# Knowing God in Eastern Christianity and Islamic Tradition: A Comparative Study

**Nur Kirabaev and Olga Chistyakova \***

Department of History of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), 6, Miklukho Maklaya Street, 117198 Moscow, Russia; kirabaev-ns@rudn.ru

**\*** Correspondence: chistyakova-ov@rudn.ru

check for updates

**Abstract:** The currently existing type of dialogue of Western and Eastern cultures makes a philosophical exploration of Christianity and Islam compelling as they are fundamental monotheistic religions capable of ensuring the peaceful interaction of various ethnic cultures in the age of deepening secularization. The present analysis of the philosophical and epistemological teachings of the Greek Byzantine Church Fathers and the thinkers of classical Arab-Islamic culture aims at overcoming stereotypes regarding the opposition of Christianity and Islam that strongly permeate both scholarly theorizing and contemporary social discourses. The authors scrutinize the epistemological principles of the exoteric and esoteric knowledge of the Islamic Golden Age and the apophatic and cataphatic ways of attaining the knowledge of God in Early Christianity. Special attention is paid to the analysis of the concepts of personal mystical comprehension of God in Sufism (*fanā'*) and in Christianity (*Uncreated Light*).

**Keywords:** Christianity; Islam; Eastern Patristics; Sufism; *fanā'*; *uncreated light*; deification; religious epistemology

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary world is culturally and religiously diverse and may be confusing and sometimes even threateningly unpeaceful in the perception of people belonging to different socio-cultural communities. Interreligious relations in a multicultural world present a contemporary person with the idea of the *other* way of knowing God, religion, and hence another, different religious self-identity. In this regard, a comparative analysis of various forms of perception of *other* religions, whether or not included in the framework of an individual's religious culture, allows to raise questions of intercultural communication, interreligious relations, and the possibilities for ethnocultural and religious identity in a global world. However, the problem of understanding a particular culture is related to the fact that the founding values of different cultures, even those interrelated, do not coincide with each other, meaning they cannot be simply translated and transferred to the other cultures without losing substantive aspects.

We believe that religions, having a communicative and anthropological essence, help to overcome these axiological differences. Let us note that in this work we speak of two monotheistic religions—Christianity and Islam—that both infuse a sacred knowledge, primarily concerning the relationship of an individual and God and the possibilities of understanding the Absolute into their societies. In our opinion, they are able to establish a productive interaction of people of different ethnic cultures and religions on the basis of common values and moral norms.

The religious justification of an individual's aspiration to reach God gave rise, in both Christianity and Islam, to a reflection accompanied by the development of various methods and practices of perceiving the Absolute, moral ideals and principles, ways of exegesis of the sacred texts in

order to achieve the single highest goal—to know God and to achieve spiritual unity with Him. The Early Church Fathers and Islam's theologians[1] developed comprehensive epistemological doctrines (Von Grunebaum 1970, p. 80) using the depth of ancient Greek philosophical thought, chiefly the Neo-Platonists and Peripatetics.

To realize the goal of considering the various ways of religious gnosis created within the framework of Arab-Muslim and East Christian directions of the Middle Ages, the authors trace the historical formation of exoteric and esoteric forms of knowledge of Islam in the context of comparative analysis with the cataphatic and apophatic Christian theology. These types of religious knowledge aimed for their followers to comprehend the meanings of the scriptures of Islam and Christianity in various ways, justifying the opposite methods of interpretation of the sacred texts of both religions. The article deals mainly with the mystical direction of cognition of the Creator that emerged in Sufism and Christian tradition (in Christianity it is the cognition through the Divine light). In this discourse, the authors considered it important to make a comparative study of the teachings of al-Ghazali on *fanā'*, and of Symeon the New Theologian on the *Uncreated Light*. The adherents of these teachings reached an extraordinary spiritual state of unity with God. The purpose of religious gnosis was a state of conflux with the One through transfiguration and change of a person.

The epistemological concepts of these two religions outlined the movement of a person along the path towards knowing God, meaning the moral elevation towards the Creator (e.g., reaching the condition of *fanā'* in Sufism (Watt 1963) or *deification* (McGrath 2017), ending with the unity with God in light in Christian monasticism). Therefore, religious gnosis, coinciding with the moral and spiritual cognition of God, unites Christianity and Islam not only from the perspective of theocentrism but also from the position of anthropology. After all, the ways of knowing God, elaborated by the Eastern Church Fathers and the Muslim thinkers from the classical period, designated the "junction points" between an individual and the Absolute. In fact, God-knowing in the Arab-Islamic traditions and in the Church Fathers' writings shares a common ground—it is an uplifting, improving, and transforming path, consisting of moral steps, contributing to the individual formation of a subject (Asad 1993). The peak of personal self-improvement is the transcendence out of the limits of one's natural condition and a spiritual meeting with God, a special mystical unity with Him, a "*vision*" of God not with the eyes but with the soul, the inner light, the feeling of essential presence in God. This common spiritual foundation was distinguished by its conceptual embodiment in various teachings of the Greek Byzantine Church Fathers and in some trends of classical Islam (especially, in Sufism).

In the aforementioned context, epistemological and anthropological concepts may be considered as a kind of socio-cultural and theoretical *integrity* that performs the role of a "prototype" in determining the ways of knowing God in Islam and Christianity in the early Middle Ages.

Thus, based on the general premise of the complete domination of mind over matter, Greek-Byzantine Patristics sought to create an image of a "spiritual man" striving in his moral self-improvement to achieve unity with God. The Christian ideal of a "spiritual man", founded on the principles of *Uncreation* and the *Likeness of God*, was alien to the pagan Weltanschauung: that was an entirely new trend in the culture of the early Middle Ages, discovered by the authors of Eastern Patristics.

The early Byzantine theorizing at the times of *Trinity* (4th century) and *Christology* (5th—7th centuries) disputes (Whittow 1996) was based on the elaboration of a conceptual comprehension of an individual's place as the crown of the divine creation, and the substantiation of the carnal (in the context of the ideas of deification and the knowing of God[2]) and eschatological prospects of life.

---

[1] "Theology" ("Kalām") is regarded as "speculative theology", as Islam lacks an ecclesiastical institution. There is therefore no orthodox Islamic theology. In turn, "theologians" as used in the present article equal "the authorities of religious knowledge" (Rosenthal 1970).

[2] The Eastern and Western Church Fathers derived the initial consistency and correlation between the human being and the Deity from the Old Testament thesis of the creation of man "in the image and likeness of God". This theological

The soteriological and eschatological doctrines explained the inconsistency of human nature within the Christian epistemological system: the nature is able to lure an individual away from the Creator if he abuses freedom of choice and rejects the idea of deification. Soteriology marked the way leading to the unity with God already in earthly life if a subject follows certain moral imperatives and spiritual practices (e.g., keeping silence or spiritual warfare for monks).

The ideas of Christian epistemology and anthropology regarding the nature of Man as an image and likeness of God, receiving divine "grace" for the commission of good, valorous deeds, and knowledge of higher values is largely similar to Islamic theology, which referred to the idea that God had created Man after His likeness[3], and in its arguments about the place of the individual in the Universe. In Islam, a human, as a beautiful creation of God, is also dual in essence, being a conflux of light and darkness, good and evil, and choosing a path to freedom, initially provided by Allah. In both religions, individuals bear responsibility for choosing their own path and for the "eternal refuge" after death, to which one is consciously moving for the whole mortal life.

However, there is also specificity in the conceptual substantiation of knowing God in both religions even though philosophical and religious ideas of Christianity and Islam regarding the role of an individual and his attitude to God are somewhat similar. The authors based their research on the methodology of philosophical comparativism and hermeneutic analysis of the texts of medieval thinkers, which allowed comparing Arab-Muslim and East Christian intellectual traditions, revealing their traits and some common thoughts.

Let us dwell on the features of the religions' epistemological systems formed in the Middle Ages.

## 2. The Formation of Religious Epistemology: Theoretical Approaches

### 2.1. Exoteric and Esoteric Knowledge in Islam

In the Arab-Islamic culture of the Islamic Golden Age (8th–13th centuries) were developed the ideas and categories of Islamic culture that would allow seizing the spirit of Islam as a religion and civilization, and, at the same time, determine the cognitive capabilities of the people in the culture in their relationship to God. The establishment of epistemological concepts took place within the framework of exoteric and esoteric doctrines, antagonistic and complementary at the same time.

Researcher of Islamic philosophy, Oliver Leaman in his book (Leaman 1985) examines how to read Muslim philosophers' writings. Plato, Kant, Thomas Aquinas can be studied with little or no knowledge of the circumstances of their work. In the case of Muslim thinkers, an esoteric interpretation is necessary when the text is to be considered in the context that gave birth to it. After all, Muslim authors sought, on the one hand, to reconcile their views with the dogmas of Islam, and on the other hand, to express their thoughts in a form that excludes uninitiated people, the profane ones. Therefore, we may encounter contradictory statements upon reading. The works may in some cases be esoteric and in others—exoteric.

An issue of interpretation and explanation of the sacred texts emerged in Islam's "speculative theology" just as it had happened in Christian theology. In fact, resolving that issue brought about the creation of the epistemological foundations of the Islamic religious system. The concepts of exoteric and esoteric knowledge exhibited the possibilities and ways to dive deeper into the meanings of the sacred texts and Islam. Exoteric knowledge (indicated by the category of *zāhir*) aimed at the external, literal interpretation of the Qur'ān and the Sunna, denying any possibility to extract a hidden

---

standpoint was also used to justify the possibilities of the knowledge of God, which involves personal self-improvement and self-knowledge (i.e., deification). Yet, the paths varied: for example, Augustine of Hippo sought to know God by reference to the image of the created man, while Gregory of Nyssa in his "On the Creation of Man" on the contrary, tried to comprehend the true nature of Man following the knowledge of God.

[3]　That issue was a subject of special discussion among Muslim lawyers, in particular, Al-Haffar and Al-Mawwaq. See more: Miller (2000, 2008, pp. 37–41, 44, 113, 192, 267).

meaning in these sacred texts. Esoteric knowledge (*bāṭin*) defended the inner, hidden perception of the "obvious things" as symbols containing the implicit and intimate truths of the sacred sources.

The division of theoretical works into the esoteric and exoteric ones is widespread not only among the adherents of the opposing religious branches (Shīʿa Islam, Ismāʿīlism, Murjiʾa, and some others) and the Arab Peripatetic philosophers but also among the established thinkers of Sunni Islam, including, in particular, famous Muslim thinker Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058–1111)[4]. He noted that there were two levels in his works. The first level being for the general public, while the second level is for the elites and those seeking the truth shall look for it in the "books written for the elites" (Al-Ghazālī 2003, p. 44).

Among the Sufi and Shīʿa Muslims arose quite early an idea that in addition to the apparent meaning of the sacred texts there was also a deeper, inner significance, linked to the true textual understanding. It was believed that the true idea of religion was only open to an Imām, yet there was no impassable abyss between the Imām's knowledge and the knowledge of laymen, as an Imām was a mentor of the religious people, assisting them on their way to salvation. The consideration of an Imām as a source of the true knowledge was important for the discipline and organization of the secret divisions of the Shīʿa branches in their revolts against the ruling regimes. Ismāʿīlism recognized the *bāṭin* as something that gives meaning to life. The arrival of the Mahdi (the hidden 12th Imām) and the 1000-year triumph of justice should put an end to Sharīʾa, the domination of *the zāhir*. The idea of considering the "external" law and religious cults just as the "signs" of true knowledge led to the assertion that those who know the inner meaning of the sacred texts might free themselves from the external understanding (Corbin 1986, p. 149).

Sufis identified esoteric knowledge with the intuitive comprehension of the truth and exoteric with blind faith in the language of the sacred texts. The practice of guidance was common among Sufis with the mentor, the Sheikh, seen as perfect in his essence and qualities. The Sheikh was also believed to embody all the human virtues and justice. The Sheikh's guidance was a prerequisite of Sufism because the one lacking the Sheikh was mentored by evil. For being a successful mentor, the Sheikh must acquire and nourish absolute trust in him. The Sheikh was seen not only as a mentor and tutor but also as a role model—he is the "Other Self" of a religious person, which, after all, would become a part of the believer through the total acceptance and the deepest devotion to the mentor. "Identification", "confluence" with the Sheikh is the way to the "confluence" with God. As we may notice, the Sufi concept of mentoring is very close to the one provided by the "infallible Imām" in the Shīʿa doctrine. However, the strictly individual, contemplative nature of the achievement of religious truth has largely determined the political quietism of Sufism (Corbin 1986, p. 151).

Sufis tried to reflect in their teachings the life experience in a specific form, which seemed to be the best. The whole reality was seen as anxiety, suffering, as something transient—hence the desire for pristine purity and beauty, stability, and balance (Smith 1944). It is only possible to comprehend the unity of the world through intuition, "insight". The use of symbolism and the "esoteric knowledge" doctrine allowed Sufis to "encrypt" the wholeness and specificity of life, the principles of the social ideal (Jabre 1956). Their world was dominated by the supra-rational origin, "internal sight", "internal hearing", and "internal mind" (Al-Ghazālī 1973, pp. 86–87).

The later Sufis spoke about several levels of the "truth" and their adequate understanding, which could correspond to the number of celestial spheres and the number of the stages of emanation (*fayḍ*). For example, it is believed that Rumi's "Mathnawī" (sometimes called the "Qurʾān of Sufis") contains seven of such levels.

The concept of *taʾwīl* (the return to the origin or source) is closely related to the doctrine of the true, internal knowledge (Kirabaev 2011). It is a method of a symbolic-allegorical or a rational interpretation

---

4  At the end of the 19th century, Dunkan B. MacDonald published a monumental work: "The Life of al-Ghazzali, with Expecial Reference to His Religious Experiences and Opinions" (MacDonald 1899). Also refer to the fundamental books: W. Montgomery Watt (1963); Griffel (2009).

of the Qurʾān or the Sunna. As it is known, this method was widely used by Sunni Muslims to remove the obvious contradictions in the Qurʾān, the Sunna, and Islamic law (Farīd 1982, pp. 214–15).

Yet the Salafists from Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal to Ibn Taymiyya strictly opposed *taʾwīl*, believing that an allegorical interpretation would inevitably lead to innovations in religious matters (*bidʿa*)[5]. The Shīʿa Muslims and the Sufis used the method especially actively, which should be of no surprise, as, according to them, the achievement of true knowledge is only possible through allegoric interpretation. If for the Sufis *taʾwīl* is rather a search for the meaning of the symbols, then for Shīʿa Muslims the interpretation of the texts is strictly related to the allegory.

As a general rule, Shīʿa Muslims and Sufis limited the symbolic and allegorical explanations of the texts to the Imāms and Sheikhs. Nevertheless, the scope of the method was quite broad and affected the spheres from politics to literature. So, the Shīʿa Muslims tried to prove through *taʾwīl* that Muhammad had left ʿAlī and his adherents as the deputy. While Sufis created a kind of symbolic language of the Sufi literature by using the method of "allegorical interpretation".

The method of *taʾwīl* also found its application among the Peripatetics (Kirabaev and al-Janabi 2014). Hence Ibn Rushd (Averroes): "And we firmly affirm that, whenever demonstration leads to something differing from the apparent sense of the Law, that apparent sense admits of interpretation according to the rule of interpretation in Arabic" (Ibn 1968, pp. 40–41). According to Ibn Rushd, not everyone has the right to apply this type of interpretation of the sacred texts because people differ in the degree of intellectual ability to comprehend the truth and have different knowledge concerning its nature and significance. The "general public", for example, has the rhetorical knowledge, while the dialectical class (*mutakallimūn*) base their knowledge on probabilistic assumptions. Yet only the philosophers capable of achieving apodictic, strictly evidential knowledge have the right to allegorical interpretation. Such philosophers as al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) were under the influence of the ideas of Shīʿa Islam, considering the philosophical works as internal esoteric knowledge, and the works for the general public, including the religious authorities, as exoteric ones, camouflaged with the help of figurative-symbolic language. Al-Ghazālī, like Ibn Rushd later on, emphasized that it was necessary for the general public to have faith in dogmas. However, unlike Ibn Rushd, al-Ghazālī believed that the identification of the esoteric and exoteric content of his works should be made by the readers themselves, as the truth is open to everyone according to the degree of one's abilities, and at the same time, the "ignorant" should be on the outer border of true knowledge, so as not to harm him (Ibn 1964, p. 27). One of the main unwritten rules among the adherents of esoteric knowledge was the prohibition to put philosophical questions to the court of the "general public", because the "masses" should be satisfied with the presentation of philosophical provisions in the figurative-symbolic language of religion, and the philosophers should dive deeper into the sphere of theoretical knowledge, without revealing the value of their achievements, explained with the help of reason.

However, the boundaries of philosophical doctrines did not coincide with the boundaries of the many religious trends in Islam (Kirabaev and al-Janabi 2011). Therefore, the philosophers sometimes violated the rules of the esoteric knowledge which is the case of al-Ghazālī's *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (Incoherence of the Philosophers), in which he had shown that the philosophers (al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā) had contradictions in their solutions of the issues regarding theoretical and practical reason (Lazarus-Yafen 1975).

---

[5]   Indeed, representatives of the Hanbali school *Abū Bakr Al-Khallāl* (d.311 A.H.), *Al-Ḥasan ibn ʿAlī al-Barbaharī* (d.329 A.H.), *Ibn ʿAqīl, Abū al-Wafaʾ ʿAlī* (D. 513 A.H.), *Ibn Qudamah al-Maqdīsī* (D. 620 A.H.) are as a rule mentioned between *Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal* and *Ibn Taymiyya*.
Use of the term «Salafism»—implying a group of Muslims with radical ideas—has a long history and dates back to the time of *Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, founder of the Hanbali school of Sunni jurisprudence. See more: Hosseinzadeh (2015); Zargar (2017) .

*2.2. Christian Gnosis: Apophatic and Cataphatic Thought*

The theoretical and categorical apparatus of Eastern Christianity formed in the heated theological discussions of the fourth to the seventh centuries which overtook Byzantium. Like the conceptual epistemological grounds of Islam, Christian gnosis was ambiguous, conditioned by the variety of theological approaches to the possibilities of knowing God. The Greek-Byzantine Church Fathers directly connected the formation of epistemology with the dichotomous system of *apophatic* and *cataphatic* theologies. It is appropriate to note some correspondence between esoteric/exoteric knowledge in Islam and apophatic/cataphatic theorizing in Christianity.

The ground stone of *apophatic thought* is the notion that God cannot be endowed with rational categories, definitions, and attributes of human sensory experience. Apophatic theology marked Man's ascent from the mortal plane to the *heavenly (Divine) world; cataphatic theology,* vice versa, "*descended*" as a kind of a ladder of God's manifestations in the earthly world. The cataphatic knowledge of the Creator coincided with the positive names of God and moral imperatives of human behavior and uncovering the Divine names found in Holy Scripture, which an individual mastered in the process of God-knowing.

The researcher of Byzantine philosophy V.V. Bychkov who analyzed the formation of Early Christian epistemology identifies two ways of knowing God that are related to the sphere of "super-conscious psychology": the "unmediated, "otherworldly" path of a mystical unity with God, and the mediated, "in and through the mundane world" symbolic path of knowing"(Bychkov 1973, p. 160). The Russian philosopher emphasizes the reference of the initial stage of Greek-Byzantine epistemology to theory and contemplation built as a number of *antinomic* principles and concepts that make up the essence of *apophatic thought*.

The apophatic system of a dichotomous concept is the *first stage* of Byzantine epistemology, implemented at a *rational* level. It is based on the assertion of the equal existence of mutually exclusive concepts. However, these antinomy concepts are not proved rationally but are accepted as eternal a priori theses.

Greek-Byzantine Patristics was dominated by a view that the cataphatic way of knowing God was insufficient and imperfect—the true knowledge of the Creator is not possible by perceiving only the positive names of God. To reach the coveted sacred unity with God in the highest point of knowledge, one must reject everything that cannot express His essence, that is, everything earthly. This is what apophatic theology was aimed at.

We should emphasize that apophaticism in Patristic writings does not match the philosophical dialectic method of the mutual transition of opposite categories. Rising from the sensual world, negative theology reaches the rational sphere, goes beyond it, and flows unto the so-called divine darkness that shines brighter than light. "Darkness" does not refer to the characteristics of actual existence and does not reflect logic: it is *beyond* everything existing in the mundane world and a manifestation of the divine essence.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a prominent philosopher and the classifier of Christian theology, worked out the best reflexive justification of apophaticism: apophatic theology is not so much the knowing of God in the ascension but rather the mutual communion, personal mystical unity with Him with the true nature of this unity always staying hidden from the human sphere. Thus, *unknowability* is the only concept applicable to God. An individual on this path overcomes his nature, abandoning feelings and rationality, entering the stage of "not-knowing" God, which is higher and wiser than any other knowledge; in this unity of Man and God, the *deification* cherished by every Christian is achieved. However, even in a state of *mystical deification,* God in His nature remains unavailable to knowing; His essence always stays concealed to the limited human mind.

According to Pseudo-Dionysius, the personal mystical God-knowing is supra-sensitive and supra-intelligent; all cataphatic names are suitable for the designation of the deity with none of them actually expressing His essence. Apophatic concepts, complementing the cataphatic ones, lead to "*complete ignorance*", which could be the only *true knowledge* of the higher object.

Alongside Pseudo-Dionysius, theological apophaticism was also fundamental to Athanasius of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, and the Cappadocian Fathers. John of Damascus also supported apophaticism, proceeding from the premise that God is incomprehensible and therefore "nameless". At the age of Trinity disputes in Byzantium (fourth century), Basil of Caesarea and, later, Gregory of Nazianzus overtook the task of building up the system of antinomic categories suitable for describing God. The Holy Fathers elaborated the *two ways of knowing God*.

The first one marks the ability to deduce about the world in general and on that premise to come to the intelligent reason, that is, God. The second way is God-knowing through self-knowledge: the strict "observance of self" provides sufficient guidance to knowing God. Yet, the essence of the Creator stays hidden. Basil of Caesarea comes to the theological system of knowing God from the philosophical and epistemological premises. Being a brilliant philosopher, St. Basil justifies the idea that any theological concept implies the perception of some reality. Thought only recognizes, analyzes the divine *manifestations* in the world being unable to comprehend God in His entirety. "Accordingly, one appellation is not adequate for expressing all the glories of God simultaneously, nor is anyone entirely free from the handicap of incompleteness" (Basil of Caesarea 2016).

Some names have apophatic shading, that is, describe what God is not, while others show what He is. Yet they all express the *attitude* of the knowing subject to God. These names are created to show God in Revelation and in His manifestations in the earthly world. St. Basil claims the objectivity of the human mind and activity of thought that at the same time limit the knowing. Communion is only possible in the human mind, yet it cannot know the essence of God in reality.

Epistemological issues were common throughout the centuries of Patristics but the apprehension of Man as a dynamic, acting being was already formed in the religious doctrine of Basil of Caesarea, one of the most significant thinkers of early Byzantium. His epistemology was further developed by Gregory of Nazianzus. According to St. Gregory, the definitions of God and the conceptual meaning of His divine essence are incomprehensible. He thus tries to draw rational provisions: how to define with an "inquisitive mind" what is God? Obviously, God "is not corporeal". "But this term Incorporeal, though granted, does not yet set before us—or contain within itself His Essence—any more than Unbegotten, or Unoriginated, or Unchanging, or Incorruptible, or any other predicate which is used concerning God or in reference to Him" (Gregory of Nazianzus 1994, p. 396). However, it is not enough to describe God in this way as one shall understand existence as a whole.

Further, St. Gregory turns to apophatic theology, describing God through prohibitions and negations. The Holy Father clearly expresses the need to combine apophatic and cataphatic approaches since only *Existent* out of all positive names expresses God and belongs to Him. God is above everything existing and described; therefore, cataphatic theology shall be supplemented by the apophatic one and not vice-versa. "Just so he who is eagerly pursuing the nature of the Self-existent will not stop at saying what He is not, but must go on beyond what He is not, and say what He is" (Gregory of Nazianzus 1994, p. 396).

Knowing God is the path and the task of life, the possibility of salvation and deification. Although God is the "Perfect Mind" with Man created in His image and likeness, and therefore possessing reason, God is unknowable, incomprehensible to a human mind. An individual cannot imagine the Creator in His entirety but could be "called" by God to "become like" Him, and in order to accomplish that a person should be worthy of the Deity. The path of deification is the path of spiritualization, the ascent of the mind, and the detachment from the sensual world. The Byzantine's thinker theory of God-knowing goes to the other plane (the second path of God-knowing, designated by Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus)—one of the "practical" stages of religious epistemology, that is, the stage of the mystical ascetic "spiritual warfare".

The system of apophatic (negative) theological concepts is entirely due to the Greek-Byzantine Patristics and has an important philosophical value. The apophatic theology used ancient Greek philosophy to elaborate the fundamental principles and categories of the Byzantine theory of knowledge, connecting in a unique way an individual with God-Logos (the Son of God) and elevating a person

to the contemplation of the Holy Trinity. Thus, the antinomic semantics of the Byzantine thinkers was an attempt to express at a categorical, philosophical level the contradictions of life, covering the field, incomprehensible by the human mind but still, to some extent, open to knowing because of "divine grace".

By limiting the possibilities of reason in knowing the divine cause of the world, the Byzantine epistemology transferred the logical function of the cognitive activity to the *non-conceptual—supra-sensitive* and *supra-intelligent*—field, where emotional insights, religious ecstasy, and personal mystical experience reign.

It can be argued that the Eastern Patristics epistemology acts as a special kind of "knowledge", different from the logic knowledge of any science, *ascending* from the logical-philosophical and theological categories to the non-conscious level. There the knowing of God is felt and experienced in the form of peculiar mental states. The supra-conscious and supra-sensitive levels are conditioned by the mystery of the personal mystic comprehension of God. The structure of the antinomies of the apophatic thought, acting as a kind of primary, conceptual stage, is a prerequisite for the second, "practical" stage of knowledge, where *mystical gnosis* plays the lead role.

Let us now analyze how the Christian gnosis is comparable with the Islamic epistemological systems in terms of personal mystic knowing of the Creator which in our opinion has an internal similarity with Islamic esoteric knowledge.

## 3. Spiritual Mystical Path of Ascension to God

### 3.1. Personal Mystical Knowing of God in Eastern Christianity

Mystical ascension to God in the Greek-Byzantine tradition is a *dialogue* between a human being and God. The Byzantine religious philosophy presented it as one of the most common methods of comprehending the Absolute. A crucial theoretical position for the mystical God-knowing is the anthropological idea of a hypostatic union of God and Man. Spiritual unity with God is affirmed as the deification of a subject's personality by improving its unique characteristics. The personal mystical path is the path of *ascetic gnosis*. It is strictly individual, subjective but is always ontologically realized typically throughout the ascetic monk's virtuous life. In terms of knowing, the ascetic practice included the notions of apophatic theology and was directly aimed at the spiritual and moral self-improvement of a person, continually moving towards the state of unity with the Deity.

Mystical ascetic Christian knowledge, being carried out existentially, does not allow any symbolic interpretation. Symbolic cognition fixes static forms, while the personal spiritual path is volatile and endless, reflecting the co-activity of a person and God in the perception of the Holy Spirit. The Russian philosopher S.S. Horuzhiy defines the essence of personal mystical knowing: " … the existential content describes the dynamics of the personal relationship between God and a man—the dynamics of the internal process, that is directed from the outside, unpredictable in its sensual expression, and is constantly taking various new forms without being associated with any of them with any essential and final connection" (Horuzhiy 1991, p. 51).

In this regard the monks, anchorites, and novices were described by the Church Fathers as the wise ones, towering up to the degrees of *dispassion*, walking along the way of spiritual purification, renunciation of the mundane and material to elevate the inner world over the own nature to know God in a unique existential state. An ascetic renounces the sensual material world, which by itself is not sufficient to enter the unity with God. Only the spiritual world and the inner essence of man with his appropriate activity may return the lost likeness to God even within an ascetic's lifetime.

It is precisely the strive for catharsis, moral perfection, salvation, and the attainment of immortality that unites the ascetic ideal and Orthodox theology, as found in the works of the prominent theorists of early Christianity. Asceticism and the antinomic understanding of human nature were immanently incorporated in Christianity. According to *dogmatic theology*, the deified unity with God must be set in the earthly life; yet the ultimate goal—unity with God and, therefore, knowledge of Him—is

possible only after one's physical death and resurrection. The *ascetic teaching* assured that communion is possible in the earthly existence; it is an incredibly difficult, unending way of knowing God and *self-improvement* and *self-cognition*.

Monastic ideals reflected the intellectual culture of that era. The atmosphere of early Byzantium was imbued with the cult of *spirit*, denial of the material world, ascetic withdrawal, and disregard for the physical nature. Hence the peculiar style of thinking and behavior of ascetics, *spiritual warfare*, which means a specific conscious activity to overcome the negative functions of the mundane life. The most consistent work, outlining equally the speculative and proactive steps of the monastic deeds along the path of spiritual perfection is "The Ladder of Divine Ascent" written by John Climacus (sixth century). The writing of St. John substantiated thirty steps of ascension to God, starting with the idea of free and conscious renunciation of everything worldly, sensual, and material.

John Climacus follows the spiritual warfare to *dispassion* as the top step of the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. The paradox of the Eastern Christian ascetics is that complete *dispassion* is achievable through the *feeling of love*, which serves as the criterion of the ultimate spirituality of an individual, the restoration of the unity of "image and likeness", the harmony of body and soul, and the culmination of the mystical ascension. Love is a divine gift invested in each and everyone from birth to improve one's own nature. The love for one's neighbor is a sign of acquiring God's true love. "He who loves the Lord has first loved his brother, because the second is a proof of the first" (John 1908, p. 249). According to Eastern Christian thought, each person finds his perfection exactly *in love* but for this to happen the unity of human nature must be carried out. A person is united through its created nature with all humankind, thus removing the contradiction between the earthly and divine worlds. In the state of *love,* Man rises to the heights of *mystical unity* with God.

Following the Eastern Patristics ideology, love is inseparable from knowledge—it is an expression of personal consciousness, without which God would be unattainable. Asceticism without the knowledge and informed commitment to the pinnacle of God-knowing is inane. Hence Maximus the Confessor: "No one can truly bless God unless he has sanctified his body with the virtues and made his soul luminous with spiritual knowledge" (Maximus the Confessor 1993b, p. 293). Personal consciousness and knowledge of the Divine grow as Man becomes more and more perfect by entering the union with deifying grace.

*3.2. Mystical Comprehension of the Creator in Sufism: al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Concept of Fanā'*

Although Islamic culture lacks the concepts of monasticism and asceticism in the forms known in Christianity, there is a personal mystical way of knowing God in Sufism, showing the peculiarity of Muslim culture as well as some similarities with the ideas of early Christianity. The mystical comprehension of the Creator is manifested most vividly in the work of one of the most influential thinkers of the Arab-Islamic classical period. The author is al-Ghazālī who in his lifetime was awarded the honorific title "*Hujjat al-Islām*" (Proof of Islam).

The concept of *fanā'* takes the central place in his Sufi epistemological system. According to al-Ghazālī, the state of *fanā'* is the mystical vision of the soul (Nicholson 1966). It is the "exit" of an individual from himself, complete detachment, peace and quiet, and at the same time the movement of a soul seeking what it needs. This state of Man is considered by al-Ghazālī an unspeakable experience, intensifying to the extent of weakening consciousness. This unconscious state is caused by the activity of some external force, with which the soul is connected.

However, the concept of *fanā'* is not a vision of any particular sensual form; it is not connected to contemplation. Here is where al-Ghazālī's realized the highest idea of mystical epistemology—the equivalence of subject and object. As a reminder, in Christianity, the unity of a human subject with God as an object of individual comprehension was achieved at the level of non-conceptual mystical gnosis. According to al-Ghazālī, the soul, after its "purification" from everything external and alien, reaches the One and Only, getting suddenly illuminated by Him. In this state, the soul ceases to be a *Wise Reason* in order to become a *loving Reason*.

Concerning the state of *fanā'* in his *Deliverance from Error*, al-Ghazālī describes it in the Sufi mystical style: "The degree of proximity to Deity which they attain is regarded by some as an intermixture of being, by others as identification, and again by others as intimate union. But all these expressions are wrong ... Those who have reached that stage (*fanā'*—N.K., O.C.) should confine themselves to repeating the verse—'What I experience I shall not try to say; Call me happy, but ask me no more'"(Al-Ghazālī 1973, p. 141).

*Fanā'* is an intimate experience of the One and Only, the source of plenty, a kind of union with God. *Fanā'* is an internal experience beyond description, a conflux with the good. It is "purification", the loss of psychological self-awareness from the phenomenal standpoint. But what matters most is the ontological view used by the "Proof of Islam". Al-Ghazālī had to solve one of the major problems of the Sufi concept: what happens to an individual at the moment of reaching *fanā'*? In what form does the union with God occur?

It should be noted that the union might not be understood literally. It becomes clear in the precited passage from *Deliverance from Error*. In this work, al-Ghazālī writes of "proximity" *(qurb)* as a reality constituting *fanā'*. Proximity is not considered as spatial or temporal proximity, but as an intentional one, emerging in the process of knowing, qualitative, so to say. In *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, the Sufi elucidates: "It is by means of the soul that Man can go to the nearness of God and make efforts to realize Him. So, the soul is the king of the body, and its different organs are its servants to carry out its orders and commands. It is accepted by God when it remains free from things other than God. When it is attached to things other than God, it drifts away from God" (Al-Ghazālī n.d., p. 7). In this case, we are talking about an individual's self-improvement. It means the movement of a person in the process of knowing according to his state and the stage of being at which he is. Thus, the thinker asserts a certain hierarchy of movement, which ends in the state of *fanā'*.

The definition of "*fanā'*" itself fully meets the hierarchy and translates as "annihilation" or "passing away". On the levels of the process of improvement, *fanā'* opposes *baqa'* (subsistence). Yet al-Ghazālī did not give *fanā'* that meaning. He believes, this state means *the experience of unity with God* at the highest level of intensity, which as noted above corresponds to Symeon the New Theologian's experience of *divine light* (11th century) and Gregory Palamas' *hesychasm* (14th century). However, for al-Ghazālī, *fanā'* is primarily a psychological breaking down of *self*. As we may witness, this aspect of the analysis is related just to the phenomenal point of view, and not the ontological one. "The knowledge about God's being, attributes and actions is the most honorable and on that strength a man becomes perfect and within this perfection there lies his fortune of approaching God" (Al-Ghazālī n.d., p. 212).

The perfection is that a man disappears in himself, in his psychological states. A man forgets his own personality, stops contemplating himself. Considering the highest stage on the path of self-improvement, al-Ghazālī argued that a person contemplates only the outer limits. For most Sufis, this last border meant the "self-destruction" in the faith of God. Thus, a person beholds the All and cannot embrace himself as a personality, for from that moment on he is immersed in his own consciousness, disappearing from himself. Yet the immersion should not be understood literally, it is rather an immersion in the process of knowing God, that is, the epistemological and intentional immersion (Chistyakova et al. 2019, pp. 166–67). The All then appears not just in the sense that God is the One and Only but in the sense of His omnipresence.

This treatment of *fanā'* is to a certain extent close to Plotinus' ecstasy but only in phenomenal terms. There are, however, significant differences and even opposites in ontological terms. *Fanā'* means the instantaneous contemplation of "reality", under which al-Ghazālī understands God and the entire scope of His presence. If we translate this into the language of the Neo-Platonists, "reality" is nothing but an intelligible world led by the One.

According to Plotinus, an intelligible world exists in complete unity with the One, transcendent to all other kinds of existence. For the "Proof of Islam" the actual reality is also transcendent to everything created. Following al-Ghazālī, the principle of knowing is in the Reason (*'aql*), which is identified with heart (*qalb*), spirit (*rūḥ*), and soul (*nafs*). Due to reason, a soul becomes an intelligible world, knowing

itself as an object. Reason, also belonging to the mystery of the spiritual realm (*Malakūt*), has the ability of such knowing, and nothing prevents it from reaching its goal. Reason (or spirit, or soul) as the "Higher Self", sameness, is tethered to the achievement of the state of *fanā'*.

The similarity principle, the teaching of the unity of micro and macrocosm are for the Muslim thinker the additions for the reasoning of *fanā'* as not only the result of rational dialectics but also the dialectics of love, which lies at the heart of "purification of the soul". For al-Ghazālī, God is not only "light" but also "supreme beauty". Therefore, love is considered a natural tendency of the soul toward beauty, both earthly and divine. The source of love is the desire to contemplate beauty, the desire for pure beauty.

The contemplation of beauty does not only mean a figurative vision, but also a degree of moral beauty. Reason, striving for beauty, rises from feelings to the beauty of behavior and actions, seeing the beauty of the virtues. Thus, beauty is something that causes love, so the soul in its passage through the levels of perfection could reach the levels of the "supreme beauty" and the "supreme good". The "Proof of Islam" linked the existence of beauty to natural love with love appearing to be the final stage of the path on the one hand, and the basis for perfection and knowing of the "supreme truth", on the other. The basis of the dialectics of love is simultaneous involvement in the divine and human existence. It should be noted that in this case the similarity principle, associated with self-knowing, is in action. "Similarity" is considered in relation to the soul, which due to its divine nature leads to knowing God.

We should take into account that, while reflecting on the path to *fanā'*, al-Ghazālī interpreted the similarity law in an ambivalent manner. Firstly, the likeness of God and Man means that Man is endowed with the same attributes as God with the latter having them to an excellent degree. Here lies the essential difference with the Christian anthropology, where Man is seeking to recover the once lost likeness to God, which is exactly what attracts a Christian on the path of deification and super-conceptual gnosis (Melford 1966). In al-Ghazālī's Sufism, this serves as a source for the *first path to fanā'*—the knowledge of self as the center and the origin of the attributes inherent to God. This is a psychological path described in al-Ghazālī's *The Best Means in Explaining Allah's Beautiful Names*. We may assert, the first way to *fanā'* is nothing else but the *self-knowledge* of a person, alienated from its origin, and translated into the language of transcendence.

Moreover, the similarity principle means that an individual through mastering knowledge as the exclusive ability of the reason becomes the universe, the center of the divine presence, the intelligible world, in relation to which Man is a ruler akin to God (Quran 2:31). Hence the *second path to fanā'*: the cosmological path, the knowing of *self* as the center of the All. This path is possible due to "knowledge" (*'ilm*), providing us quasi-domination over the created universe through the sudden grasp of the divine presence, although God remains the transcendent being.

So, upon reaching the state of *fanā'*, an individual is reborn, receiving new qualities. The approach to divine perfection is accompanied by the improvement of an individual human spirit on the Earth (Wilcox 2011). According to al-Ghazālī, perfection is not measured by quantity, as quantity supposes the existence of the limits and perfection has no limits. As a result, only the perfect Man has true morality, as only he has real knowledge. Since the formation of the perfect person is epistemological, his existence is determined by the epistemological features, primarily, by the ability to intuitively "grasp" the truth. The process of self-perfection is seen as endless. We are talking, of course, about the earthly life, during which an individual may achieve perfection despite all the shortcomings.

The doctrine of perfection opened another world for Sufis, with a different understanding of good and love[6]. The more a person pondered the nature of love, the more he wanted to transfer spiritual harmony to his mundane deeds, the more he tried to combine the ideal of the perfect Man with real existence. Thus, a person embodied the idea of perfection, for which there were no barriers (hence the

---

[6]    For details on Sufis' issue on Love refer to: Said and Demiri (2007).

"internal sight", "internal hearing", and "internal mind"). All this led to an attempt to express the true essence of an individual.

*3.3. Knowing God through "Divine Light": Religious and Philosophical Apprehension of Symeon the New Theologian*

Al-Ghazālī's sublime mysticism can only be compared with the mysticism of Symeon the New Theologian, the peculiar Christian thinker of the 11th century who embodies Christian monasticism. He described the highest super-intelligent and super-sensitive level of mystical God-knowing as communication through light. The Christian ascetics St. Paul of Latros (10th century), Symeon the Studite (10th century), Symeon the New Theologian (late 10th–early 11th century), and Gregory Palamas (14th century) taught about the possibility for an ascetic (monk) to contemplate the *uncreated light* at the peak of religious ecstasy.

*Uncreated light* is revealed visually, though spiritually; it is no allegory. Divinity comes to a person in the form of light that is perceived *sensually* and *extrasensory* at the same time. This is not a Neo-Platonic ecstatic state because the unity of God and Man in the Divine (uncreated) light occurs at the higher stages of *dialogue with the Creator* with Man simultaneously observing and knowing God.

The seeing of light undoubtedly takes an essential place in the mystical monastic experience of Symeon the New Theologian. However, the ascetic himself is not able to analyze the nature of that light. During the personal experience of the confluence with light, a monk cannot comprehend *how* this happens. The mystical knowing turns out to be an unconscious act:

> "I lament and I am stung with contrition when the light shines on me,
> and I see my poverty, and I know where I am,
> and the sort of mortal world I dwell in, and I am mortal.
> And I am delighted, and I rejoice when I will understand
> the glory and status given to me from God,
> and I suppose that I am an angel of the Lord,
> having been wholly dressed in an immaterial garment". (Symeon the New Theologian 2011, Hymn XIII)

The effect of the *uncreated light* is not limited to the elevation of a human being to the level of the Creator. According to the Byzantine mystic, only in *uncreated light* does a man unite with God, know, and *become a part* of Him. What is thus the difference between Man and God?

> "And so You have given this to me, my God.
> For this dirty and perishable tent
> was united to your all-immaculate body,
> and my blood mixed with your blood.
> I was united, I know, to your divinity also,
> and I have become your most pure body,
> a resplendent member, a truly holy member,
> far-shining, and transparent, and gleaming.
> I see the beauty; I look at the luster;
> I reflect the light of your grace,
> and I am astonished at the mystery of the radiance,
> and I am beside myself when I consider myself". (Symeon the New Theologian 2011, Hymn II)

According to St. Symeon's description, the vision of mystical light at the initial stage of asceticism is accompanied by some ecstatic states, oblivion, and unconsciousness, when an apprentice cannot determine, where he is—"inside the body" or out of it—and finds himself terrified and enduring an unbearable pain after being left by the light. By following further the path of monasticism through inner purification and conscious asceticism, the Holy Father reaches new insights. A novice reaches the summit of knowing God with a personal, close meeting with Christ, which ends with a dialogue with

the one who manifests Himself in the form of light. Jesus, speaking to St. Symeon through the spirit and the heart ("the descent of the mind into the heart" is the reference point for the late Byzantine Hesychast doctrine) teaches His adherent (and thus the entire human race) of the path one needs to follow in order to attain salvation and deification.

Symeon the New Theologian explains in the vein of Orthodox theology the impossibility to comprehend the essence of God by God's super-essence. Nevertheless, the Absolute presents itself to mankind, beaming out a glint of its glory, a ray of light, energy, and perceives that an individual knows it. St. Symeon sought to smooth out the tension between the triune, by essence unknowable God and His *visibility* to human vision. The Byzantine philosopher elaborates an image of the Sun spreading its rays. The feeling of the rays and the inability to perceive the Sun itself can be interpreted as an indication of the unknowability of God's essence and the "visibility" of His energies. There is a sense of God's presence behind all these symbols.

> "You Who are wholly in the whole of everything, and wholly outside the universe,
> and again she contemplates You inside herself,
> You Who are wholly incomprehensible in your divine divinity,
> invisible and hidden from everyone,
> You, the unapproachable, and approachable only to whom You have wished,
> because You have benevolently wanted to reveal
> Yourself as approachable among human beings". (Symeon the New Theologian 2011, Hymn XX)

Perhaps, these words are addressed to those spending their lives purifying themselves from their passions, clearing their minds, souls, and hearts. The others are blinded, making it impossible for them to see the divine light.

The *divine light*, according to the mystic, is the basis of an individual's consciousness, as he is learning not only about the Deity but also about himself. The light reaches the depth of the human being, seeking dialogue with God. The unity with God is also an apophatic concept as it denies any imperfections. A person, being on this way, rebuffs gradually everything sensual in their life. Thus, an individual refines themselves reaching the highest level of spiritual unity with God (in the Light). However, the state of absolute perfection is also an "experience" of the changed nature of an individual who has become light. The super-sensitive nature of the divine light is knowable by *the spiritual eyes of the heart*. "Perception of light occurs simultaneously as super-sensible and super-intellectual comprehension of the Trinity, as a dialogue between an individual and the Savior who came to deliver him" (Chistyakova 2020, p. 96). Thus, the divine light is revealed to be God as the Holy Spirit and God's love.

Following precisely the Eastern-Christian tradition, St. Symeon equates the concepts of *love* and *God*. Love becomes the apex of merging with God; God opens through His love, portrayed as energy, communicated to mankind. Not that the essence of God is communicative and unattainable at the same time. This loving God is carried away, far beyond, into the light to become light and grace of the Holy Spirit. Symeon the New Theologian shows the extremely individualistic character of that love to God, the indispensable condition for which is the denial of all earthly attachments, significant others, material things, and passions. This is a bare fundamental paradox of asceticism, where striving for suffering and self-deprecation morphs into the desire for happiness and spiritual bliss, a rejection of transient joys in the name of eternity.

St. Symeon's *uncreated light* conceptual phenomenon found many admirers and disciples both in Byzantium and Ancient Rus. In its theoretical expression, the Church Father's mystical experience does not contradict traditional Eastern theology. His mysticism is associated with the freedom of the spirit, peacefully coexisting with the ascetic and dogmatic tradition of Orthodoxy.

## 4. Conclusions

The formation of esoteric and exoteric types of knowledge in Islam, cataphatic and apophatic Christian theology in the Middle Ages led not only to the different ways of interpretation and explanation of the Holy Scriptures—the Quran and the Bible—but also to the understanding of the different ways of knowing the Creator and achieving the cherished spiritual unity of man and God. However, Sufism and the mystical tradition of Christianity have developed gnoseological teachings that present not only differences but also formulate a common axiological foundation that unites the two religions in value terms.

The Christian Patristics and Arab-Islamic traditions, with all due differences and discrepancies in substantiating the ways to God-knowing, come to a common understanding of the tasks and goals of an individual in the earthly world. After all, it is a human who becomes a symbol, "gathering" the Universe and signifying life itself, according to the writings of the Eastern Church Fathers and the Sufis. The following words by Maximus the Confessor, in our opinion, summarize the epistemological concepts of both religions.

Maximus the Confessor in his *Mystagogy* divides everything existing into two worlds. "For the whole spiritual world seems mystically imprinted on the whole sensible world in symbolic forms, for those who are capable of seeing this, and conversely the whole sensible world is spiritually explained in the mind in the principles which it contains. In the spiritual world it is in principles; in the sensible world it is in figure" (Maximus the Confessor 1993a, p. 160). The essence of the earthly world is hidden in the Divine *logoi* that emanate from the Deity and return to Him. The sensible world is permeated with "spiritual logoi" and energies and is therefore inherent in God. The invisible is comprehended through the visible. The convergence of the two worlds manifests itself in an individual, who by his primary antinomy can understand both the sensible and the Divine worlds. Both Eastern Christian Patristics and Arab-Islamic philosophy took the true purpose of Man to consist in knowing these two worlds while ascending to God.

From the authors' standpoint, the epistemological doctrines of Christianity and Islam in the context of the philosophical reflections on the cognitive and moral capabilities of people may be viewed as interreligious, intercultural, and inter-civilizational, as they establish common values and norms in the controversial era of a globalizing world. Axiological and anthropological ideas of Christianity and Islam in their focus on the relationship between an individual and God are deeply moral and may become the basis for the development of the communities' activities (ethnic, political, civil, charitable) to strengthen peace, improve social performance and humanitarian assistance to those in need. Religion is a special means of communication in the modern world. Christianity and Islam, by performing the communicative function, are capable of uniting believers and non-believers, belonging to different denominations and professing various creeds, as well as establishing strong ties among the religious organizations for humanistic purposes.

Arab-Muslim tradition and Eastern Christianity, formed in theological discussions and disputes of different directions within these religions, in the Middle Ages, created a special sacral space of values and canons. This space included the categorical apparatus of those schools of theology that were actively involved in the formation of sacred knowledge of Islam and Christianity (Kharijites, Sufis, Isma'ilists, Mutakallimūn, Alexandrians and Antiochians, Christian mystics, etc.). It is important to emphasize that the knowledge elaborated by the two religious and cultural traditions was largely based on the allegorical method and allegorical means of interpretation and explanation of the scriptures of Islam and Christianity. Therefore, the developed sacral knowledge of Islam and Christianity, which has undergone a parallel path of historical development, is largely based on a system of symbols and symbolic images, each of which has an internal interpretive connotation. This symbolism and the depth of meaningful imagery still exists today not only in worship practice but also in the cultural life of those societies where Islam and Christianity are professed.

## References

Al-Ghazālī. 1973. *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl [Deliverance from Error]*. Beirut: Dār al-Andalus.

Al-Ghazālī. 2003. *Al-Arbaʾīn fī Usūl al-Dīn [The Forty Principles of Religion]*. Cairo: Dār al-Qalam.

Al-Ghazālī. n.d. *Iḥyāʾ ʾUlūm al-Dīn [The Revival of the Religious Sciences]*. Beirut: Dār al-Maʾrifa, vol. 3.

Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Basil of Caesarea. 2016. *The Complete Works of Saint Basil (5 Books): Cross-Linked to the Bible*. Edited by Kindle. Seattle: Amazon Digital Services LLC.

Bychkov, Victor. 1973. Byzantine Aesthetics. *Byzantine Annals* 34: 17.

Chistyakova, Olga. 2020. Understanding of Human Being and Human Freedom in Christian and Islamic Cultural Traditions. *Logos* 102: 90–99.

Chistyakova, Olga V., Maythem M. al-Janabi, and Nur S. Kirabaev. 2019. Christian and Muslim gnosis of the medieval age. *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. Philosophy and Conflict Studies* 35: 159–74. [CrossRef]

Corbin, Henry. 1986. *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, pp. 149–53.

Farīd, Al-Hijāb Muhammad. 1982. *Al-Falsafa as-Sīāsīa inda Ikhwān as-Ṣafā [The Philosophy of the Brethren of Purity]*. Cairo: al-Haiat al-Misrīa al-Āmma lil-Kitāb.

Gregory of Nazianzus. 1994. *Writings of Gregory of Nazianzus in 2 Vols*. Sergiyev Posad: Typography of Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius, vol. 1.

Griffel, Frank. 2009. *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Horuzhiy, Sergey. 1991. Philosophical Process in Russia as a Meeting of Philosophy and Orthodoxy. *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 5: 31.

Hosseinzadeh, Vahid. 2015. Salafism and its Socio-Intellectual Foundations. *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews* 3: 34–37.

Ibn, Rushd (Averroes). 1964. *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut [The Incoherence of the Incoherence]*. Cairo: Dār al-Maʾārif.

Ibn, Rushd (Averroes). 1968. *Kitāb Faṣl al-Maqāl wa Taqrīr fī mā bayna al-Hikma wa al-Sharīʿa min al-Ittisāl [The Decisive Treatise, Determining the Nature of Connection between Religion and Philosophy]*. Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Maḥmudiyya.

Jabre, Farid. 1956. L'Extase de Plotin et le Fanā' de Ghazali. *Studia Islamica* 6: 101–24. [CrossRef]

John, Climacus. 1908. *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Sergiyev Posad: Typography of Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius.

Kirabaev, Nur S. 2011. Concepts and Issues of Classical Arab-Muslim Philosophy. *RUDN Journal of Philosophy* 4: 80–87.

Kirabaev, Nur S., and Maythem al-Janabi. 2011. Faith and Reason in the Thought of Al-Ghazali. In *Knowledge and Belief in the Dialogue of Cultures*. Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, CUA, pp. 143–50.

Kirabaev, Nur S., and Maytham al-Janabi. 2014. About the Classification of Science: Aristotle, Eastern Peripatetics, and al-Ghazali. In *Philosophy and Science in Cultures: East and West*. Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, CUA, pp. 289–95.

Lazarus-Yafen, Hava. 1975. *Studies in al-Ghazali*. Jerusalem: Magness Press Hebrew University.

Leaman, Oliver. 1985. *An Introduction to Medieval Islamic Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 182–93.

MacDonald, Dunkan B. 1899. The Life of al-Ghazzali, with Expecial Reference to His Religious Experiences and Opinions. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 20: 71–132. [CrossRef]

Maximus the Confessor. 1993a. Mystagogy. In *Writings of Maximus the Confessor in 2 Vols*. Moscow: Martis, vol. 1.

Maximus the Confessor. 1993b. Speculative and Actionable Chapters. In *Philokalia in 12 Vols*. Moscow: Russian Spiritual Center, vol. 6, pp. 247–307.

McGrath, Alisher. 2017. *Theology. The Basics*, 4th ed. Hoboken: Willey-Blackwell.

Melford, Elliot S. 1966. Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation. In *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Edited by M. Banton. London: Tavistock Publications, pp. 85–126.

Miller, Kathryn A. 2000. Muslim Minorities and the Obligation to Emigrate to Islamic Territory: Two fatwas from Fifteenth Century Granada. *Islamic Law and Society* 7: 2. [CrossRef]

Miller, Kathryn A. 2008. *Guardians of Islam: Religious Authority and Muslim Communities of Late Medieval Spain*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Nicholson, Reynold A. 1966. *The Mystics of Islam*. London: Routledge and K. Paul.

Rosenthal, Franz. 1970. *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*. Leiden: Brill.

Said, Yazid, and Lejla Demiri, eds. 2007. *The Future of Interfaith Dialogue. Muslim-Christian through A Common Word*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, Margaret M. A. 1944. *Al-Ghazālī, The Mystic*. London: Luzac & Co.

Symeon the New Theologian. 2011. *Divine Eros*. Edited by Kindle. Yonkers: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Von Grunebaum, Gustave E. 1970. *Classical Islam: A History, 600–1258*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

Watt, Montgomery. W. 1963. *Muslim Intellectual. A Study of Al-Ghazali*. Edinburgh: Edinburg at University Press.

Whittow, Mark. 1996. *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium, 600–1025*. London: Macmillan.

Wilcox, Andrew. 2011. The Dual Mystical Concepts of Fanā' and Baqā' in Early Sufism. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38: 95–118. [CrossRef]

Zargar, Cameron. 2017. Origins of Wahhabism from Hanbali Fiqh. *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law* 16: 68–114.