

Dr Khalil Andani

Shī'ī Ismā'īlī *Tawhīd*: From Dual Negation to Metonymic Affirmation

Modern scholars regard Ismā'īlī theology as a hyper-negative discourse about God that borders on the paradoxical and amounts to a non-rational theology. In this paper I argue that Ismā'īlī philosophers root their theology in rational argument by explaining how their Neoplatonic discourse about God combines hyper-negation with metonymic affirmations. Ismā'īlī theology is not opposed to natural theology but instead combines a negative theology of the divine essence with a positive theology of divine action predicates through its affirmation of the First Intellect and Universal Soul as originated beings bearing positive attributes.

In the first part of the paper, I consider how Ismā'īlī negative theology operates. Contrary to some polemical presentations (Juwaynī, Ghazālī, Ibn Taymiyya) that accuse Ismā'īlī theologians of violating the laws of logic, Ismā'īlī discourse does not conjoin simple negations with double negations (i.e. affirmations) – which does entail contradiction; rather Ismā'īlī dual negation discourse is of two types. The first type is a series of simple negations where Ismā'īlī philosophers negate the qualities of corporeal beings (bodies, accidents) and incorporeal beings (intellects, souls, angels) from God. Without recognizing this discourse within its original cosmological context, some of these simple negations may look like double negations, but this is not what Ismā'īlī authors intended. The second type of Ismā'īlī dual negation consists of first negating real-distinct entitative attributes from God, which *kalām* thinkers often ascribed to God, such as uncreated life, knowledge, or power insofar as these are real-distinct entities additional to the Divine Essence; and subsequently negating all privations from God like lifelessness, ignorance and incapacity which also describe created beings and their deficiencies. This type of dual negation is known in Neoplatonic thought as hyper-negation or aphaeresis.

Finally, Ismā'īlī theology still accepts positive verbal affirmations for God by interpreting positive predications in the Qur'ān, prayer, and everyday speech as metonymic speech. This means that a positive predicate P when applied to God is reducible to a description of God as the originator, source, or bestower of P within creatures as opposed to God being the bearer or locus of P. Meanwhile the direct referent of P as a real attribute is the First Intellect, Universal Soul, and other ranks in the created spiritual hierarchy that God originates and sustains in being. To some extent, this Ismā'īlī move prefigures how mystical thinkers in the Ibn 'Arabī tradition treat the divine names and attributes. Metonymic predication is the hermeneutical key to unlock Ismā'īlī interpretations of positive theological language and has also been used by Sunnī theologians in specific cases.



Dr Khalil Andani
Augustana College

Khalil Andani serves as an Assistant Professor of Religion at Augustana College. He holds a Ph.D. and MA in Islamic Studies and a Master of Theological Studies (MTS) from Harvard University. His scholarship focuses on Qur'anic studies, Islamic intellectual history, Sufism, Ismailism, and the Philosophy of Religion. Khalil's current book project is an analytical study of revelation in early and classical Islam. His most recent publications appear in *Zygon*, the *European Journal of Analytical Philosophy* and *Global Intellectual History*.