains that Christian

orthodoxy found in the construction of dogma and doctrine no way do justice to the non-rational aspect of its subject. So far from keeping the non-rational element in religion alive in the heart of the religious experience, orthodox Christianity manifestly failed to recognize its value, and by this failure gave the idea of God a one-sidedly intellectualistic and rationalistic interpretation. (Otto 1924, 3)

This article generally supports Otto's assertion, whilst at the same time qualifying it, for there are many thinkers in the Christian tradition who underscore the non-rational aspect of God. Among the most famous of these is Pseudo-Dionysius who includes the following disclaimer about his musings regarding the divine:

I have followed divine tradition and I have tried to come to grips with these mysteries in a manner that went beyond the workings of intellect. For the truth is that everything divine and even everything revealed to us is known only by way of whatever share of them is granted. Their actual nature, what they are ultimately in their own source and ground, is beyond all intellect and all being and all knowledge. (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 62)

Not only is knowledge of God not bestowed *in toto*, says Pseudo-Dionysius, but even the fragments that are bestowed must be filtered through the limited lattice of the intellect that cannot absorb the »actual nature« of the divine, which remains »beyond all intellect and all being and all knowledge«. The entire endeavour, then, is a »struggle to break free of all the working of our minds« (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 63).



To address this challenge, Pseudo-Dionysius believes that »dissimilar symbolism« is a more potent pedagogical tool than »similar symbolism to convey the non-rationality of God as it engages the intellect more directly through negation (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 7). He writes,

Since the way of negation appears to be more suitable to the realm of the divine and since positive affirmations are always unfitting to the hiddenness of the inexpressible, a manifestation through dissimilar shapes is more correctly to be applied to the invisible. (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 149)

It is therefore more suitable to employ the dissimilar symbol of drunkenness than to use the similar symbol of beauty or wisdom because

»dissimilar« symbolism [...] through its very dissimilarity, its ugliness or monstrosity, and by the natural repugnance it inspires, proves from the very first to be better adapted to the method of negation that it demands. (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 7)

Through dissimilarity, then, Pseudo-Dionysius »self-consciously employs contradictory constructions of the divine Other to convey a more realistic sense of God's utter unthinkability« (Almond 2002, 526).

Meister Eckhart's (d. 1328) solution to the conundrum of divine non-rationality versus divine rationality was to actually designate two gods: the non-rational God was the »Godhead« (*Gottheit*), as opposed to the rational God (Almond 1999, 152). Eckhart argued that one must go »beyond« God »to the nameless Oneness of the »Godhead« (Eckhart 2009, 20). Eckhart's non-rational Godhead is an »abyss« (*Abgrunt*) that is »nameless« and »quality-less« (Almond 1999, 152), and so it is most radically the Other. He writes about this non-rational Godhead:

God is nameless; no one can know or say anything of him. [...] If say God is good it is not true: I am good, God is not good. I say more: I am better than God is, for what is good can be better and what is better can be best. But God is not good, therefore he cannot be better; and since he cannot be better, therefore he cannot



be best. These three: good, better, best are remote from God who is above all. (Eckhart 1947, 246)

All adjectives, since they operate within the realm of human comprehension, cannot be applied to the nameless Godhead, says Eckhart. He uses scandalous language to drive his point home when he declares »I am better than God is«. In making this assertion, Eckhart is negating the legitimacy of the comparison since God is »above« the categorisations of »good«, »better«, and »best«. He goes further, saying that these descriptions do not just apply to the aspects of the nameless Godhead, they apply to His very existence: »If I say, God is being, it is not true: he is a transcendental essence, a superessential nothing.« (Eckhart 1947, 246) He therefore cautions against »prating« about the non-rational Godhead as whatever one says about him is inevitably a lie, and lying about God is a grave sin (Eckhart 1947, 246).

A further example of the emphasis on the non-rational God in Christian mysticism is San Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross) (d. 1591) who argued that the soul could only grasp God in »general terms« (*términos generales*) because God was essentially beyond all meaningful comparison (San Juan 1929, 206). He explains that the experience of the divine is innately ineffable, which is why mundane terms have to be used to give an idea of the phenomenological experience, but that that generality should not be mistaken for specificity or accuracy (San Juan 1929, 207). Kieran Kavanaugh notes that even though San Juan believes in union with the divine, he, nevertheless, does not abandon his notion of the non-rational God, for in this exalted state of divine union, though one reaches the pinnacle of phenomenological experience, the comprehension and, *a fortiori*, articulation of that experience remain firmly out of reach (Kavanaugh 1987, 113.185). E. Allison Peers adds that even though San Juan does allow immanence of the rational God, rational God ultimately gives way to the religious experience of the non-rational God that is incomprehensible and evokes a sense of »awe« (Peers 2011, 199). San Juan, then, much like Otto, focuses on the religious experience of the holy, but in contrast to Otto, he believes that this experience leads to the complete abandonment of rationalisation (Kavanaugh 1987, 185). It is clear through these examples (and many more could be cited) that while Otto's assertion of the emphasis on the rational God as a general characteristic of the



Christian tradition is largely correct, there are many significant outliers to this that need to be acknowledged.

This study also generally agrees with Otto that the Jewish tradition veered less in the direction of rationalisation (see below), although he does not pay sufficient attention to the mystical aspect in this tradition. Further, this general assertion must also be qualified as there are numerous counterexamples who rationalise God whilst also maintaining God's essential non-rationality. Such a significant figure is Rabbi Isaac Luria (d. 1572) who believed that although God was fundamentally non-rational (*En-Sof*), the divine was constantly being manifested in the universe, which was moving towards a restitution (*tikkun*) of God's original creative plan (Dunn 2008, 21–22).

This article does, however, break ranks with Otto is in his categorisation of the Islamic tradition as possessing an essentially pre-Mosaic quality of absolute non-rationality (Otto 1924, 77). The Islamic tradition, like its Abrahamic counterparts, has a spectrum of opinions regarding God's knowability, with the hyper-rationalistic Mu'tazilites rejecting the idea that God could be known by humans, whereas the anti-rationalistic Atharis maintaining that descriptions of God in the Qur'an were to be taken at face-value (Frank 2007). Between these extremes are the majority of Sunni denominations that incline either more towards rationalisation or non-rationalisation. The mystical worldview of Ibn 'Arabi is distinct in its manifestation, but follows the majority opinion in the equal attention it gives to both facets inherent in the duality of God.

This study further demonstrates that one thing that the mystical trends in the Abrahamic traditions have in common is that the rational God is an emanation from the non-rational God, and that the non-rational God is the source and basis for the rational aspect of God. While Otto seems to allude to these ideas at some stages, he fails to develop them, and certainly neglects the Jewish and Islamic manifestations of them in his work.



Method

Otto expresses the experience of the non-rational God as *mysterium tremendum*. First, the essential aspects of this phenomenological experience are scrutinised. Subsequently, the non-rational/unknown God as the source and basis for the rational/known God is explained. Finally, the rationalisation of God in all three traditions is explored. Through this method, Otto's neglect of the Jewish and Islamic traditions, as well as his frequent conflation of phenomenology, epistemology, and metaphysics, is remedied. This study differentiates between the ontological reality of God, the epistemological accessibility of this reality, and the phenomenological experience of that reality. The ontological reality of God in the Abrahamic traditions is generally non-rational, but the non-rational God is the source and basis for the rational/known God, as the study explains. This means that the rational/known God is the only God that is epistemologically accessible. Lastly, the phenomenological experience, which is of the non-rational God, but remains incommunicable, is explored.

Otto's analysis of *mysterium tremendum*

Otto views the rational, or known God, as being parallel to the non-rational, or unknown God, in the Christian tradition through his description of the non-rational God as *mysterium tremendum*. The composite term of *mysterium tremendum* has two distinct, yet interconnected, facets. By the adjective of *tremendum*, Otto refers not to the mundane emotion of »tremor« resulting from fear, but »a quite specific kind of emotional response, wholly distinct from that of being afraid, though it so far resembles it that the analogy of fear may be used to throw light upon its nature« (Otto 1924, 13). The awe-inspiring dread that the numinous God evokes is different to the mundane dread that is elicited by mundane things. This »tremor« precipitates a consciousness of the self as entirely dependent on God. The dependence is not an ordinary dependence, but what Otto calls »creature-consciousness« or »creature-feeling« (Otto 1924, 10). He defines it as »the emotion of a creature, abased and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures« (Otto 1924, 10). This feeling is »a self-valuation, in the sense of self-depreciation«, which is »a self-consciousness, a feeling concerning one's self



in a special, determined relation, viz. one's dependence« (Otto 1924, 10). It would therefore seem to be an entirely phenomenological definition for an objective reality. Nevertheless, as Otto points out,

[t]he »creature-feeling« is itself a first subjective concomitant and effect of another feeling-element, which [...] in itself indubitably has immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self. (Otto 1924, 10)

It is the non-rationality of God that evokes the creature-consciousness, and »the numinous is thus felt as objective and outside the self« (Otto 1924, 11). The creature-consciousness of absolute dependence has a rich history in Islamic intellectual thought, most notably, in Avicenna's »Demonstration of the Truthful« (*Burhan al-siddiqin*) (Lala and Alwazzan 2023). Yet, of greater concern for us (as well as for Otto) is the phenomenology of this dependence. Empirically, it is as the true consciousness of one's own nothingness compared to God's absolute omnipotence that this categorical dependence presents itself. In this regard, »creature-consciousness« is an apt translation for the Arabic term *taqwa*.

Taqwa is regarded as being one of the most important terms in the Qur'an and appears in the sacred text over 250 times (Esposito 2003, 314–315). Toshihiko Izutsu states that this is the »fear of God« only in the sense of »a reverent awe before the Lord of the Day of Judgement«, which acts »as the determining motive of all conduct of the religious man« (Izutsu 2002, 53). Izutsu emphasizes that this term denotes far more than just fear of God's punishment, instead it arouses »in the mind of the believer a clear consciousness of the tremendous seriousness of life and thus incite him to moral earnestness and responsibility« (54). Therefore, even though it is often translated as »fear of God«, and the etymology of the term suggests there is a connection between *taqwa* and »fear« (Wehr 1994, 1282), it is far more expansive than just »fear« of God, or even »God-consciousness«, which has gained popularity in recent times (Dusuki and Abdullah 2007). Otto's »creature-consciousness« is more closely correlated with the concept of *taqwa* precisely because it is not just the consciousness of God, but the *relation* of one's self with respect to God, and the overwhelming awareness of one's utter impotence and absolute dependence on God. The term denotes something subjective and



phenomenological, as Izutsu concedes, but refers to the source of that feeling. It is for this reason that Otto further categorizes »*tremendum*« as »*tremenda majestas*«, or »aweful majesty« (Otto 1924, 20). It is not only an awareness of one's absolute dependence and nothingness, nor of the absolute independence and omnipotence of God, but the juxtaposition between the two and the *relation* between them that the term denotes.

The second term in Otto's formulation of *mysterium tremendum*, that of the mysteriousness of God, is naturally connected to the adjective. Otto begins by defining the term:

Conceptually, »*mysterium*« denotes merely that before which the eyes are held closed, that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar. (Otto 1924, 13)

However, as with *tremendum*, there is more to *mysterium* in this context than just that which is hidden and incomprehensible. Further, Otto makes an interesting observation: the substantive of *mysterium* is not just explained by the adjective of *tremendum*, but the latter adds a synthetic attribute to it (Otto 1924, 25). This means that, while the two terms are connected, *tremendum* adds something extrinsic that is not semantically contained within *mysterium*. The former connotes the creature-consciousness outlined above, and the latter denotes a designation of the »wholly other«. As Otto puts it, »the elements of meaning implied in 'awefulness' and 'mysteriousness' are in themselves definitely different« (Otto 1924, 26). The difference is also definable in the human reaction to the two facets: *tremendum* evokes tremor and fear, whereas *mysterium* evokes stupor, and as Otto says, »*stupor* is plainly a different thing from *tremor*« (Otto 1924, 26).

The major difference between *tremendum* and *mysterium*, however, is not in the reaction of tremor versus stupor, but in the cause of the latter. For if the creature-consciousness of *tremendum* produces fear, the stupor of *mysterium* is produced due to attraction. Otto explains that the real attraction of *mysterium* is that »in an uncommon degree, it entices the imagination, awakening strong interest and curiosity; it is the weird thing itself that allures the fancy« (Otto 1924, 29). It is because the thing is the



»‘wholly other’, something which has no place in our scheme of reality«, that it »arouses an irrepressible interest in the mind« (29).

In Judaism, the most influential Jewish philosopher of the medieval period, Maimonides (d. 1204), underscores the absolute »otherness« of God through exclusive use of negative attributes to describe God. He speaks of »the propriety of forming as many negative attributes as possible, and the impropriety of ascribing to God any positive attributes« (1956, 87). Since God is the »wholly other«, it is only by saying what God is not that He can be understood, or as Maimonides says, »those who do not recognize, in reference to God, the negation of things, which others negate by clear proof, are deficient in the knowledge of God, and are remote from comprehending Him« (1956, 89). It is this aspect of complete »otherness« that evokes fascination in humans, as Otto observes (1924, 29).

The non-rational/unknown God as the basis for the rational/known God

The upshot of Otto’s deliberations is that (1) the non-rational God is the *mysterium tremendum*, and (2) these two aspects of God are interrelated but distinct, so (3) while *mysterium* evokes fascination and attraction, (4) *tremendum* evokes dread and fear. He then speaks of the rational aspect of God, and the duality of God that is expressed in this sphere. Nevertheless, there is some conflation between the non-rational aspect of God and the rational aspect when Otto gives examples from the Old Testament and the New Testament that, according to him, express the *tremendum* of the non-rational God (Otto 1924, 13–14). While I agree with Otto that the non-rational God has both the *tremendum* aspect that evinces dread and the *mysterium* aspect that inspires attraction, I believe examples that are cited to support these aspects from scripture undermine the argument that these aspects are truly non-rational. It is not sufficient to assert – as Otto does (1924, 13–14) – that some of the actions seem to fall afoul of our common conceptions of morality. For these aspects to be truly numinous, as Otto stresses, they cannot have any practical manifestation in the phenomenal realm.



It is in this regard that this study breaks ranks with Otto's thesis. Otto intimates that there is some correlation between the dread of *tremendum* of the non-rational God with fear of the rational God, and the attraction of *mysterium* of the non-rational God with mercy of the rational one when he says,

The ideas and concepts which are the parallels or »schemata« on the rational side of this non-rational element of »fascination« are Love, Mercy, Pity, Comfort. (Otto 1924, 31)

However, his conflation between the non-rational and rational aspects of God muddies the waters and undercuts his thesis. It is my assertion that the love and mercy of the rational God are not a »parallel« of the non-rational *mysterium*, nor is the fear of the rational God a »parallel« of the non-rational *tremendum*; rather, the non-rational God is the *source* and *basis* of the duality of the rational God that we find in the scriptures of the Abrahamic religions. As the source and basis, the relation of the fascination of the non-rational God to the mercy of the rational God is the same as the relation of the non-rational God to the rational God. Put otherwise, the relation between the two is not known *except* in the sense that the former is the source of the latter. This is the same point Eckhart makes when he advocates going beyond the rational God to the non-rational, nameless Godhead who is the source of the rational one (Eckhart 2009, 20). San Juan makes the same point when he asserts that the rational God that is manifested in the phenomenal world is predicated on the non-rational God who is forever out of reach of human understanding, even in the phenomenological perfection of divine union (Peers 2011, 199; San Juan 1929, 206–207). To argue that the rational and the non-rational God are »parallels«, as Otto does, is to presume that the »numinous« is not numinous because we can extrapolate from rational mercy non-rational fascination, or from rational fear non-rational dread, which is not the case. Further, as Otto concedes, the dread of *tremendum* is »wholly distinct from that of being afraid« (1924, 13), and the fascination of *mysterium* is due to God being the »wholly other« (1924, 29). These assertions preclude any »parallel« between *tremendum* and fear of the rational God on the one hand, and *mysterium* and mercy of God on the other. For if the traces of *tremendum* and *mysterium* of the non-rational God appeared in the



phenomenal realm, then, even if they fell outside our conceptions of morality, the non-rational God would no longer be entirely numinous.

This means that dread and attraction are aspects of the non-rational God, in which way we cannot comprehend, much less express, except secondarily, aspects of the rational God in a derivative, but comprehensible, form in the same way as God is fundamentally non-rational and only rationalised in Abrahamic scriptures so that humankind can forge a connection with God, or at least some way to conceive God (Scholem 1941, 8–9). For this reason, the non-rational God is known only through negative attributes and the rational one through positive ones, and the non-rational God remains completely unknown, even in terms of His traces, whereas the rational God is known through His traces in the phenomenal world (see Figure 1).

The extent to which this rationalisation is carried out in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is one of the major concerns of this study. We shall address each religious tradition separately. The reason for dealing with each religious tradition separately is that, even though they all share some of the same characteristics (Otto 1924, 74–77), Otto claims the process of rationalisation is completed to differing degrees in each tradition:

The noble religion of Moses marks the beginning of a process which from that point onward proceeds with ever increasing momentum, by which the »numinous« is throughout rationalized and moralized. (Otto 1924, 77)

If the rationalisation process begins with Judaism, says Otto, it reaches its apogee in Christianity. Otto believes that

it is in this that the special nobility of the religion revealed [...] by the Bible is to be found, which, when the stage represented by the deutero-Isaiah is reached, justifies its claim to be a universal world-religion. (Otto 1924, 77)

Otto's claim that there is a general trend towards rationalisation in the Christian tradition that was initiated in the Jewish tradition must be heavily qualified in terms of its scope and consistency since there are numerous



counterexamples, as listed above. However, the general trajectory is towards increasing rationalisation. But Otto also believes that Islam reverts to a pre-rationalisation conception of God. He claims that Christianity has a 'manifest superiority over [...] Islam, in which Allah is mere 'numen'' (Otto 1924, 77). This study demonstrates that this is not the case, and Otto's assertion is predicated on his lack of familiarity with the Sufi tradition in Islam. What emerges from close analysis of Ibn 'Arabi's works is that in his school of speculative Sufism, at least, there are rationalistic and non-rationalistic elements.

Another reason for carrying out analysis of each tradition separately is that, as must already be clear to the reader, each religious tradition, and each denomination within that tradition, as well as thinkers that hail from them, have their own set of values and emphases that they apply to the nature of God. As Scholem apprises us, »[w]e cannot [...] expect the physiognomy of Jewish mysticism to be the same as that of Catholic mysticism [...] or Moslem Sufism« (Scholem 1941, 10). This is not to say that they do not share some features, and in the importance placed on the essential nature of God as non-rational and numinous, they are united. However, this is negative unification through attributes of the non-rational/unknown or, more precisely, unknowable God (Lala 2019), and not positive attributes of the rational/ known God, which are rationalised to varying degrees.

The rationalisation of God in Judaism

As mentioned above, the rational/known God in Judaism is investigated in this study through the works of Scholem. We must therefore first justify why Scholem's exploration of the mystical aspect of Judaism deserves to be the lens through which we scrutinise the rational God. Martin Buber once remarked, »all of us have students, schools, but only Gershom Scholem has created a whole academic discipline!« (Magid 2013). Steven Aschheim classifies Scholem as »arguably *the* greatest scholar and thinker of matters Jewish in the twentieth century«, and it was through »his ability to present the esoteric byways of Jewish history in a thoroughly accessible [...] idiom that he excited so many readers whose worlds were entirely removed from that of Jewish mysticism« (Aschheim 2001, 9). Scholem's pioneering work on the Kabbalah is therefore used to make sense of the rational God



in Jewish mysticism. This is not to suggest that Scholem's outlook is the definitive interpretation of the Kabbalah. Luria's Kabbalism, for instance, is far more kataphatic than that of Scholem (Dunn 2008). Additionally, since Scholem was not himself a mystic but a historian of Kabbalism, his interpretation of the Jewish mystical tradition is from the perspective of an outsider, as opposed to that of Ibn 'Arabi who was himself a Sufi. In this regard, the representation of Kabbalism is more limited in this study than Sufism.²

Kabbalah is defined by Scholem as

the traditional and most commonly used term for the esoteric teachings of Judaism and for Jewish mysticism, especially the forms which it assumed in the Middle Ages from the 12th century onward. (1974, 3)

This brings us to the second reason for Scholem's selection: the rational God is interrogated in Islamic mysticism through the mystical *weltanschauung* of Ibn 'Arabi, who, not only is arguably the greatest Sufi, but hails from the same period. The interrogation of both traditions is thus from the 12th century onwards.

Scholem agrees with Otto that God is essentially non-rational. He writes,

No creature can take aim at the unknown, the hidden God. In the last resort every cognition of God is based on a form of relation between Him and His creature, i.e. on a manifestation of God in something else, and not on a relation between Him and Himself. (1941, 11)

While this is the reality of God – God is the *deus absconditus* – the Kabbalists still attempted to rationalise God to some degree (Scholem 1941, 11–12). The rationalisation, however, is very mild, says Otto, as compared with the Christian tradition. Scholem explains that

2 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.



the God of religion [...] has innumerable Names – which, according to the Kabbalists, belong to Him by His very nature and not as a result of human convention – the *deus absconditus*, the God who is hidden in His own self, can only be named in a metaphorical sense and with the help of words which, mystically speaking, are not real names at all. (Scholem 1941, 12)

In the designation of the names that describe God as entirely metaphorical, the Kabbalists, according to Scholem, kept God at a distance, not allowing the conception of God to be the rational and personal God of the Bible. Scholem writes that one of the most popular phrases to describe God was *En-Sof*, which highlights »the impersonal character of this aspect of the hidden God from the standpoint of Man« (Scholem 1941, 12). The reason for this is *En-Sof* is most accurately translated as »that which is infinite«, not »He who is infinite«, as it is often translated. This means that God is »that which is not conceivable by thinking', not 'He who is not'« (Scholem 1941, 12). The stress on the impersonal, as opposed to the Christian tradition, demonstrates that »Kabbalism abandons the personalistic basis of the Biblical conception of God« (Scholem 1941, 12).

Otto argues that the lack of rationalisation of God in Judaism is reflected in the dominance of the term Yahweh over Elohim for God in the Torah (the former occurs more than twice as many times as the latter). He writes that »whereas in Yahweh the numinous preponderates over the familiar 'rational' character, in Elohim the rational aspect outweighs the numinous« (Otto 1924, 77). This is not to suggest that Yahweh does not bear traces of personalness, nor Elohim traces of »awefulness«, it is just that the emphasis of the former is »awefulness« and the latter personalness (Otto 1924, 77). Moreover, the preponderance of the awefulness of God over the personalness manifests as a focus on the austerity of God, and not the mercy of God that makes God more personal. Otto observes that »the 'awefulness' and the 'majesty', the 'mystery' and the 'augustness', of His non-rational divine nature« are emblematic of the lack of rationalisation and personalisation of God in the Jewish tradition (Otto 1924, 78).

It is due to this that, according to Otto, the *emāt* (fear) of Yahweh is prominent in the Torah (Otto 1924, 14). An instance of this is Exodus 23:27 in which God proclaims, »I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into



confusion every nation you encounter» (NIV). The terror of God serves to keep God at a distance from humans and make God less understandable, especially when, as Otto claims, some instances of divine wrath lie entirely beyond the ken of human comprehension (Otto 1924, 18–19). Otto believes that as the process of rationalisation, initiated in the Jewish tradition, gains pace in the Christian tradition, the mercy of God that makes God more relatable is more heavily accentuated (Otto 1924, 77). It is to this process that we now turn our attention.

The rationalisation of God in Christianity

Otto declares that

[i]n the Gospel of Jesus we see the consummation of that process tending to rationalize, moralize, and humanize the idea of God, which began with the earliest period of the old Hebrew tradition. (Otto 1924, 85)

It is clear from Otto's assertion that he treats »rationalisation« of God and »humanisation« of God as synonymous. This puts him at odds with Christian thinkers like Søren Kierkegaard, who views the »humanisation« of God to be antithetical to the »rationalisation« of God (Levine 1982). According to Kierkegaard, God taking human form is not something that is accessible to reason and a necessary entailment of this belief is the abandonment of rationality. Kierkegaard maintains that God is aspatial and atemporal. To believe that God could be spatially and temporally bounded requires an irrational »leap« of faith. Richard Schacht explains Kierkegaard's issue with temporal circumscription of the divine thus,

[t]he proposition that God has existed in time [...] is radically paradoxical. Indeed, to the rational understanding, it is »absurd«. If it is to be affirmed, therefore, it can only be affirmed through a »leap of faith«. And what is required to make such a »leap« is not reason. (Schacht 1973, 307)

However, what Otto means by »humanisation« of God is not incarnationism; rather, it is the emphasis on the »human« attributes of God, as his



analysis makes clear (Otto 1924, 85). Otto argues that »the Fatherhood of God« is as much a part of the humanisation and rationalisation of God as is the Sonhood of Christ (85–87). In other words, it is the »personalisation« of God that he refers to by »humanisation« because it is this aspect of God, the personal and merciful aspect, that is emphasised in the New Testament (87). That this aspect is underscored in the New Testament should not lead one to think that the austere God of the Torah disappears. Otto makes it clear that the »awefulness« and »majesty« of the Mosaic God persists in the Gospels. We have verses reminiscent of the Torah, like Matthew 10:28, that say, »Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell« (NIV).

Yet there is generally a greater emphasis on the personal mercy of God in the New Testament. There are historical reasons for this. Jesus came at a time when there was an accentuation of legal formalism on the one hand, and stringent asceticism on the other. The Pharisees were emblematic of the first contingent whereas John the Baptist represented the latter. To find a middle way between these two extremes, Jesus placed great stress on the personal and merciful God, according to Otto (Otto 1924, 86–87). Further, Jesus had no need to emphasise the »awefulness« of the impersonal God because »how could He have had need of ‘teaching’ what was simply the primary, self-evident fact to every Jew« (Otto 1924, 86). It is based on these factors, says Otto, that Jesus exaggerated the merciful aspect of God even though the austere aspect was still important.

The emphasis on the personalisation of God in the New Testament is not only observed in the numerous verses devoted to the topic, but in the change in language. Otto gives the example of Deuteronomy and Hebrews. While the »awefulness« of God is highlighted in Hebrews from the New Testament as well as Deuteronomy from the Torah, there is a nuance in the language that reveals how the former has been »personalised«. In Deuteronomy 4:24, it states »The Lord is a consuming fire«, whereas in Hebrews 12:29, it says, »Our God is a consuming fire«. This shows that even though the »awefulness« of God is still present in the New Testament, there is a personalisation and rationalisation of God. The change from the impersonal (»The Lord«) to the personal (»Our God«) brings God into the realm of human comprehension (Otto 1924, 87).



Nevertheless, the personalisation and rationalisation of God in the Christian tradition is not, and can never, be complete, says Otto. In this, then, he agrees with Kierkegaard. But while Kierkegaard argues for the abandonment of reason, urging a »leap of faith« that is intrinsically illogical (Kierkegaard 1985), Otto believes that the paradox of the divine reality is settled in the Christian experience:

That that »heavenly« Being of marvel and mystery and awe is Himself the eternal, benignant, gracious will: this is the resolved contrast that first brings out the deep-felt harmony in true Christian experience. (Otto 1924, 87)

Thus, while Kierkegaard prescribes an innately »illogical« resolution to the divine paradox, Otto describes a »phenomenological« resolution to it. This resolution is not required, says Otto, in the Islamic tradition because only the numinosity of God is observed therein (Otto 1924, 77). Arguably, this superficial assessment of the rich Islamic tradition represents the most egregious failing in Otto's otherwise excellent thesis, for Islam navigates the same issues pertaining to the divine paradox as its predecessors.

The rationalisation of God in Islam

It is Otto's assertion that the Islamic tradition stresses only the numinous God and makes no concessions to rationality. He states that

the special quality of Islam is just that in it, from its commencement onwards, the rational and specifically moral aspect of the idea of God was unable to acquire the firm and clear impress that it won e.g., in Christianity or Judaism. In Allah the numinous is absolutely preponderant over everything else. (Otto 1924, 94)

This assessment, however, neglects the rich heritage of the Islamic tradition generally, the Sufi tradition specifically, and the school of Ibn 'Arabi especially, which underscores both facets of God: the numinous and the



knowable God (Chittick 2007; Izutsu 1998).³ It is this superficial analysis of only the numinous aspect of God being highlighted in the Islamic tradition that leads Otto to claim that it will

account for what is commonly called the »fanatical« character of this religion. Strongly excited feeling of the numen, that runs to frenzy, untampered by the more rational elements of religious experience – that is everywhere the very essence of Fanaticism. (Otto 1924, 94)

The notable appeal of Ibn ‘Arabi’s worldview to perennialism should disabuse one of this notion (Austin 1980; Burkhardt 2001; Lipton 2018).

Through his »spiritual unveiling« (*kashf*), which is a phenomenological experience that precipitates epistemological certainty (Ibn ‘Arabi 1999, 2:132; Lala 2022), Ibn ‘Arabi avers that the fundamental numinosity of God and God’s knowability are articulated in one and the same verse of the Qur’an. In his commentary of 42:11, the first part of the verse expresses the absolute numinosity of God when it says, »There is nothing like Him«. The strict attention Ibn ‘Arabi pays to the literal interpretation of the text (Morris 1987, 9; Sands 2006, 41) leads him to observe something extraordinary in this verse: there are two prepositions of similarity for »like« (*ka* and *mithl*). Arguing that a redundancy violates the principles of high eloquence (*balagha*) that the Qur’an exemplifies, Ibn ‘Arabi believes there is, and can be, no redundancy. Therefore, the apposition to two prepositions of similarity has a meaning (Ibn ‘Arabi 2002, 111). Translated literally, Q 42:11 would be »There is nothing like God’s like«. This declaration has two simultaneous meanings. First, it tells us about God’s absolute numinosity in denying that there could be anything like Him, or, even, anything like what would be like Him, adding an extra layer of numinosity. This extra layer is necessary, says Ibn ‘Arabi, because if we assume that there is a redundancy and the translation of the verse is »There is nothing like Him«, then it means that a direct comparison, through juxtaposition, is possible

3 Although the terms »numinous« and »non-rational« are not synonymous, nor are the terms »rational« and »knowable«, Otto generally employs them as such. I have followed Otto’s imprecise denotations in my analysis in order to analyse what he refers to by these terms. Due to this, there is a certain lack of nuance in the use of these terms. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.



with God, which is delimiting God through juxtaposition with that which is limited, i.e. all contingent things (Ibn 'Arabi 2002, 111). Meena Sharify-Funk and William Rory-Dickson explain that »[a]ttempts to declare God free of any limitation whatsoever, in fact, limit him by this very declaration, by nonlimitation« (2014, 152). Michael Sells elaborates that by such designations, Ibn 'Arabi wishes to extricate the nature of God from the strictures of language itself, which is innately comparative (Sells 1994, 22).

Yet, at the same time, by allowing that there could be something that is »God's like«, Ibn 'Arabi is opening up an avenue to the knowable aspect of God, which is underscored by the rest of Q 42:11 that says, »He is hearing, seeing«, since contingent beings also have these attributes. More specifically, says Ibn 'Arabi, this description refers to the Perfect Human that is imbued with the potentiality to be a locus of manifestation for all the »most beautiful Names of God« (*Asma' al-husna*), which are the symbols of God's knowability (Ibn 'Arabi 2002, 48–49). It is these divine Names that become the means through which an essentially numinous God becomes knowable, to some degree, by humankind.

Otto argues that the Islamic tradition emphasises God's numinosity alone (see above), but the divine Names in the Qur'an (Q 7:180), which are described as being ninety-nine in the prophetic tradition (Bukhari 2001, 3:198), are a »relation« (*nisba*) through which God, despite His innate apophysis, connects to His creation (Ibn 'Arabi 2002, 105). This is the knowable God that is described through Names of »majesty« (*jalal*) and »beauty« (*jamal*). If the former display the »aweful majesty« of God, as Otto describes (Otto 1924, 20), the latter display His love and mercy. In his epistle devoted to this issue, Ibn 'Arabi first underscores the absolute numinosity of God (Ibn 'Arabi 1997, 24), and then proceeds to describe how God becomes in some way kataphatic through the divine Names.

Unlike Otto, Ibn 'Arabi does not fall into the trap of conflating the majesty of God and the numinosity of God (see above); indeed, he punctiliously underscores the difference between them, despite the term of numinous majesty and knowable majesty being the same (*jalal*). He writes, »The first thing I declare is, the [numinous] majesty (*jalal*) of God is an entity (*ma'na*) that returns to Him, and He, the Exalted, has prohibited us from knowing about it« (Ibn 'Arabi 1997, 25). Before setting out the two aspects



of the knowable God, Ibn 'Arabi affirms unequivocally that God is ultimately apophatic and that is the numinous majesty, or *jālal*, that only He knows about and that He has prevented humankind from knowing. Then he says,

Beauty (*jamal*) is an entity that returns from Him to us, and it is that which gives us the gnosis (*ma'rifa*) that we have regarding Him. [...] In our opinion, it has two aspects: awe (*hayba*) and intimacy (*uns*), and that is because this beauty has what is elevated and what is close by. So we call that which is elevated »the majesty of beauty« (*jālal al-jamal*). The gnostics talk about this [...] although they imagine they are talking about the first [numinous] majesty. (Ibn 'Arabi 1997, 25)

Ibn 'Arabi says that beauty is what connects God to us and allows to know God. But this beauty is not what people think. It has two facets: divine majesty, or awe, and divine love, or intimacy. While intimacy or love draws us closer to God, awe or majesty keeps us afar. Ibn 'Arabi then points out that the error made by Otto – that of conflating the absolute numinous majesty of God and the majesty that falls outside our moral paradigm but is still manifested – is an error that gnostics commonly make. Put otherwise, the majesty of God is juxtaposed against the mercy of God, wherein the latter is presumed to be the way in which God is connected to and comprehended by the creation, and the former is understood to be the way in which God is dissociated from and not comprehended by the creation. However, the confusion, says Ibn 'Arabi, stems from the fact that there are *two* types of majesty – the numinous majesty of God, which is God's essential numinosity (naturally, we know nothing about this), and the majesty of beauty that underscores God's justice, as opposed to the mercy of beauty,⁴ in which God's love is highlighted (Ibn 'Arabi 1997, 25–26). Then Ibn 'Arabi makes an assertion about divine balance and equilibrium. As loci of divine manifestation, we, too, manifest these attributes of majesty of beauty and mercy of beauty. But in order for there to be cosmic balance, if the knowable God manifests the majesty of beauty, we will counteract it with the mercy of beauty; likewise, if the knowable

4 Ibn 'Arabi calls this just »beauty«. I have translated it as »mercy of beauty« to differentiate it from »majesty of beauty« (Ibn 'Arabi 1997, 26).



God manifests the mercy of beauty, we will counteract it with the majesty of beauty (see figure 2).

Conclusion

The foregoing has argued that the non-rational God is the source and basis of the rational God in all three Abrahamic traditions. The duality of God's »aweful« majesty and mercy that is observed in these traditions are facets of the rational God, but while the former does not contribute to God's rationalisation, the latter does as it makes God more relatable to humankind. In the Jewish tradition, Otto argues that there is less of a tendency to underscore the personalness of God. Scholem agrees that the Kabbalists believed the Names of God were completely metaphorical, essentially making God entirely unrelatable for humankind. The process of rationalisation of the rational or knowable God, says Otto, was taken much further by the Christian tradition in which the »human« attributes of mercy were most deeply emphasised, whilst also maintaining the majesty of God.

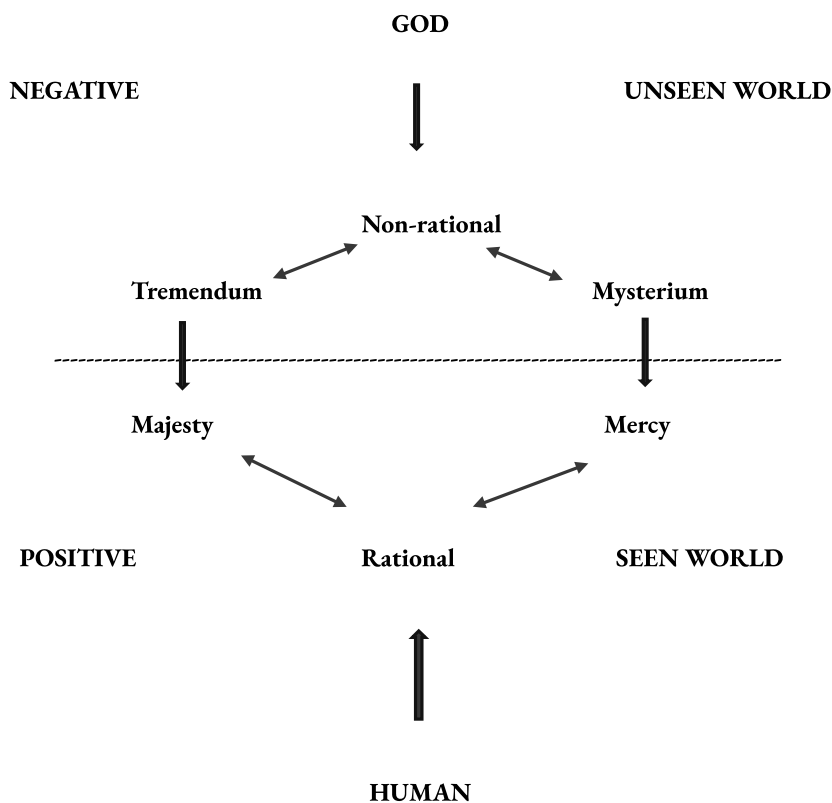
This study demonstrates that the nuances within both these traditions are overlooked by Otto since both Judaism and Christianity have numerous counterexamples that refute Otto's assertion. Nevertheless, within the limited remit of the phenomenology of religion, the assertion vis-à-vis his personal experience of the rational God must be taken seriously. Yet Otto's claim that Islam has sole emphasis on divine numinosity is rejected by this study through the mystical metaphysics of Ibn 'Arabi. Not wishing to repeat Otto's mistake of universalising an individual claim, the author recognises the nuances that exist within the Islamic tradition, much in the same way as they do in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and in the different mystical trends in the Abrahamic religions generally. However, in the work of Ibn 'Arabi, at least, there is clear evidence that God is essentially apophatic, but the rational God is known both through the attributes of mercy and the attributes of majesty. Both these aspects are elements of God's Names of beauty, which is the way God connects to the creation.



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Figure 1. The non-rational and rational God



Data Availability Statement

As this study is based on a theoretical approach, no new research data were generated or analyzed.

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