

# The Notion of the Image in the Teachings of Christian and Muslim Thinkers

Lubomira Stefanova

Department of Theology, Saint Kliment Ohridski University, Sofia, Bulgaria

**Email address:**

[loubastefsoleil@hotmail.com](mailto:loubastefsoleil@hotmail.com)

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**Abstract:** Notwithstanding the difference in historical periods of creativity, in the treatises of some of the most famous thinkers both in Islamic culture and in the Christian world, ideas and understandings of the image are found as a notion that does not exhaust the perception of God, but is relevant to the pursuit of God's knowledge. The brief historical distance between the emergence of the Pseudo-Dionysian treatises and those of Islamic philosophy allows us to make a comparison between the two religious worldviews. The two monotheistic concepts of the manifestations of God in the visible world have common foundations in the Greek philosophy and the views of the Neoplatonists. The rich and tangled language in the Pseudo-Dionysian treatises reveals the two-sided process of the interrelation between the divine and human realities. In the texts of the Muslim thinker Muhammad al- Ghazālī, the image of the contemplative man's ascension to the Almighty and indescribable God is also revealed. This article attempts to compare the patterns of thought through which these two philosophers, with different religious beliefs, express their understanding of the image of God and the path of contemplative rising to Him. The image of the One, from where the entire immanent world originates, occupies the first place for both wise men. But while for the Muslim philosopher the manifestations of God in the world are a direct realization of His gentle mind, the Christian thinker focuses on the image of the incarnation of God in the person of Christ.

**Keywords:** Image, Religion, Philosophy

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## 1. Introduction

Both Islamic and Christian cultures draw their inspiration and interpret in their own way the ancient philosophy and, in particular, the ideas of Neo-Platonism. Part of the medieval Islamic philosophers as well as Christian thinkers are strongly influenced by the ancient thought and philosophical treatises of Plotin, Aristotle and the Neo - Platonists. Founded on the rationalism, Islamic philosophy rejects the idea of the anthropomorphic image of God. Authors like al-Fārābī interpret Aristotle's teachings about the intellect. They represent active intelligence as a non-realizable, but already realized intelligence that creates the forms. Not only the image of God, but also the principle of depicting Man in Islamic art is rejected. The only art that develops in Islamic architecture are that of decorative ornamentation and calligraphy. Ibn Sinā proclaims striving for unity with intelligence instead of God. For Islamic philosophers, the world is the result of divine emanations, which however

means that God is only a source of good things, but has not brought these emanations into shape.

On the other way round, Christian philosophers accept and justify God's anthropomorphic image as the real prototype of the image of the Man. Their perception of the image is based on the Old Testament scriptures of the Creation as well as on the Neo-Platonistic ideas of the One. The early Christian Fathers like. [1] Atanassius of Alexandria claimed that God has incarnated Himself because He wanted to make Himself visible for us. He became apparent to us for we could reach to Him through our meaning.

The focus of this study is on the God's image in Pseudo-Dionysius as a representative of Christian thought and at Muhammad al-Gāzālī as a representative of the Sufi Islamic movement. Despite the discussions about the personality of the Christian thinker that will not be mentioned here, the two authors reveal both common ideas and at the same time some different views on the idea of the image which is the main subject of the presented study.

The common points of the both teachings consist in some important points. First of all it is the Neoplatonistic comprehension of the Divine as The Divine Unity. Above all, we have to say that in the Neo-Platonic teachings the Unity is considered in two basic aspects: as a source of the divine energies that act in the immanent world and secondly and as the object of unification to which all creatures of this immanent world aspire. Secondly, this Unity is identified as God, as an Absolute and Supreme Personality. There is one God, The Creator of all visible and invisible world, from Whom originates each creature. The third common point is related to the transmission of divine energies from this Absolute in the created world. The idea that the Divine Absolute, which is the cause of everything that exists, can not be reached and seen by man is common to both teachings. The differences are mainly in the notion of God's knowledge when in the reverse process of exalting to God man seeks the connection with his Creator. In a deep, plighting context, it means that he seeks God's image.

Using the comparative method, this research will mark the differences in the two conceptions of the image. For the Islamic thinker, the images of the created things represent the world created by God. This world, which is God's creation, at the same time exists with all its imagery as something separated from the Unimaginable Creator. The Christian author doesn't separate the notion of God's image from God - Himself, although he is conscious about God's absolutism. Based on the triadic hierarchical structure borrowed from Plato's teachings, Areopagite puts the image in a metaphysical environment where he can transcend or merge with an image adjacent to it, which predetermines the mental union with God.

Since, in Neo-Platonic thought, the image and, in particular, the human image is perceived as an expression of the created essences that are the result of the Emanations of the One in the visible world it would be appropriate to look at the concept of Unity in Procle's teachings, in the teachings of Pseudo-Dionysus, and in philosophy of the Islamic thinker al-Gāzālī.

## 2. Literature Review

The Neo-Platonic's teachings clearly show the continuity that existed from the times of the Chaldean religious practices and the Hellenic mysteries to the Christian mysticism in the quest for communion with the divine One. In Plato's [2] teaching the existence of unity is presented as contained within itself, and at the same time existing in plurality. In the study of Procle's philosophy, where the *theurgy* or "*hieratic art*" is a key, Anne Sheppard (1982) [3] looks at the connection between the priestly practices of unity with the gods of antiquity and the philosophical mystical quests of the Neo-Platonites. This explains to a great extent why both Christian thinkers and Islamic philosophers reach the idea of uniting with God in the path of spiritual contemplation by excluding the senses and the mind. There is a common understanding that the path to God's knowledge

passes through certain degrees of bodily, mental and spiritual purification, to inner union with the Divine Absolute, which transcends the limits of sensory and mental contemplation. According to Procle [4], moving forward is accomplished "by the likeness of secondary things to the primal," whereas the conversion is in the direction of the Beginning of everything created. Hence the notion that states in Plotin's [5] thought, that each image originates from the Image of God and is part of the emanation of the energies in the immanent world. It carries its essence as a hypostatic magnitude. Being the bearers of the essential characteristics of the Image, all created beings seek back to Him. Ivan Christov [6] writes, that these processes are interdependent and underpin the so-called *synergistic dialectics*. As a synergistic unity, the man in Aristotle's treatise [7] "For the Soul" is presented. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite [8] succeeds in building a sophisticated system that shows the two interrelated processes - that of the emanation of the Divine energies, which generates all creatures and that of the rising of the created essences to God. In his article on Pseudo-Dionysius, Mayendorf [9] follows the construction of this system of images, which becomes a symbol or connecting link between the earthly and the heavenly hierarchies. But at the same time we know, that God is omnipotent and unreachable. No one can see His image. This paradoxical dilemma underlies the thesis of the separate existence of the Unified of the multiple in the later philosophical reflections of many thinkers from both the Christian world and those, professing Islam. Tamara Albertini [10], reviews the major monotheistic teachings in the Islamic world that emerged at the turn of the seventh century with the emergence of Islamic culture. Focusing on certain Muslim thinkers, the study summarizes their relationship with Greek philosophy and their predominant rationalist approach in expressing the idea of God and being. However, the name of the Islamic thinker Muhammad al-Ghāzālī [11] stands out. The essence of his philosophy is most clearly seen in his autobiographical book *Deliverance from error*. Re-discovering the path of Sufi mysticism, this author manages to get rid of traditional notions of God as knowledge of the intellect and describes the contemplative states of the spirit in which God is revealed to man in an inexplicable way. Although it does not reach the idea of incarnation, he describe almost the same way of divinization of the man, who search for approach to God. Al-Ghāzālī is very close to the way of thinking of Pseudo-Dionysius when he speaks of the path to spiritual union with God, and even implies the appearance of images in those states of mind when every thought or image order are excluded from the freed consciousness. Both of the examined authors build a picture of the mystical experience on the path to the encounter with God. It becomes the centerpiece of the idea of ignorance and the Undiscovered and Incomplete Creator of everything. But while for the Islamic thinker God remains a Person whose image is inaccessible, the image of the Invisible is embodied in Christ in the author of the Areopagite's texts. Andrew Rippin [12] writes on the exegesis of the sacred Qur'an-which is considered by

Muslims as the only kind of incarnation of God. He clarifies the notion of *asbab* - a constant remembrance of God, which is key to those who are attracted to contemplative practices, and thus reading the verses of the sacred book can reach the highest levels of enlightenment centered on sacred texts. In their etymological study of the root of the word "Allāh", Nikolay Shivarov and Slavcho Valchanov [13] explain the Muslim notion of God as Almighty and Everlasting Creator of everything. The tracking of the Semitic origin of the word also shows the general thinking of both Muslims from the Middle Ages and Judaistic beliefs in the times of the Old Testament. In both monotheistic religions, God is a Supreme Person, but precisely because of this, and because of His inbred nature, He has no form. In the seventh century, the icon-protector, Saint John Damascene [14], explains the main Christian dogma of the incarnation, through the paradoxical existence of Divine and human nature into the Person of Christ. The unseen God appears in the world through the Holy Spirit in the Face of His Only Begotten Son. Citing the thoughts of his predecessor, Saint Basil the Great, John Damascene justifies the Christian doctrine of God's image. This leads to the conclusion that God, who is invisible to the ordinary human eyes, is actually revealed to us as manifested through his energies in the visible world. More than that, however, through the image of Christ we can understand how the Unity exists both in itself and as a plural. In her study of the personality of Jesus Christ in Islam, Clara Stamatova [15] examines the explanations of the texts in the Qur'an referring to Christ's image and the way He is perceived as a prophet - perhaps the highest, but still entirely and only in His human state. Vladimir Losski [16] examines the theological treatises "Exact Presentation of the Orthodox Faith" and "The Word of Transfiguration" by Saint John Damascene, who performs the synthesis of imaginary thinking and dogmatic expressions during the first seven centuries of Christian thought. They refer to the distinction of the essence from the hypostasis, and have a direct relation to the concept of "prototype" and "image", what cannot be observed at the Islamic thought.

### 3. The Notion of Unity

Why does the Unity occupy a prime place in the philosophy of both ancient thinkers and Christian and Islamic sages? In various religious and philosophical views, the Unified identifies itself with the transcendent God. This is the unachievable Absolute, from which all the creations unfolded in images accessible to the senses or thoughts are derive.

For Muslim philosophers this topic is at the heart of their debates. Their writings, in the eighth century throughout the medieval period of Islamic culture, are influenced by both ancient authors and later thinkers. Many of them dominate the rationalist view of the world as a result of a perfect mathematical harmony of the cosmic mind. Others advocate the mystic mystery in which creation is overlooked and which is relatively accessible to the human mind within the limits of human empirical spiritual experience. In a brief review of the ideas developed by several more significant

representatives of Islamic philosophy, a special consideration deserves the thinker Abū Hāmid Muhammad al-Ghazālī, because his ideas are related to the Sufi mystical contemplation and the path to spiritual enlightenment, which differs from the dominant rationalist teachings of his contemporaries. Like Pseudo-Dionysius, he also describes the path to unity with God through the consecutive rise of thought from the things in the visible world, through the contemplation of the imagined images to the attainment of spiritual enlightenment in which thoughts disappear and the pure consciousness that is beyond the limits of every imagery. According to both the Qur'an and Al-Ghazali, God is the unified One, to which the highest human aspirations are directed. At the heart of these ideas, as has already been said, are the neoplatonic perceptions of the world.

#### 3.1. The Notion of the One According to Procle

The transcendent God is in fact the One, which for Procle has become known as the First Hipostas and Cause of everything that exists. On the other hand, he speaks of the one in the soul, which is achieved by activating his abilities to self-knowledge. "The separation of the essences from the Cause is related to their modification. They acquire images that are both similar but different from the Primary cause, because the production remains in the producing, as far as it has some identity with it. But when it comes from it, it moves forward, it is "somewhat identical and at the same time different." [4] This explains the place of the image in the successive rising to the First Cause. Each image is an expression of a certain essence originating from this First Cause and can therefore be considered as some kind of symbol or association with Her. So image is in some sense a door to unity with God. This model in the notion of unity can be associated with the first state of God's triad existence as a *moni*. In the first part of the dialogue, opposing the ideas of things is rejected. Socrates suggests that ideas stand in nature as examples, and the other things are similar to them and are their likenesses. [2]

In this context, it is of particular importance to introduce the slogan term into the Proclusian Understanding of the *theurgy*. It is important to trace the development of this notion to neoplatonists, and especially to Proclus, because in its philosophy there is a specific application that very closely approximates the application of the symbol in the teachings of Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite. The similarity lies in the fact that both of them are bound to the earth with the divine reality in a metaphysical chain of symbols reaching the One. In the philosophical system of neoplatonists, the pursuit of God's knowledge is called *theurgia* because theology is not only related to intellectual effort, but is a complete pathway, leading from the contemplation of the visible objects to the mystical union with God.

Both Hermias and Proclus, in their comments to *Phaedrus* [3] highlight three levels of *theurgy*, for which the highest is beyond rational knowledge and is not human knowledge, but *thea philosophia* (philosophy, which is beyond rituals and

even beyond intellectual effort). Unlike most neoplatonists, Procle binds reality into a complete metaphysical system. In his work „On Hieratic Art,” it takes the object of the visible world to associate it with its equivalent of a higher sensual or mental level, which in turn leads to the elevation of perceptions of the spiritual world of the neo-Platonic Unity. If we use the example of the plant, which, because of the sun, is a heliotrope, we will see that they are in mutual interdependence. The Sun, in turn, is related to the other heavenly bodies, and to the higher beings of God like Apollo, and the higher transcendental Unicus. Every essence has its own place in the metaphysical chain. From the sensory world, the gradient passes to the mind- boggling elements in the higher levels and reaches the world of the higher essences that lead to the One. In this system, each low-level essence is described as a symbol of corresponding things from a higher level, so that heliotrope is a symbol of the sun, which in turn is a symbol of the god Apollo, which leads to the Unity. In the divine kingdom, according to Procle, there are three basic unions, they are: kindness, wisdom and beauty.

Proclus says that every soul consists of notional words (cognitive logos) and divine symbols. Cognitive logos come from intellectual shapes, and the symbols come from the divine energies flowing out as Emanations from the One. It is the divine symbols that can join the soul to the divine, because they, like it, have a slogan, a mark of inner unity or inner union with themselves. This is the unity that the soul achieves, preparing to enter into unity with the higher beings on the path of moving to the One, because it, by knowing itself, attains the perfect fulfillment of the divine enade, which is assumed by Plotin as the Ipostas of the downward Unified: “All existing things, residing within themselves, give out of their essence the existence of something outside them. It depends on their available ability and is an image of the pattern that is generated.” [5]. In the Plotin’s system, the Eneads are Emanations of the One in its advanced supreme Hypostas. Similar are the ideas of Procle when he speaks of the soul as the origin of the unity. “Procle thinks *the one* in the soul as a symbol of the First Hypostas,” Shepard writes, and precisely because of this connection-symbol, mystical unity is possible... [or could be described] as a superior form of theurgy, because the conversion of the one into the soul the ultimate Unity was the exclusion of thought by activating the symbol in the direction of what it symbolizes. “ [3]

The very divine theurgy as an act of unity has the same slogan (a sign of the overall essence) and is also such a completed unity that unites the three theoretical practices. It is in this sense that the view of philosophy can also be understood as a supreme theory, as Plotin thought.

### **3.2. The Discovery of the Concept of Unified at Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite**

Drawing from the ancient tradition, Dionysius develops the theory of the emanation of the Divine energies of the One, which are transformed through logos into visible images in the world of creation. This process is called more scattering *πρόοδος* (progress). God, Who resides in Himself

as Self-sufficient (*μονή*) passes by pouring out the ideas that exist forever in Him through His logos. Dionysius says that: “ He is beyond the totality of being and being as equivalent and eternal to Himself... always keeping in the same way for the same things, without ever going outside of Himself or leaving His sacred throne, still rest and fireplace, but benefiting... walking on everything and staying in itself, always standing and moving, without either standing or moving... at the same time naturally and supernaturally restraining the constructive energies at peace and the peace in the thought.” [8] They (the logos), in turn, are at the root of the names in nature through which we know the manifestations of God. Therefore, according to Dionysius, if we are contemplating things from the visible world, we are actually contemplating their names, which express the transfusion of God into the earthly world. Since every name can express God but can not fully encompass it, then in the reverse process of the rising of the created world to the energies that come from the transcendent Unity, we reject one by one each of these names, that do not exhaust the truth for God to reach as close as possible to Him.

This process unlocks the apophatic aspiration to approach Divine truth. Therefore, on the path to the rising or still known as *επιστροφή* – the return to God, the images are contemplated and consecutively rejected because they are not absolutely true. These are images of the Word, the super-communal Godhead. Some of them are: Mind, Essence, Light, Life. These sacred images look “far above the images,” but they also “do not attain a godlike resemblance to the truth” [8]. So Dionysius says that even the most beautiful names, like even the most beautiful images that the human mind can imagine, can not fully depict God.

Images are constituent parts of the concepts of things, but the concept, being a basic and compact philosophical category, claims to be exhausted. Like no concept, however, no image portrays the truth of God in fullness because it reflects some unambiguous or multifaceted, but not absolute, reality, as God is. Therefore, early Christian thinkers replace the notion of “*image*” with the term “*symbol*” that points to the truth without claiming to exhaust it. The symbol becomes a particularly dynamic form of the mind, in which truth is not given but is revealed through mental images.

When we talk about God's actions, they are divided into pre-eternal energies radiated by nature from God's essence. Energies are an expression of God's Mind. But God is not a Mind, but a Person who works through the Word. Thus the eternal ideas are realized through logos that fit into the nature of the creature. This makes possible the indirect knowledge of God from the sensible perceptible forms to the logos and to their Creator.

And if, in Hellenic philosophy, the path to God's knowledge is from the sensible to the utterly inconceivable, then with the Christian thinkers we also have the extraordinary knowledge - it is the mystical contact of the spirit with the light of God, in which the images are transformed into symbols. They are the ones who are real and present in the spiritual vision of man on an energy level. So

Dionysius invites us to penetrate in “sacred-like” way into the symbols because “they bear the seal of God’s attributes and are prints and images of unspeakable, supernatural visions.”

“If you look at them in a manner appropriate to the sanctity, Dionysius says - one will see the single-minded and only inspiration as it came out of one of the first Spirit.” [8] The immanent world can be perceived as a world of images that lead inwardly and purposefully to the cause of their origin. The human path to reaching this First Cause is a permanent mockery of successively alternating systems of images that intertwine and convey to one another the hidden meaning of divine knowledge. In the notion of *theurgia* Dionysius imposes Christian meaning. To him it is the godliness, the partaking of all created beings towards God, but also the acquisition of the sacred knowledge of Himself. Knowledge is attained when it moves from the vivid images to the immaterial and achievable through the mind “sculptures” [8]. In a commentary of the *Scholia* it is clarified that “... *sculptures* he calls the images of the invisible and the mystical, i.e. what is accomplished by symbols, and among them is first the sacrament of the Assembly, whose unmistakable meaning, which is clear in contemplation, he uncovers and announces. “he calls the images of the invisible and the mystical, i.e. he is the first to be the sacrament of the assembly, whose witty meaning, which is made clear in contemplation. (Schol. 140: 1-6). When he depicts the liturgical ritual in the church hierarchy [8] Dionysius builds the dynamic image of the hierarchy and relates it to the One, expressing the same idea of spiritual unity through the completed unity of symbolic actions. Through the symbols in the liturgical ministry, the idea of a slogan or the sign of the One, which is hypostated in the human soul, is presented: “... Here in this godlike manner, the divine hierarchy, though graciously subordinating his subordinates to his unified knowledge of the hierarchy, by serving the multitude of sacred mysteries, being free and untied to the inferior, then inexorably returns to his own beginning, and, making a mental entry into the Unity within himself, clearly contemplates the one-sided foundations of the performed, transforming the boundary of the human-loving intercession into the secondary things at the beginning of the profound conversion to the primal.” [8].

In the mention of Wisdom at Maximus Confessor, as with other Fathers of the Church, she is identified with the Word. Through His Wisdom (Logos), God knows the world created by Him, but it also allows us to realize the feedback - that of the sensible creatures with God, through which God’s knowledge is realized. [8] Some of the lower ranks are sacred to the first in the glory of Christ in His ascension into the human image. [8] Others are consecrated „directly by Jesus Himself, Who reveals His loving-kindness to them from the first.” [8]. The idea of mediation, to reach knowledge of God is valid even for the highest essences: „I am astounded - Dionysius writes, that the first heavenly beings... devoutly aspire to the initial energies, but as they move in the middle.” [8]. Through the biblical and liturgical symbols of

Dionysius’s teaching, the One embraces His holiness in the world of the visible and tangible being. Mayendorf finds that with the characteristic of the author of the treatise, parallelism in the description of the downfall of God, implying a departure from His essence, as well as in the description of the ecstatic, upward movement of man to the Omnipotent Cause of All, “Dionysus touches very closely the secret of personal encounter with God.” [10]. From the texts quoted, it is clear that in the teachings of Pseudo-Dionysius, every image that verbally depicts the manifestations of God is a symbol, that is, a mediating link in the divine message. The image of the incarnate God is Christ. He is both Almighty, and Wisdom, and a Word leading the mind to his only Home. By virtue of His hypostasis, Christ is the image of the Immaculate God, and at the same time He is the Intermediate Unit, the Real Symbol, the Mediator between man and His Creator.

### 3.3. The Idea of the One in the Notions of Hellenizing Islamic Philosophers

According to the Qur’ān (Q. 2: 258) God is the Creator of all creatures: “For God are east and west; wherever you turn, the face of God is there. In fact, God is omnipresent, omniscient.” (Q. 2: 115). In the narrative is drawn idea of the omnipotence of God and that Abraham (in his face, and all human race) must believe and obey God completely. Who is God according to the words in the Qur’ān? And how does He reveal Himself to men? The Qur’ān does not mention the acts of epiphany. God’s presence in the immanent world is wrapped in silence. The moment of epiphany is the Qur’ān. He appeared historically in one night in a cave on the outskirts of the city of Mecca. According to the Islamic writer, this revelation is the mystery of Muhammad, and this means the mystery of Man. For Muhammad the most important is the revelation of Allāh, it is a miracle, and by its word of grace and clarity must convince the people in the truth of the Muhammad’s sermon. Material wonders would provoke doubt about his doctrine and would make him a pagan cult. The postulate on the Qur’ān’s uniqueness makes a clear distinction between the divine and the created. Allāh is the Unseen, shrouded in the veil of the night Creator of the world and man.

Despite the inability to see the image of God, He reveals himself to us through His manifestations in nature, which provoke human imagination to comparisons. In Q.2:19-20 is shown the metaphor of God, which is “like a rain from heaven in which there is darkness, thunder and lightning.” We can observe imaginary thinking that compares God with the most impressive natural phenomena [12]. In the Qur’ān God is a Supreme Person, but it has no epiphanic dimensions. He is known only through the manifestations of nature to man. This text is perceived in a literal sense without the inclusion of symbolic content. In Islamic theocentric notion God is One, Almighty and All-knowing. He reveals Himself in the created world in two aspects: through the Holy Qur’ān and through various images, which is why he is named with the most wonderful names (Q.7.180). Since God is known by

His names, the very writing of these names becomes a sacred action. The art of calligraphy reflects precisely this aspiration to reveal the unseen presence of God through the skillfully curved line of the painted sign - where the image and the word divide the meditative space of the encounter with God. But the names He is called are different. In the oral tradition of Prophet Muhammad's wisdom (Hadith), it is claimed that they are 99. When they speak of God as Creator of the world, thinkers have in mind His various visible manifestations in the immanent world through His names. The Qur'ān, however, does not place any of these names as dominant over others, because it is not permitted for any of its passages to be considered as greater than others. [9] Like Christian beliefs, for the Islamic mind, God is so great and unfathomable that no light can picture Him. The look seems to be directed toward Allah, Who is the Creator of everything but at the same time standing outside the world of images. The setting for the One God, who has nothing similar to himself, is formulated at the end of the first and earliest Meccan period in the Surah Al-iqq (Purification): „Say, Oh, Muhammad: “He is Allāh, The One, Allāh - The Purpose [of All Desires]! Neither has He bore, nor was He born, nor is He equal”. The word *Allāh* has an all- seme root. The Hebrew analogous is Eloah or Elohim, in which the suffix -im expresses the idea of “abstractness, intensity, exalting, possession of powers” [13]. Although the name of God is mentioned in early transcendental revelations (Allāh, God), no definition of the essence of the divine subject is revealed. God remains unrecognizable in other ways than in his manifestations in the natural phenomena of the visible world.

The theosophical apophatism in Islam is revealed in three basic positions of the concept of the name Allāh, which God is called. The first is related to the rationalistic speculation that the true name of God is Huwa (He). This is found in the following sentence: “Oh, he, oh, who has no other than he, oh, through whom is the he-ity of every he,” [9] The second notion is related to the name Allāh, which is the basis for all other names. If the compound letters are broken down, each remaining part of the name always continues to refer to God. Thus, when we take away the first letter of the name “A”, there remains “lillāh” (“to God”); When we take away the second letter “l” remains “lahu” (“to Him”); and finally, removing the third letter, remains “Hu” (wa), i.e., He (God, Allāh). The third concept of the name of Allāh refers to the fact that this name has no etymology and describes the very essence of God, since it can not be separated from its Object or attached to any other being [9]. Like Christian apophatic thinking, in which all the names of God are rejected as being completely inexhaustible to the truth about Him, in Islam there is the same aspiration to deny the immanent modus of the existing in search of the absolute reality. The idea of the One is expressed through the intellect underlying the metaphysical nature and in the creation of the whole visible world. The dogma of the Qur'ān's inimitable character has been confirmed in the Islamic theoretical theology called the *kalām*. The philosophers of the Mutazilites build a system of views that shape the pure rationalist dialectic of Islam, based

on the logical formulations of Greek philosophy. However, they are not accepted by conservative thinkers because they raise the idea of the creation of the Qur'an [16]. This allows its content to be interpreted much more freely. Any expression in it can be understood as a symbol, it is enough to raise the sheet in which the words surround the hidden meaning of the Divine message.

At the same time, the Christian thought of God originating from the dogmatic decrees of the Christian Councils, reveals God like Supreme Being in Three Hypostases, stating that He Who Is Invisible to man has abased as He has become visible to Him. St. John of Damascus begins his "Exact Statement of the Orthodox Faith" with a categorical statement about the unknowability of the nature of God. “Neither men nor the powers of heaven — cherubim and seraphim can cognize God except in His Revelation. By His nature, He is beyond being, and, therefore, beyond knowledge. Its essence can only be defined apophatically, through negations. What we say about God affirmatively (καταφατικῶς) means not His nature, but His attributes — that which is “near” with nature (τὰ περὶ τὴν φύσιν) This is the same thing as manifestation without, force (δυνάμεις) at Dionysius” But further, the Christian author also explains the way God can be seen: “Before the incarnation — writes John Damascene, the Hypostasis of God - The Word was simple...and uncreated. She became Hypostas... and became composed of the Deity that she always had and of the flesh she received, and therefore She has properties of two natures, being known in two natures. In this way the same united Ipostas is uncreated by deity and created by humanity, visible and invisible. Otherwise, we would be forced to separate one Christ, recognizing two hypostases, or denying the distinction between nature and introducing conversion and merging.” [14]. The unequivocal difference in the doctrinal formulations also determines the different notions of the concept of "image" of the two religious worldviews. In Islam, it is not bound to the idea of God except as a rationalistic equivalent of some essential sacral element, such as the Qur'an, which is a symbol (the connecting link) between man and Allāh. For Christian spirituality, the image is an expression of God's manifestation in the created world, and its absolute manifestation is in the face of Christ as the Second Ipostas of the Holy Trinity.

For Islam is the alien Christian concept of the God-man. The majesty of Alālḥ and his supreme sovereignty are opposed to the subordination of man and his dependency on the Creator. The Qur'ān does not allow the Muslim to think, that he is created in the image of God. On the other hand, in Islam, the foreknowledge of human existence in love, knowledge and will is revealed. Nothing exists as a complete and perfect creation, unless it is in Allāh: "Our Lord is He who gives everything to His face, and then guides him" (Q 20:50) The notion of giving the appearance of everything that originates from the Creator largely reveals the idea that God.

“prints” his image in every creature in a unique way. The question is: What is the attachment of the human mind to an image? If we accept in the most general sense being as an

image of the immanent world, the attachment of the mind to an image can be referred to as the attachment of the immanent being to the transcendent force from which it is born. In his treatise "About the Soul," Aristotle treats soul and body as *kynonia* (κοινωνία, gr.) – which means their existence together. This presupposes their existence as an active community or dynamic unity of the one that gives rise to movement and other that it undergoes [7]. By the law of this unity, not every body can accept every soul, but a particular soul and body are in synergy. This determines the existence of specific images that characterize the dynamics in the essence of any thing, person, or phenomenon in the immanent world. The Hadith says that God creates man in His image. In man, God puts on certain natural attributes, and this fact in the Sufi teachings is referred to as *fitra*. This is the natural giving of every person, which determines the individual partiality not only to the Divine order and harmony, but also to the very inexplicable Divine essence. Thinkers perceive that the visible images of things do not exhaust the notion of truth in its fullness. That is why they are beginning to wonder what is the true knowledge of the things that are the imprint of the Divine essence?

#### 3.4. Sufi Teachings and Image Correlations Through the Eyes of Thinker Mohammad Al-ghazālī

In his treatise, "*Deliverance From Error*", philosopher al-Ghazālī perceives knowledge as cosmology of One God, and sets three fundamental moments in true knowledge of God [11]. These are the sensory knowledge of the visible things, the rational understanding and comparison of the realities, and the super-rational or ecstatic insight given to some of the men. Beyond these three knowledge is the Unknowable, Merciful Omnipresent God. The true knowledge, according to the author, is based on the individual faith of each one. Human faith is an expression of confirmation of individual sensory, rational and mystical knowledge, which is above every accepted reality or doctrine. Thus the author reveals the multiplicity of the image through the prism of personal perception and conviction. At the same time, there are generally accepted objective limits of imaginary thinking, which do not fully exhaust, yet they express and partially enlighten the mind by nourishing it with knowledge of the Divine reality. al-Ghazālī explains that in the process of studying and examining visible things, he felt an inner necessity to see the real meaning of the original (prime) *fitra*. [11]. For both early Christian thinkers and Islamic philosophers, the starting point in seeking the Divine Truth is the contemplation of things from the visible world and the reflection on their hidden meaning. Realizing the different way of perceiving reality, al-Ghazali comes to the conclusion that in the immanent world the truth is relative. For this purpose, he compares two different realities - when a person is dreaming and when he is awake proving that they take place in parallel over time and are mutually exclusive. Regarding imaginary thinking, these judgments confirm the correlation between truth and image. Only this image, which

we can not doubt, is true. Truth is always referred to a state that is expressed through certain images. In their contemplative practice, the Sufis cross the boundary of the rational field and, through inner concentration, manage to reach out to phenomena that reveal other realities. Thus the immanent truth turns out to be a not devoid of image dynamic paradigm, in which everyone can accept or reject a given reality according to their own state and to achieve that fusion of object and subject in which imaginary thought disappears, and relative truth merges with absolute Divine reality. The mental state (*al-fāna*), in which the mind is free of all attachment to earth, is equivalent to the ecstatic state of Plotin. Compared to Plotin, Sufism has a different concept of the state of ecstasy. It is divided into three stages: *al-fāna*, *al-hāl*, *al-mutl*. It is the beginning of the prayer for the Muslims, which is inner seclusion, the absorption of the heart in its memory of God alone. But *al-fāna* is actually just the beginning of the road. The author of the treatise describes the image sensitivity of the one who is in the *al-fāna* state: "Images begin to appear at the very beginning of the road, so even in waking state the Sufis see the angels and spirits of the prophets and hear voices, coming from them, learning very valuable things. Further, in this state they rise from seeing forms and likenesses to states beyond the scope of words, so if anyone tries to express this, his words will contain an obvious error that will be inevitable." [11]. In the Qur'ānic text, we find a similar thought: "No one knows the ghosts of your Lord except Himself." (Q.74 34/31) Reaching the notion of the impossibility of describing or finding an image that is equivalent to God, al-Ghazālī, characterizes any definition of Him as an unfortunate experience. Pseudo-Dionysius express similar thought in the following passage: "In fact, said Areopagit, this was only necessary for our evangelism, not for overcoming the revelations of the world beyond to inappropriate similarities, which unjustly offends the divine powers and equally misleads our mind with all those completely unlike the likenesses of the truly clarifying words, who describe them in the absurdity of untruth and partiality." [8] (1). For both the Christian author and the Muslim philosopher, there is an understanding of the falsehood of the image as filling and expressing God's essence. Both thinkers speak of similarities through which the image as an absolute concept manifests itself in the visible world. However, Pseudo-Dionysius affirms the image as a connecting link between intellectual effort and the transcendent reality: "... the search for truth reveals the sacred wisdom of the Word, which carefully embodies in each case the images of the heavenly minds not to offend, as some would say, the powers of the heavens, nor to affirm us as passionate supporters of the grounded image of the images. But in essence, to give images of the unimaginable and outline of the uncharacteristic is correct. The reason is, we can say, not only in our inconsistency, which does not allow us to rise directly to the conspicuous contemplation and needs in our inherent nature and the nature of the evocations that the accessible images provide to the formless and supernatural visions, but also because it is most

appropriate for mystical words to be revealed through unspeakable and sacred insights, thereby rendering the sacred and inherent truth of super-cosmic minds inaccessible to the multitude.” [8] (1). Later, in the doctrine of St. Gregory Palamas and his followers, the idea of divine contemplation will be further developed through the Hesychast practice of clever prayer and the release of the mind from all imaginary thoughts to reaching the divine light, which is also understood as a dazzling apophatic darkness. All this comes close to the state of descent of God's revelation and its holding in front of the spiritual sight of the contemptuous Sufi. There are several stages that reveal the apophatic path from sensual to spiritual knowledge. First is the feeling of touching the material things that give us information about our existence. But the colors and sounds exist without being able to touch. Therefore, they need higher senses of vision and hearing. Third, according to the author, it is the sense of taste and so all the elements of the sensory knowledge of the world are listed. The taste is inherent in all living creatures, and in this sense the Sufi doctrine is no exception to the religious imagery of the taste as the primary manifestation of God. If we compare this conception with the biblical text, (“*Taste and see that the Lord is good, blessed is he who trusts him*” Ps.38: 4), we will find the idea of the general partiality of God's creatures to their Creator. Then comes the intellect. One realizes the existence of the possible and impossible of things that can not be found in previous states, but they are realized as real with the help of the intellect. Finally, knowledge overcomes the boundaries of the intellectual, and going beyond the intellect, it achieves a state in which it sees what is concealed. “And just as one able only to discern, al- Ghazali says, if presented with the things perceptible to the intellect would reject them and consider them outlandish, so some men endowed with intellect have rejected the things perceptible to the prophetic power, and considered them wildly improbable.” [11]. In written Sufi sources, the term of the mystical ecstatic state is *al-hāl* “It was also a fact that many Sufis were very reluctant, and even refused to write anything about their experiences, which they regarded as truly *ineffable*.” [11]. In true knowledge, the Sufi teachings distinguish three levels of knowledge: “Ascertainment by apodeictic proof leads to *knowledge*. Intimate experience of that very state is *fruitful experience*. Favorable acceptance of it based on hearsay and experience of others is *faith*. These then are three degrees, or levels of knowledge.” [11] The idea of change (*tabaddul al-šifāt*) of human nature is developed on the basis of the perception of Divine Attributes by the spiritual practitioner who seeks true knowledge. Under this term in the Sufi teachings is meant the change in the human essence associated with the acquisition of virtues, but in a deeper sense it is considered the exchange of personal moral experience in the ecstatic states in which, by touching the Divine qualities by turning them into virtues. One must strive to assume the qualities that are marked as divine attributes as much as possible, thus shaping their own nature. Thus the Divine is transformed as an emanation of virtues and penetrates into man as far as possible for himself

in the form of ideas and concepts of God's attributes and names. This theological doctrine occupies a significant part of Al-Ghazali's treatise *The Noblest Aim*. [11] As al-Ghazālī refers to Qur'ānic verse: “God raise in degrees those of you who believe and those to whom the knowledge is given.” [11]. In the context of spiritual development and unity with Divine nature, knowledge is a mystical experience acquired through the Sufi practice of seclusion, prayer and contemplation, which begins from the things in the visible world – images of the manifestation of God's nature in order to rise to the phenomena of states of ecstasy where the intelligible itself can be overcome. This highest level is called “seeing the hidden”, by acquiring a prophetic gift - spiritual sight, or so-called *hubuwwa* (the other eye). al-Ghazali does not actually explain what is going on anymore, nor does he suggest strictly (apodictically) proof of the existence of this vision. For him the prophetic gift is a way of perceiving things that intellect can not perceive. Besides, in a state of mystical ecstasy, God reveals Himself according to the individual characteristics of each contemplative mind. “Know that man's essence, in his original condition, is created in blank simplicity without any information about the worlds of God Most High. These worlds are so many that only God Most High can number them...Man gets his information about the worlds by means of perception. Each one of his kinds of perception is created in order that man get to know the existing world - and by the worlds we mean the categories of existing things.” [11]. Therefore, one can not speak of universal worlds in which God's manifestations are revealed to men. All revelations are revealed individually, according to the abilities and characteristics, and in the light of the prophetic niche of each individual mind. The metaphorical image of the prophetic niche illuminated by the light of God and the image of light as closest to that of God's manifestation in the immanent world is revealed in the Quranic verse: “God is the light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp “ (Q.24, 35). According to the author, “light” has four meanings: first, it is God., on the second - it is the usual meaning of natural sunlight, third - it is the eye or the look, and the fourth - the intellect. Figuratively speaking, „God casts His light into the light niche“, which means in the human mind. This is His special interference in the individual essence of man. It is this light that illuminates the prophetic minds that provoke the striving for unity with the Creator of everything visible and invisible. But even this, the highest state of spiritual unity, according to al-Ghazālī, is wrong to be considered a limit. He cites thoughts from his own treatise “The Highest Purpose”: “There was what was of what I do not mention: So think well of it, and for no account!” [11]

In the state of spiritual unity remains only the inexpressible love of God, in which the mind of the contemplator is immersed and rests. “Generally speaking anyone who is granted nothing of that through fruitful experience grasps, of the reality of prophecy, only the name.” [11]. Even the greatest prophets have not achieved a spiritual insight without the help of God. According to the Qur'anic text: “God raises those of



you who believe (in Him) and to whom knowledge is given" (Q 58. 12/1). Al-Ghazālī, thinks that God can give to the man a special gift of prophetic power - *al-nawm*. In the prophets, the Islamic thinkers see the gracious gift received by Allāh, who bestows spiritual insights reaching the higher degrees of contemplation and enlightenment of the mind.

For the same blinding light in the divine discourse, Christian thinkers also speak. However, they simultaneously focus spiritual vision on Christ's image, which is God Himself as Light.

In this context, Losski emphasizes the Transfiguration of Christ at Tabor, which is also mentioned by John Damascene." The most interesting thing for us – writes Losski, is the application of the teachings about energies to the Transformation - this manifestation of the Divine in the Incarnate Word. St. John of Damascus speaks about this twice - in his "Accurate Presentation of the Orthodox Faith" and in the word for Transfiguration: "The Body (Christ) was glorified at the same moment as it was brought from non-existence to being, so that the glory of the Divine should also be called the glory of the body. Never has this holy Body been alien to Divine glory. On Mount Tabor, the disciples saw the same Personality of the Incarnate Word, but they were able to contemplate Him in His eternal glory, to perceive the energy of the Divine nature:" [15] The transfiguration of Christ is the clearest confirmation of the perception of God's image simultaneously as a transcendent and immanent essence.

## 4. Conclusion

Striving to reject any attachment to the immanent world on the path to true knowledge, Muslim philosophical thought remains in the apophatic perspective without completely rejecting the imagery. It is, however, perceived as affirming certain phenomena and the finest visualizations that are the result of certain contemplative states of mind at the beginning of the path of spiritual ascension. By embracing spiritual unity as a complete process of gradual and progressive rejection of immanent images, thinkers focus on the method of reaching higher states of mind by denying the immanent, without allowing the image to be self-exhausted and transformed into a symbol. This predetermines the existence of a broad dividing line between the visible world and the world of the transcendent that prevents their mutual penetration and interaction in dynamic unity. To a great extent, this can be explained by the lack of the idea of apophatic understanding of the image as a symbol of the connection between the world of God and that of man - an understanding that is expressed in the Christian belief through the belief in the incarnation and personality of Christ as the only true image, the Second Face of the Holy Trinity.

In spite of the rationalist foundations of the teachings developed by Islamic philosophers outside the circle of Sufi mysticism, there is also a presence of figurative thinking, expressed in the doctrinal constructs of the connection between the transcendent God and his creation. Already in

the early period of Islamic culture, highly intelligent Islamic thinkers succeeded in assimilating and interpreting progressive ideas from the Arabic and Greek worldviews by translating them into their own theories. The basic idea of Islamic philosophy remains God's revelation, but at the same time it is inseparable from the postulates in the Qur'an that neglect the relationship of man with his Creator. God as the Creator of the visible world is depicted in both Christian and Muslim culture as One, the only source of every being. But Allāh, whose prophet Muhammad turns out to be the only mediator between man and God, is perceived as a remote transcendent person who is indispensable to human nature and does not engage in partaking of his creation. In the understanding of Islamic thinkers, the emphasis is placed on man's aspiration to God's knowledge, rather than on the sinking of the Supreme Intelligence to the Immanent. There is both rationalistic and mystical elements in God's knowledge, but it is not tied to symbols that have anthropological dimensions. Between the man and the invisible God stands the overwhelming abyss of the rational thought, which excludes the act of God's incarnation.

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