THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEGATIVE THEOLOGY IN PESANTREN AND MADRASA IN MALANG, EAST JAVA

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Abstract: This article discusses the metaphysical construction of divinity in the Indonesian Islamic education institutions, namely madrasa and *pesantren*. The research has been held in Malang, East Java. It focuses on constructing the negative concept of theology that grows and develops in these Islamic education institutions. In doing so, this study employs a qualitative approach coupled with Miles' and Hubermann's data analysis. The study finds that negative theological discourse is an arena of "prophetization" of the divine values whose style of expression is apophatic. Therefore, it constructs its theological knowledge based on the logic of negation and paradox. It also "rejects" the knowledge construction for the same reason. This view affects the system of Islamic education and the framework of its educational objectives to be more oriented to the aspects of humanity and divinity or the profane and transcendental dimension. In other words, negative theology has implications for the axiology of Islamic education.

Keywords: Negative theology, theology, axiology, Depistemology, discourse.

Introduction

This article analyzes the concept of divinity in the Islamic education system with reference to the Sufism and philosophical discipline (of Islamic education). Therefore, this article opens a metaphysical discourse of divinity that has been constructed in Islamic education. It is undeniable that the dynamics of God is always interesting to be discussed by the experts. Like Neuberger's research

which analyzes the concept and image construction of God;[1] Susanti's and Ikhwanisifa's research which identify the conception of God in elementary school students;[2] Scott's research which attempts to explore the concept of God's personality within the framework of modern theology;[3] and Latief's research which analyzes the concept of a Christian God from an Islamic perspective.[4] All of these researches try to unravel the theological value constructs that are meant to answer the big questions about God.

Some researchers have even tried to analyze the different concepts and images of God in same-gender-attracted (gay) communities, such as Colpitts and Yarhouse, in their research.[5] Besides, there is also a research that reveals the emergence of different concepts of God from the defining aspects of mankind, such as research by Trimeche et. al.[6] This means that the concept of theology is very much influenced by the construction of the metaphysical value of human divinity. On the other hand, theological constructions influence human attitudes and actions. Therefore, there are several research studies that examine the relationship between these two domains, such as Stulp et al. in their research which is based on the relationship between the dimensions of religiosity and well-being;[7] Carrigan's research which examines the implications of

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[1] Belina Neuberger, "The Good of Plato, the Neoplatonic One, and The God of Dante", *Religious Studies and Theology* 37, no. 1 (2018), 92-115. DOI: 10.1558/rsth.36394.

[2] Reni Susanti and Ikhwanisifa, "The Concept of God: From the Lens of Students of Integrated Islamic Elementary Schools", *Humanitas: Indonesian Psychological Journal* 17, no. 1 (2020), 46-54. DOI: 10.26555/humanitas.v17i1.8916

[3] Mark S.M. Scott, "God as Person: Karl Barth and Karl Rahner on Divine and Human Personhood", *Religious Studies and Theology* 25, no. 2 (2006), 161-190. DOI: 10.1558/rsth.2006.25.2.161.

[4] Juhansar Andi Latief, "The Concept of God in Christianity: An Islamic Perspective", *Jurnal al-Ulum* 11, no. 1 (2011), 1-16.

[5] David Colpitts and Mark A. Yarhouse, "God Concepts, God Image, and Religious Orientation in Same-Gender Attracted Christians", *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 47, no. 4 (2019), 296-312. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0091647119837011

[6] Samir Trimeche, et al., "Individual Differences in the Theological Concept of God", *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 16, no. 2 (2006), 83-100. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327 582ijpr1602_1

[7] Henk P. Stulp, et al., "God Representations and Aspects of Psychological Functioning: A Meta-Analysis", *Cogent Psychology* 6, no. 1 (2019), 1-50. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2019.1647926.

the internet for ecumenism and religious exploration;[8] or Visala's research on freedom of action in theological constructs.[9] It is reasonable then when the divine discourse is continuously discussed from the aspect of human spiritual experience, such as Shook's research;[10] from the aspects of gender and beliefs, such as Howard's et al. research,[11] even from the aspects of the doctrine of penance[12] as well as from the religious aspect, such as Sharp's et al. research on the concept of Christian divinity,[13] and Jonas's research on the concept of Jews divinity.[14]

The construction of the divine concept (theology) is a normative reference containing divine discourse [read: the system of knowledge] and identification of the truth. This aims to convince religious people of the truth of their faith through a comprehensive and formulated understanding. Therefore, the concept of divinity guides the people to "the satisfaction" towards their spirituality, as concluded in Bonab's et al. research.[15] However, knowing and also understanding the essence of God is a paradox that continues to haunt theology. Welz, in her research, admits that there are difficulties

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[8] Henry L. Carrigan, "Seeking God in Cyberspace", *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 4, no. 4 (2001), 55-82. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1300/J112v04n04_05.

[9] Aku Visala, "Theology, Free Will, and the Skeptical Challenge from the Sciences", *Journal Theology and Science* 18, no. 3 (2020), 391-409. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2020.1786218.

[10] John Shook, "William James on Religious Saints and Verifying the God Hypothesis", *Religious Studies and Theology* 32, no. 2 (2013), 185-208. DOI: 10.1558/rsth.v32i2.185.

[11] Simon Howard, et al., "Who Believes in a Male God? Ideological Beliefs and Gendered Conceptualizations of God", *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 28, no. 1 (2018), 55-70. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2018.1416251.

[12] Jennifer M. Buck, "Feminist Philosophical Theology of the Atonement", *Feminist Theology* 28, no. 3 (2020), 239-250. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735020906938.

[13] Carissa A. Sharp, et al., "One God but Three Concepts: Complexity in Christians Representations of God", *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9, no. 1 (2017), 95-105. DOI: 10.1037/rel0000053.

[14] Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice", *The Journal of Religion* 67, no. 1 (1987), 1-13. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1203313.

[15] Bagher Ghobary Bonab, et al., "Attachment to God in Islamic Spirituality", *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 7, no. 2 (2013), 77-104. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3998 / jmmh.10381607.0007.205.

in defining God.[16] This crisis also raises serious problems in theological construction, namely the attitude of the people who question its validity and standardization. This is termed as negative theology, [in which] it offers a subjective ontological argumentative perspective. It also puts "God" not as an objective reality as the general definition that society understands.

Indeed, negative theology can find a solution for the frozenness of the concept of divinity. It seems reasonable when some researches discuss this theology, such as Jugrin's research which examines the thinking of the more modern theologians of Dionysius—the father of negative theology[17] or Kars's research which focuses on describing the intellectual atmosphere of two figures (Ibn 'Arabī and al-Qabrafiqi) who are contradicting the human ability to imitate God's attributes.[18] In addition, the classic research that also addresses negative theology is Boeve's research which critically disentangles its philosophical dimension;[19] and Blans' research which attempts to compare Dionysius' pseudo thinking and Derrida's deconstruction.[20] Thus, the construction of negative theology has strong roots in the Western civilization, until it began to enter into Islamic world through Ismāiliyya understanding, especially through the thoughts of Muḥy al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī.[21] Likewise, it also begins to merge with the philosophical concept of education in the Islamic education system, especially in Islamic educational institutions such as madrasa and *pesantren*.

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[16] Claudia Welz, "Difficulties in Defining the Concept of God: Kierkegaard in Dialogue with Levinas, Buber, and Rosenzweig", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (2016), 61-83. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-015-9544-z.

[17] Daniel Jugrin, "Negative Theology in Contemporary Interpretation", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, no. 2 (2018), 149-170. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v10i2.1796.

[18] Aydogan Kars, "What Is "Negative Theology?" Lessons from the Encounter of Two Sufis", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86, no. 1 (2018), 181-211. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfx025.

[19] Lieven Boeve, "Postmodernism and Negative Theology: The A/Theology of the "Open Narrative"", *International Journal for Philosophy and Theology* 58, no. 4 (1997), 407-425. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00062278.1997.10739687.

[20] Bert Blans, "Negative Theology and Deconstruction: On Pseudo-Dionysius and Derrida", *International Journal for Philosophy and Theology* 57, no. 1 (1996), 2-19. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00062278.1996.10739631.

[21] Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, Trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 112.

Based on this framework, this study focuses on the construction of negative theology in the Islamic education system (madrasa and *pesantren*) in Malang. From this focus, the research question that was raised: What is the concept of negative theology in Islamic educational institutions (namely, Madrasas and *Pesantren*) in Malang? As this study wanted to understand and analyze these negative theological constructs, a qualitative approach was used in this study. Techniques for data collection used in this study were interviews, observation, and documentation. The data analysis used in this study was the interactive data analysis by Miles and Hubermann.

Negative Theology Discourse in Islamic Educational Institutions

Negative theological discourse among Islamic educational institutions, i.e., madrasa and *pesantren*, is very unusual. Even within the Islamic education system itself, this topic has never been discussed by academics and practitioners. This phenomenon arises because the construction of negative theology does not have a common language discourse used in madrasa and *pesantren*. Rubenstein's thesis, which argues that negative theology can only be expressed through negative language,[22] seems factually true. This is because the madrasa and *pesantren* themselves tend to express the concept of divinity in a positive way. Therefore, the divine metaphysics that they build have a rationalistic dimension by sticking to the revelation of ethics (al-Qur'ān). This is because they design their theological narratives based on the informative reasoning of revelation elaborated with the authority of reason.

Therefore, the majority of madrasas and *pesantren* in Malang state that the metaphysical conception of divinity based on observation and experience is a mistake. The concept of divinity is originating from the reality of humanity, although the result of the contemplation or reasoning cannot be justified. God for them is unseen and irrational "reality". Therefore, to know and understand God should be based on authoritative information or religious text, i.e., the Qur'ān. They are also aware of the difference in the rationality of each person in understanding the meaning of al-Qur'an. In fact,

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[22] Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology after Ontotheology", *Modern Theology* 19, no. 3 (2003), 387-417. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00228.

this situation can shape the different concepts of divinity among madrasa and *pesantren* communities. Within the framework of Islamic education philosophy, God is positioned as the source of knowledge;[23] in the interpretation of Ḥadīth Qudsīy which explains that "God is identified as a *Dhāt Allāh* who is gentle, generous, and far from negativity."[24]

Some madrasa and *pesantren* communities are actually open to a space for experience and rationality which is contributing to the concept of divinity. From these experiences, the perception of divinity will develop so that the metaphysics of divinity cannot be separated from the rationality of meaning. Just like suffering, which becomes the pattern of spiritual meaning, it sometimes contradicts each other. In this context, Kilby suggests that to avoid this contradiction, theology needs to maintain a future-oriented eschatology and give concrete hope.[25] Therefore, the madrasa and *pesantren* communities tend to place the discussion about God as a normative construction. They believe that the parameter of religious truth lies in the revelation which is the source of the divine concept. Armstrong also acknowledges that the Abrahamic religion positions revelation as the parameter of truth and also the source of divine knowledge; then another religion, like Buddhism, is quite the opposite in which it has no theology in the divine metaphysics.[26]

Due to this thought, it seems realistic when the majority of madrasa and *pesantren* communities understand divinity within its positive meaning and approach. When ripples of different understanding appear, negative theology is actually understood as the antithesis of positive theology. So far, God has been expressed through positive statements such as "God can be known" or "God can be thought of". On the other hand, in negative theology, God is understood with negative statements such as "God cannot be thought

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[23] Abdul Matin Bin Salman and Nur Sahed, "Tuhan dalam Perspektif Filsafat Pendidikan Islam", *el-Tarbawi: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 10, no. 1 (2017), 1-16. DOI: https://doi.org/10.20885/tarbawi.vol10.iss1.art1.

[24] Misrawi, "Tuhan Menurut Tuhan: Narasi Ilahiyah dalam Hadis Qudsi", *al-Bukhari: Jurnal Ilmu Hadis* 1, no. 1 (2018), 109-121. DOI: https://doi.org/10.32505/al-bukhari.v1i1.445.

[25] Karen Kilby, "Negative Theology and Meaningless Suffering", *Modern Theology* 36, no. 1 (2020), 92-104. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12577.

[26] Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), 209.

of" or "God cannot be known." There have been even some people who are being extreme [read: radical] by choosing not to reveal their divine concept. This divine thought eventually divided the madrasa and *pesantren* communities into two parts, namely the proponents of positive theology (it seems to be the majority) and the advocates of negative theology (it seems to be the minority). Indeed, as revealed in Bader and Froese's research, the concept of divinity has an impact on the attitudes, actions, and beliefs of the people.[27] It can be observed, among others, on how a person acts of treating the environment and makes the relationship between humans, nature, and God.[28] So, the characteristics of negative theologians can only be seen through the discourse that is revealed from themselves. Moreover, the limits of their divine expressions are the expressions of oddity that are difficult to define and predict.

It seems like the oddities of this negative theology cannot be taken for granted by the madrasa and *pesantren* circles themselves. They prefer to accept the concept of divinity, which is definitive and clearly contains God's image who is "Supreme Good". Therefore, they consider the vagueness of the concept of divinity in its negative meaning arguing that it is incompatible with religious guidance [read: the revelation (al-Qur'ān)]. In this context, Denys Turner prefers not to define negative theology.[29] This is because theological oddities for religious groups in madrasa and *pesantren* do not usually appear so that they (the theological oddities) can be discussed or even practiced. On the average, as stated in Baharudin's research, there have been conceptions of divinity throughout human history, namely theism, deism, pantheism, and pantheism.[30] However, the voices of negative theology have gradually emerged to the surface and contributed to the discussion of educational theology. This is what in the context of *The*

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[27] Christopher Bader and Paul Froese, "Images of God: The Effect of Personal Theologies on Moral Attitudes, Political Affiliation, and Religious Behavior", *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 1, no. 11 (2005), 1-24.

[28] Syafwan Rozi, "Understanding the Concept of Ecosufism: Harmony and the Relationship of God, Nature and Humans in Mystical Philosophy of Ibn Arabi", *Ulumuna: Journal of Islamic Studies* 23, no. 2 (2019), 242-265. DOI: https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v23i1.354.

[29] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[30] M. Baharudin, "Konsepsi Ketuhanan Sepanjang Sejarah Manusia", *al-Adyan: Jurnal Studi Lintas Agama* 9, no. 1 (2014), 35-58. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24042/ajsla.v9i1.1406.

Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) is said to be the result of the evolution of cognitive intuition and morality.[31]

There are two patterns that are relatively manifested in the construction of negative theology in madrasa and *pesantren* in Malang. The first is negation pattern which means that this concept of theology expresses negation "definition" of God. In madrasa and *pesantren*, this pattern believes that "we never know God comprehensively". They believe that God is a mystery who will be known as the unknown God. The second is nihilistic pattern in which it defines God through unspoken attitudes and is expressed in words. Those who adhere to this concept are inclined to "be quiet" and "not bring up the words", because they believe more that God cannot be described by any expression. They choose to reveal the latent and hidden concept of God within themselves.

These two patterns characterize the theological discourse of Islamic education institutions which encourage the opening of gaps in the reconstruction of divine diversity. This means that in madrasa and *pesantren*, there are two camps that are mutually "face to face" and tend to "criticize" each other. However, this dynamic actually develops an attitude of tolerance and openness to theological diversity (heterodoxy) in the institutional environment of Islamic education. This implication itself has been pointed out in the conclusion of Iswahyudi's research in which it states that heterodox theology serves to construct the principle of non-consensus truth in a pluralistic life order.[32] The strengths of tolerance wrapped in spiritual values [read: divine values] are manifested in every action and attitude of madrasa and *pesantren* communities. Therefore, the negative theological discourse amidst the madrasa and *pesantren* communities in Malang is actually used as an arena for divine values' prophetization. Therefore, negative theology values are not only a style of expression that is negative in nature, but they are also apophatic.

Those who hold negative theological beliefs tend to cover themselves with expressions beyond the conventional concept of divinity. They believe that the spiritual-transcendental experience has to do with intuition and abstraction. Thus, its perfect essence cannot

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[31] John Teehan, "Theology in The Age of Cognitive Science", *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 81, no. 4 (2020), 423-445. https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327. 2020.1773295.

[32] Iswahyudi, "Pengaruh Filsafat terhadap Heterodoksi Teologi Islam", *al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 17, no. 1 (2017), 1-23. DOI: 10.21154/altahrir.v17i1.883.

be described. In fact, not everyone can find spiritual-transcendental experiences;[33] hence these spiritual-transcendental experiences tend to be more subjective and diverse. Therefore, they [the people who have negative theological beliefs] are unable to provide a concrete description of spiritual experience with their own definition. Based on this subjectivity, negative theology is considered by some people as being "ungrounded", so that it is positioned against the divine reason to which the majority of the madrasa and *pesantren* communities embrace. It is even considered that it is not a concrete, positive, and anthropomorphistic representation of the theological beliefs of the madrasas and *pesantren*.

Unfortunately, negative theology does not function to describe the theological beliefs of Islamic educational institutions. The metaphysical concept of divinity offered by negative theology is considered absurd and intangible. Apophatic descriptions of God, such as the belief in the existence of God that goes beyond the conceptualization of being and not being, cannot be translated at all levels of the madrasas and *pesantren* communities. Whereas, Ibn Arabi's theological hierarchy, as concluded in Hasyim's research, states that theological reality is integrated with the spiritual understanding and experience of the actor.[34] Therefore, the adherents of negative theology firmly emphasize the metaphysical definition of divinity to have a hierarchy that agrees with their understanding and experience of spirituality. But they set boundaries that God cannot be conceptualized through reason (reasoning) and human language. They set an example as "the Wisest" cannot be pinned to God because divine wisdom cannot be limited by human reason. This was also expressed by Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) when he made attempts at negative theology.[35]

The reasoning for the negative theology that is being debated by the madrasas and *pesantren* in Malang lies in a clash of principles. The advocates of this theology have contradictory ideas, borrowing

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[33] Saliyo, "Psychological Meaning of Spiritual Experience Participants Naqshbandiyah Khalidiyah in Kebumen Indonesia", *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 6, no. 2 (2018), 309-338. DOI: http:// dx.doi.org/10.21043 /qijis.v6i2.3930.

[34] Arrazy Hasyim, "Teologi Ibn 'Arabi", *Ilmu Ushuluddin* 1, no. 4 (2012), 309-328.

[35] Ehud Z. Benor, "Meaning and Reference in Maimonides' Negative Theology", *Harvard Theological Review* 88, no. 3 (1995), 339-360. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/ S0017816000030844.

al-Fayyadl's apt terms, namely negation and negativity.[36] The denial of this positive concept of divinity on the basis of metaphysical arguments for apophatic deity puts it in the binary of opposition. We see that the debate arises more on differences in beliefs in the metaphysics of cataclysmic and apophatic deity. Negation is manifested in the form of denial of the concept of God, while negativity is expressed in the form of a background for the arguments of denial against positive theology. In this context, the clash of divine metaphysical discourses in madrasas and *pesantren* often occurs. In fact, it has implications for a relatively radical theological construction, namely the concept of God's impossibility is understood by human rationality.[37] This concept continues to permeate in Islamic education, especially the philosophical system that underlies the development of Islamic educational concepts and theories as within its axiological dimensions.

It is undeniable that the discourse of negative theology can finally open up dialogical spaces in madrasas and *pesantren*, including Islamic education materials, which contain the dimensions of '*aqīdah*, in which it has rich divine, metaphysical concepts. In fact, the discourse of negative theology also provides the madrasas and *pesantren* opportunities to massively and systemically develop Islamic knowledge which puts emphasis on divine discourse. These dynamics imply that negative theology encourages the dynamic development of Islamic scholarship which brings about a positive impact on the creation of more moderate religiousness among madrasa and *pesantren* communities. A respondent of this study told us that the concept of negative theology in madrasas and *pesantren* is more often debated in the nuances of tolerance and religious brotherhood. The underlying spirit is to understand and explore the meaning of divinity in the midst of the order of human life.

Depistemologic of Negative Theology in Islamic Education

The negative theology that exists in madrasa and *pesantren* in Malang has unique characteristics. It teaches the only way to reveal the divine experience through the affirmation of statements and

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[36] Muhammad al-Fayyadl, *Teologi Negatif Ibn 'Arabi: Kritik Metafisika Ketuhanan* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2012).

[37] David Tracy, "The Hermeneutics of Naming God", *Irish Theological Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (1991), 253-264. https://doi.org/10.1177/002114009105700401.

understanding of God. Thus, the madrasas and *pesantren* communities can only speak with negative expressions or even prefer to remain silent and do not state any expressions. Instead, they idealized the metaphysical knowledge of divinity that was born from within. In fact, the metaphysics of divinity that they embrace do not have definitive conceptions though it has an impact on the development of self-morality or society in general; and this has been stated in Simone Weil's "*Human Personality*".[38]

On the other hand, they believe that if a person has faith, s/he will accept the knowledge inherited from a certain divine metaphysical tradition. Through this tradition, "something" that is believed about God is essentially a reflection of what has been known. In this context, God can be known and understood through knowledge that contains various metaphysical conceptions of divinity. Therefore, the majority of the madrasas and *pesantren* communities in Malang emphasize divine knowledge as the basis of faith. Naturally, in the madrasa and *pesantren* education system, faith is formed on the basis of knowledge-based doctrine. The strength of doctrine in education, according to Kidd, lies within the epistemic knowledge that underlies educational values.[39]

In the paradigmatic view of negative theologians, knowledge is a means of knowing the existence of God as the first cause. They also emphasize that we only know the relationship between physical reality and God but not the reality of God's essence itself. The implication is that theological knowledge about God is only conceptual, which is born from the imagination of humanity. Thus, it cannot be used as a basis for justifying the truth of knowing and understanding God. According to them, divine metaphysical realm is a mere knowledge and it has nothing to do with "God". Various things about divine reality are only reflective imagination of humans in their spiritual experiences. Therefore, in Benor's research, it is stated that a good attitude is an act of silence and limits rational understanding.[40] For

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[38] Anna Rowlands, ""Angry Angels" as Guides to Ethics and Faith: Reflections on Simone Weil and Gillian Rose", *Theology* 112, no. 865 (2009), 14-23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X0911200103.

[39] Ian James Kidd, "Epistemic Corruption and Education", *Episteme* 16, no. 2 (2019), 220-235. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.3.

[40] Benor, "Meaning and Reference in Maimonides'", 339-360.

negative theologians, God cannot be defined; even to Dyonisius, God is the light and dark–but not both.[41]

In the Islamic education system, divine knowledge is essential to be indoctrinated to all members of the madrasa and *pesantren*. Interestingly, the doctrinal process is adjusted to the understanding ability of the madrasas and *pesantren* communities. Hence, the principle of negation of divine metaphysical knowledge does not cause "jerking" paradigmatic. Empirically, negative theology can still be abstracted in the form of conceptuality as a cluster of ideas, perspectives, views, and approaches at the divine level with the principles of negation and nihilism in it. These two principles are often seen on the stage of educational reality in madrasa and *pesantren* in Malang. Even the construction of negative theological conceptions has a strong relationship with the educational system. Muslih's research argues that the theological dimension actually encourages the development of science.[42]

Accordingly, the discourse of negative theology in this madrasa and *pesantren* have their own epistemological reason. Although it still essentially has affinity with other theologies, the characteristics of the epistemology of negative theology are different from other theologies. Of course, in this context, the negative theologians put their epistemology as a construction of knowledge about "non-knowledge" deity. When it is explained, its singular characteristics are very clear because negative theology contains contradictions and paradoxes. A negative theological conception can be said to be a metaphysical discourse of divinity, but at the same time, it is not a discourse. This means that even though it discusses knowledge, it actually talks about knowledge as the non-existence of knowledge. Obviously, negative theology is a discourse framework about divine knowledge, but it is also a discourse that emphasizes the absence/non-existence of the talk itself.

Although negative theology deals with divine knowledge, it negates that knowledge itself. This means that it constructs aspects of its knowledge as well as "rejects" that knowledge. Therefore, the term

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[41] Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 22.

[42] Mohammad Muslih, "Toward Theology of Science: Philosophical Reflection on The Development of Religion-Based Science", *Kalam* 13, no. 1 (2019), 1-24. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24042/klm.v13i1.3953.

"*depistemology*" emerges from this theological view. Depistemology means an epistemology that also criticizes its epistemology (de-epistemology). Within the scope of the negative theologians in madrasa and *pesantren* in Malang, this epistemological view constructs divine knowledge as well as criticizes and exposes this knowledge. Therefore, it is reasonable when the proponents of the negative theology prefer to "be quiet" and not reveal the definitive reality of divine metaphysics. This condition also applies in natural science, in which nature is expressed as "the trails" of God and the manifestation of absolute reality, that is, a complete unity. The implication is that science and theology lead to knowledge of God though God's essence itself cannot be understood.[43]

The *depistemology* of negative theology revealed in madrasa and *pesantren* can be mapped into three major variants, namely knowledge sources, knowledge procedures, and knowledge objectives. It is necessary to admit that tracing the sources of divine metaphysical knowledge from negative theology in madrasa and *pesantren* in Malang is an act of reading into paradoxical facts. Positive theology—as a construction of knowledge about divinity—has very clear sources of knowledge. This source is clearly used as the basis for building and developing faith and belief, as revealed in Safii's research.[44] Meanwhile, in negative theology the metaphysical knowledge construction of divinity is denied and rejected. The supporters of the negative theology express themselves through "quiet" attitudes and language. This is because they think that the expressions constituting the metaphysical knowledge of divinity will not be able to describe the essence of God. Obviously, the negative theologians do deny the construction of knowledge about God.

Interestingly, the negative theologians still bind and base their self-confidence on revelation, reason, and tradition. However, they tend to interpret revelation and tradition in a different form based on the conventional or positive theological styles. Even though they are different, they seem to reject a view addressed to them as having committed a pattern of deviation from the religious truth in Islam.

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[43] Teresa Obolevitch, "Negative Theology and Science in The Thought of Semyon Frank", *Studies in East European Thought* 62 (2010), 93-99. DOI: 10.1007/s11212-010-9104-0.

[44] Safii, "Pemikiran Tauhid Âyât Allâh Murtadâ Mutahharî", *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 3, no. 2 (2013), 341-375. DOI: https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2013.3.2.341-375.

These binding and foundation are in fact only manifest representations of fundamental beliefs. Even for them, a substantial source of the epistemological construction of negative theology lies in the absence/non-existence of the source itself. The divine doctrine in Islamic education is said to be a form of "introduction" towards the divine essence. They believe that God is a reality beyond the reach of the human mind. Hence, knowledge is only an introductory copy of reality which is absolute and is not "understood".

Therefore, approaching and understanding God cannot be done through binding and basing oneself on knowledge though it comes from divine authority, namely the revelation and existing traditions. The negative theologians believe that approaching God can only be done by starting from the point of emptiness. The implication is that any source of knowledge is considered meaningless or even non-existent. This emptiness for them is a form of the absence/non-existence of a source of knowledge. Thus they also have no foundation or basis for truth. In this context, they rely more on the reality of truth on no basis. This is what often raises criticism due to the assessment that the foundation of truth in epistemology is very urgent to develop science.[45] Moreover, the adherents of cataphatic theology (the positive theologians) very closely tie themselves to revelation, reason, and tradition—or the source of the truth that is in knowledge. Thus, it is reasonable that the negative theological discourse in madrasa and *pesantren* in Malang is not really visible.

Negative theologians believe that the truth is not necessarily based on any foundation. Moreover, divine truth is considered sacred, so of course it cannot be described according to profane values. This source of knowledge's absence/non-existence does not mean that negative theology has shifted towards nihilism, namely: the view that human existence has no purpose. In fact, negative theology makes sanctification and deconstruction of human elements' attributions in divine metaphysical knowledge. Hence, the point of emptiness which becomes "the source" of negative theological knowledge does not lead to stagnation. Instead, it transformed the negative theology into a process of searching for the meaning of divinity. This search is a form of the negative theologians' total self-reaction to the sacredness of

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[45] Thomas E. Uebel, "Anti-Foundationalism and the Vienna Circle's Revolution in Philosophy", *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 47, no. 3 (1996), 415-440. DOI: https://www.journals.uchicago. edu/doi/abs/10.1093/bjps/47.3.415.

reality, which James says as the meaning of "divine".[46] And it is the condition that can be analyzed through *Experimental Theology* (ET) as offered by Callaway and Strawn.[47] Obviously, negative theology constructs its knowledge based on the emptiness or non-existent source of knowledge.

However, the negative theologians have a basic thinking framework that can be traced through the structure of their theological logic. We need to admit that negative theology does not recognize the existence of knowledge constructs that arise from rationality—although it is based on revelation and religious traditions. They think outside the custom of cataphatic (positive) theology which tends to rationalize divine knowledge through causal and analogical logic. This is very evident in Christian theology about human predestination and freedom, as revealed in the research by King Jr.[48] They prefer to use thinking patterns that elevate the sacredness of transcendental reality and let go of the profane dimension.

However, they tend to position knowledge as continuously negated by other realities. They try to escape the ontological traps of humanity so that the purity of God's essence is not tainted by attribute or profanity labels. They negate the existence or knowledge of God which is composed of ontological concepts and presuppositions. Therefore, negating the effort to understand God actually leads to trapping on the knowledge that is not about God. Likewise, when they explain the divine material in learning, the concept of God is essentially not "the real God". In this context, the researcher termed the presuppositions and descriptions of God as "God Profane", namely: the concept of God that is generated by human perception and knowledge. The researchers came up with this term after being inspired by the article entitled "Looking for God Profane and Sacred in the Films of Woody Allen".[49]

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[46] William James, *Perjumpaan dengan Tuhan: Ragam Pengalaman Religius Manusia*, Trans. Gunawan Admiranto (Bandung: Mizan, 2004), 93-101.

[47] Kutter Callaway & Brad Strawn, "Experimental Theology: Theological Anthropology and the Psychological Sciences", *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 48, no. 1 (2020), 3-17. https://doi.org/10.1177/ 0091647119854117.

[48] John B. King Jr, "A Trinitarian Metaphysics of Predestination and Human Freedom", *Journal Theology and Science* 18, no. 3 (2020), 383-390. https://doi.org /10.1080/14746700.2020.1786217.

[49] Richard A. Blake S.J., "Looking for God Profane & Sacred in the Films of Woody Allen", *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 19, no. 2 (1991), 58-66. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.1991. 9944110.

The presuppositions carried out by the negative theologians are conceptually a method of thinking that compares, equates, and analogize to represent what is not the truth. They presuppose transcendental reality to provide understanding of "learner". This means that every concept that is built/developed about an object contains an element of presupposition in it or is structured metaphorically. Thus, it has no permanent and stagnant claim to truth. Rather, it shows that these truth claims are ambiguous and open to possible interpretation. Reasonable, the negative theologians often think in paradoxical ways.

Therefore, negative theologians in madrasa and *pesantren* in Malang continue to argue about understanding over understanding. Their thinking pattern tends to put two contradictory things and negate each other in the same statement and acknowledge the truth of both. One example, the concept of transcendence for them is a concept of perfection and the perfect, but this concept still requires negativity. Seemingly for them, the concept of perfection in transcendental reality is affirmed by the negativity itself. Hence, they acknowledge perfection, but on the other hand, it is also denied. Thus, theological statements labeled as word particle "not/non" are emerged in this context. For them, this "non-ness" is seen as something that shows the limitlessness of God's essence. Hence, an event is only "possible" from the "impossible" itself, this is the logic of the paradox.

Their logic recognizes that there is an intrinsic conflict between two understandings or knowledge. However, they also acknowledge the truth in each of these conflicting knowledge. The positive theologians relatively often criticize this pattern of thinking because they believe that there can be no truth between two contradicting knowledge. However, for the researcher, the heterodox cataphatic and apophatic views are treasures of theological thought in Islam which are very useful in developing the non-consensus principles of truth and harmony in life. The process of acculturation and assimilation of thoughts and segregation of knowledge will color the dialectic of theological culture. In Hamid's research, it turns out that this can encourage the harmonization of people's lives.[50]

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[50] Idrus Al Hamid, "Islam, Local "Strongmen", and Multi-Track Diplomacies in Building Religious Harmony in Papua", *Journal of Indonesia Islam* 14, no. 1 (2020), 113-138. DOI: 10.15642/JIIS.2020.14 .1.113-138.

The existence of this paradoxical logic is a critical antithesis of analogical logic in cataphatic theology. Usually, cataphatic theology often looks for points in the likeness of humans and God; or in the *Kalām*, between the "profane ones" and the "sacred one".[51] Analogical logic indeed positions itself essentially on the logic of the "likeness" of God as the "sacred one" with humans as the "profane ones". This logic is based on the assumption that there is an ontological condition in which God and man can be equated in a relation of the same understanding. The construction of knowledge from this logic is ultimately negated by the logic of apophatic theology, namely: the logic of negation and paradox.

Axiological Dimension of Islamic Education in the Frame of Negative Theology

Based on this description, adherents of negative theology have a spirit to de-profane cataphatic theology. It cannot be denied when their theological views are considered by many madrasa and *pesantren* community as being have no purpose (non-teleological). One of the arguments to be realized is the purification of the divine concept, which essentially contains human ideas and projections. Hence, negative theology wants to purify the divine idea from the claim of "dogmatism" that shackles human beings. On the other hand, there is a view that ancient theology was deemed not to have adequate functions and benefits. Even ancient creeds and teachings have become idols, ending in man himself and replacing God's indescribable reality.[52] Negative theology in this context affirms God's holiness for all dimensions of the divine concept that are considered final.

It is common for negative theological discourse to raise theological problems without the desire to reach certain teleology. It is the range between "knowledge" and "no knowledge" that gives rise to the reality of negative theologians' beliefs. It seems to be an undeniable fact that within Islamic education like madrasa and *pesantren* lies a dynamic form of faith between "rational" and "mystical" knowledge as a result of the method of *Burhānī* and *'Irfānī*.

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[51] Imam Iqbal, "Logika Keilmuan Kalam: Tinjauan Filsafat Ilmu", *Esensia: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 16, no. 2 (2015), 187-205. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v16i2.997.

[52] Armstrong, *A History of God*, 354.

This dialectical process has shifted the stagnation of cataphatic theology, which provides space for "certainty" of metaphysical knowledge. It can be assumed as a representation of the asymmetry between cataphatic and apophatic theology. The fundamental structure of belief in the Islamic education system is theological knowledge that continuously contracts due to its contradiction.

Essentially, the de-profanation of the cataphatic theology has the aim of "unifying" the *'ābid* (servant) itself and *ma'būd* (God). The adherents of negative theology believe that there are no obstacles to achieving "union" with God. Usually, they think of their theology as a form of representation of their love for God. This feeling cannot be described in the form of a verbal or written sentence, except for a sentence or statement of negating a cataphatic expression. However, on the other hand, it also affects their social behavior in the community. Heineck's research found that there was a relationship between self-religiosity and pro-sociality.[53] As Obasanjo's research found, the existence of love in theology can develop aspects of social welfare in social interactions.[54] This includes the conclusion of Hoffmann's research that avoids conflicts between religious communities; it is necessary to have moderate diversity based on universal love.[55]

For them, love is a feeling that does not require rational-empirical ontological certainty. Instead, what they need is a sense of "limitless enjoyment" with or through a dichotomic paradigm (i.e., between logic and intuition; between knowledge and ignorance that does not apply). Therefore, they tend to see God based on exaggerating and negating God's positive ontological conceptualization. This process guides madrasa and *pesantren* to be oriented towards cultivating and developing the divine awareness of the subject of education (students and *santri*). Imam's research concluded that Sufism, which was full of philosophical thoughts,

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[53] Guido Heineck, "Love thy Neighbor: Religion and Prosociality", *International Journal of Social Economics* 44, no. 7 (2017), 869-883. https://ideas.repec.org /a/eme/ijsepp/ijse-09-2015-0258.html.

[54] Olusegun Obasanjo, "Love in Theology and Secularity", *Journal of Religion and Human Relations* 11, no. 1 (2019), 1-24.

[55] Lisa Hoffmann, et al., "Universal Love or One True Religion? Experimental Evidence of the Ambivalent Effect of Religious Ideas on Altruism and Discrimination", *American Journal of Political Science* 64, no. 3 (2020), 603-620. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12479

became the inspiration for developing Islamic education methodologies to help perfect divine consciousness.[56] Therefore, the basic concept of education from negative theologians is a systematic effort to develop and enlighten the spiritual dimension and develop physical potential in a balanced manner. The axiological dimension they want to manifest is the divine moral action in the subject of education.

This dimension emerges from the basis of metaphysical criticism of cataphatic divinity, in which a de-ontological dimension frames their religious beliefs. It is a metaphysical critique of divinity that tends to go beyond the traditional concept of cataphatic theology. One example is that God is a reality that cannot be limited by the concept of a word or sentence. This ability has created contradictions and paradoxical concepts within the theological discourse in madrasa and *pesantren* and also among the Islamic education system in general. However, the paradoxical nature—which is revealed in the performance- confirms their view of "sacredizing" the divine reality. According to them, the fact of de-ontological infinity and the unrevealing reality of God will position "the divinity of *Dhāt Allah*".

Therefore, the implications of negative theology in madrasa and *pesantren* in Malang are not only on the theological-philosophical dimension but also in the empirical-moralistic dimension. That is, they emphasize the balance between the divine and human dimensions; spiritual and social aspects. They assume that through the maturity of divine consciousness, it can emerge a paradigm of integration of Faith, Science, and Charity; between *Īmān*, *Islām*, and *Iḥsān*. It cannot be denied if the lewd act, they have the nuances of transcendence; that is, a continuous effort in order to "overcome" and "exceed" the relationship between "themselves" and God. This is our term *al-insān al-kāmil* characterized by theological-philosophical features. The term mainly refers to 'Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī's *al-insān al-kāmil* in its theological meaning and Ibn 'Arabī's in its philosophical sense.[57]

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[56] Muis Sad Iman, "Peranan Tasawuf Falsafi dalam Metodologi Pendidikan Islam", *Jurnal Tarbiyatuna* 6, no. 2 (2015), 153-171.
[57] Ghozi, "Wahdat al-Wujûd 'Abd al-Karîm al-Jîlî", *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 3, no. 1 (2013), 1-18. DOI : 10.15642/teosofi.2013.3.1.1-18.

As we have seen in madrasa and *pesantren*, these aspects are gathered at the culminating point, namely the construction of *muttaqīn* humanity. In this dimension, adherents of negative theology stretch *muttaqīn* "achievements" along a linear-algorithmic line with *mu'min*, *muslims*, and *muḥsin*. Thus, the Islamic education systems they develop have been integrated with apophatic theology values, i.e., theology which is based on Sufism. Adherents of negative theology believe that an integrated Islamic education can open a path of balance to foster social intelligence and spirituality in the subject of education. Everything arises based on divine intelligence, unspoken and written, yet firmly rooted in their hearts. To achieve this goal, they clean the scientific construction of Islamic education from dichotomic isms while de-profaning Islamic education theology. The creation of this orientation was carried out massively through theological dialectics and developed by indoctrination.

The divine consciousness that exists among the proponents of negative theology can be said to be the Abdullah figure, while constructive action, namely *pious deeds*, represents this awareness. Therefore, their actions bring about goodness and grace to the realm of humanity and nature. According to Umiarso's research conclusions, this concept appears to encourage the actualization of faith and substantive *pious deeds* based on divine consciousness (*Iḥsān*).[58] Spiritual values, social ethics, and moral action are empirical implications of negative theology that need to be designed academically. However, this awareness needs to be the primary guide for designing Islamic education's current and future goals.

Concluding Remarks

It is obvious that the negative theological discourse in madrasa and *pesantren* has led to undeniably massive implications. One of them is on the theological discourse side of Islamic education institutions, in which it participates in contributing to the axiological construction of Islamic education. Therefore, the objectives of madrasa and *pesantren* education are not only oriented to the divine aspect but also to the human aspect. This integrality goal is formed from the source

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[58] Umiarso, "Human Transformation into the "God": Study of Critic-Elaborative Axiology of Islamic Education with Philosophical Sufism", *Edukasi: Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Agama dan Keagamaan* 17, no. 1 (2019), 1-13. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.32729/edukasi.v17i1.589.

of knowledge and logical patterns that exist in the negative theological *depistemology* system itself. Therefore, the adherents of negative theology in madrasa and *pesantren* in Malang continue to unprofaned the metaphysical knowledge of cataphatic divinity.

The negative theology has shifted the theological framework among madrasa and *pesantren* community in Malang into a metaphysical form of apophatic deity. All cataphatic theologies only stand as theologies that pretend to describe transcendental reality with their metaphysical principles, logic, and conceptual procedures. In fact, the metaphysics of apophatic divinity can put itself as a more progressive theology in Islamic educational institutions. Even, it also has implications for claims of truth and metaphysical knowledge in Islamic educational theology. In this perspective, negative theology seeks to build and develop "new order"—or, in other words, "new concepts and theories"—of Islamic educational theology that can be abstracted conceptually based on its propositions.

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