



THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN THE PERSPECTIVES OF KAREN ARMSTRONG AND IBN 'ATHAILLAH AL SAKANDARI: A SPIRITUAL HISTORICAL COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This study aims to examine and compare the concept of God in the perspectives of Karen Armstrong and Ibn 'Ata'illah al-Sakandari through a spiritual-historical comparative approach. The research employs a qualitative method with a library research design, focusing on an analysis of the main works of both thinkers. The findings reveal that Karen Armstrong understands God as a transcendent, unique, and incomparable reality that cannot be fully explained through rational concepts, but must be experienced existentially through spiritual awareness, myth, and ethical sensitivity, particularly compassion for the poor and the suffering. In contrast, Ibn 'Ata'illah al-Sakandari conceives God through the concept of ma'rifatullah (gnosis of God), which emphasizes inner knowledge attained through divine light, purification of the heart, remembrance (dhikr), trust in God (tawakkul), and a spiritual journey that requires detachment from worldly desires and a deep longing for closeness to Allah. The study concludes that both figures share similarities and differences in their understanding of God. The similarity lies in their view of God as the highest, transcendent reality, incomparable to anything else. The difference lies in the spiritual path toward God: Armstrong emphasizes transcendence, symbolic experience, and ethical-historical consciousness, while Ibn 'Ata'illah emphasizes practical Sufism through ma'rifah, spiritual discipline, inner purification, and intimate proximity to God.

Keywords: *Concept of God, Karen Armstrong, Ibn 'Ata'illah al-Sakandari, Spirituality, Comparative Study*

Abstrak

Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji dan membandingkan konsep Tuhan dalam perspektif Karen Armstrong dan Ibnu Athaillah as-Sakandari melalui pendekatan komparatif spiritual-historis. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kepustakaan (library research), dengan menganalisis karya-karya utama kedua tokoh. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Karen Armstrong memandang Tuhan sebagai realitas transenden yang unik, tak terbandingkan, dan tidak sepenuhnya dapat dijelaskan secara rasional, melainkan harus dialami secara eksistensial melalui pengalaman spiritual, mitos, serta kepekaan etis terhadap penderitaan manusia, khususnya kaum miskin. Sementara itu, Ibnu Athaillah as-Sakandari memahami Tuhan melalui konsep ma'rifatullah, yaitu pengenalan batiniah kepada Allah melalui cahaya ma'rifat, penyucian hati, dzikir, tawakal, dan perjalanan spiritual yang menuntut keterlepasan dari orientasi duniawi serta hasrat untuk selalu dekat dengan Allah Swt. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan adanya persamaan dan perbedaan antara keduanya. Persamaannya terletak pada pandangan bahwa Tuhan adalah realitas tertinggi, transenden, dan tidak dapat dibandingkan dengan apa pun. Perbedaannya terletak pada



jalan spiritual menuju Tuhan, di mana Armstrong menekankan pengalaman transenden, simbol, dan dimensi etis-historis, sedangkan Ibnu Athaillah menekankan dimensi tasawuf praktis melalui ma'rifat, amal, penyucian hati, dan kedekatan spiritual yang bersifat intim dengan Allah.

Kata Kunci: *Konsep Tuhan, Karen Armstrong, Ibnu Athaillah as-Sakandari, Spiritualitas, Studi Komparatif*

A. Introduction

The concept of God is one of the most fundamental themes in the history of human thought (Anwar, 2015). Since the emergence of early civilizations, human beings have continually sought to feel, experience, and understand who God truly is. This effort has involved the use of human experience, reason, and revelation as interpretive tools. Such understandings have not only shaped religious beliefs but have also deeply influenced how humans perceive the meaning of life, moral values, and their relationships with others and the surrounding world (Listiana, 2017). In this context, ideas about God have evolved continuously across different civilizations, both in Western and Islamic traditions, each developing rich and profound intellectual and spiritual heritages.

Karen Armstrong, a British scholar and historian of religion, is well known for her broad and inclusive perspective on the concept of God. In her works, she emphasizes that the idea of God is not static, but rather the result of a long historical process shaped by human spiritual experience. For Armstrong, God should not be understood narrowly as an anthropomorphic being resembling humans, but as a reality that transcends human rationality. Her thought seeks to restore the symbolic and spiritual depth of the concept of God, which has often been neglected in modern rationalistic approaches.

On the other hand, Ibn 'Atha'illah al-Sakandari, a prominent Egyptian Sufi scholar of the thirteenth century, presents a deeply spiritual understanding of God grounded in classical Islamic mysticism. In his teachings, God is described as the Absolute Reality who can only be approached through inner purification, self-surrender, and the awareness of human limitation before the Divine. For him, knowledge of God is primarily rooted in inner spiritual experience rather than intellectual reasoning alone. Despite originating from very different traditions modern Western thought and classical Islamic mysticism both Armstrong and Ibn 'Atha'illah reject rigid, literal, and anthropomorphic conceptions of God. Comparing their perspectives reveals both convergences and differences between modern spirituality and classical Sufism, offering a mutually enriching framework for understanding the meaning of divinity in the contemporary world.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative method with a library research (Sugiyono, 2019) approach, oriented toward textual and conceptual analysis. The qualitative design



is chosen because it enables an in depth understanding, interpretation, and analysis of ideas, meanings, and constructions of thought regarding the concept of God from spiritual and historical perspectives, particularly within the frameworks of Karen Armstrong and Ibn 'Atha'illah al-Sakandari. The data sources consist of primary and secondary materials: primary data include the principal works of Karen Armstrong and Ibn 'Atha'illah al-Sakandari that directly address themes of divinity, spirituality, and the relationship between humans and God, while secondary data comprise books, scholarly journal articles, previous research, and other relevant literature that provide historical, theological, and spiritual context for the analysis of both thinkers.

The research process is conducted through systematic stages, including the identification and exploration of credible and relevant literature, the classification and selection of sources based on thematic relevance and academic authority (Bakker, 1984), data processing and analysis using content analysis and comparative analysis to examine similarities, differences, and conceptual convergences between the two perspectives, and finally synthesis and interpretation to formulate patterns of meaning, conceptual frameworks, and new constructions of understanding regarding the concept of God in a spiritual-historical perspective. In addition, reflective notes are employed as a supporting instrument to help capture the dimensions of spiritual meaning, transcendental values, and ethical implications embedded in the thoughts of both figures. Thus, the method is not merely descriptive-analytical but also interpretative and comparative, enabling the production of a holistic, profound, and integrative understanding of the concept of God in the perspectives of Karen Armstrong and Ibn 'Atha'illah al-Sakandari.

C. Results and Discussion

1. The Early Concept of God in Karen Armstrong's Thought

Karen Armstrong's early understanding of God is inseparable from her personal religious background and formative experiences within Catholic education. From childhood, she was introduced to a rigid doctrinal framework in which faith was primarily defined as adherence to a fixed set of theological propositions and dogmas. Her religious formation emphasized belief in formal doctrines rather than the cultivation of personal spiritual experience. As a child, Armstrong was required to memorize catechism answers, including the definition of God as "the supreme spirit, self-existent, infinite, and possessing all perfections in an abstract sense." This philosophical and metaphysical depiction of God, constructed through abstract concepts and intellectual formulations, appeared distant and impersonal. God was perceived more as an elusive metaphysical idea than as a living presence encountered in personal experience.

Although Armstrong possessed a limited form of belief rooted in inner conviction, she simultaneously experienced a profound spiritual emptiness. The God presented to her through religious instruction did not correspond with her existential and emotional needs. This tension created a deep internal contradiction between institutional religious teaching and lived spiritual experience. As a result, Armstrong became increasingly aware of the



gap between doctrinal certainty and spiritual meaning, which later became a central motivation for her scholarly engagement with the history of religion and theological ideas.

In her intellectual development, Armstrong came to understand that religious doctrines and theological representations of God are not timeless or static truths, but historical constructions shaped by human societies over long periods of time. Concepts of God, she argues, are formed gradually through cultural, social, and intellectual processes, reflecting the needs and conditions of specific historical contexts. Early human civilizations often conceived of a supreme deity as a transcendent cosmic ruler the ultimate cause of all events and the sovereign of heaven and earth sometimes imagined as a “sky god” symbolizing transcendence and human longing for the divine. Yet paradoxically, such a God often remained experientially absent from human life, reinforcing a sense of distance rather than intimacy.

Armstrong emphasizes that religious ideas are continuously reinterpreted and transformed. Each generation reshapes the concept of God in accordance with its intellectual frameworks, moral sensibilities, and social realities. When a particular theological model loses its relevance or fails to respond to new scientific, cultural, or existential challenges, it is gradually abandoned and replaced by alternative religious interpretations. Consequently, the idea of God does not evolve toward a single final or absolute form, but rather undergoes continuous historical reconstruction. (Otten & Armstrong, 1994).

Furthermore, Armstrong highlights the importance of inner spiritual awareness rather than purely conceptual theology. She suggests that the divine cannot be reduced to abstract definitions alone, because spiritual reality is experienced through transformation of consciousness and inner awareness. Practices such as contemplative disciplines and meditative traditions (including yogic techniques) illustrate how human beings become aware of an inner dimension of existence that connects them to a transcendent reality. The divine, therefore, is not merely an external metaphysical entity, but a reality that surrounds, sustains, and inspires human life through inward spiritual experience.

a. The One God

The experience of the One God is powerfully illustrated in the prophetic vision of Isaiah. While praying in the temple shortly after the death of his father, Isaiah felt deep inner unrest and spiritual unease, particularly in response to the luxury and ritual splendor of the temple ceremonies despite his own royal lineage. Known for his democratic and populist sensibilities, as well as his concern for the poor, Isaiah experienced a profound spiritual rupture. In the midst of incense filling the sacred space and sacrificial blood sanctifying the altar, he perceived a vision of God (Yahweh) seated upon a throne above the temple and the heavens, accompanied by two seraphim who covered their faces with their wings and proclaimed, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord.” This encounter generated what Rudolf Otto earlier described as the numinous experience an encounter with



transcendent reality that evokes awe, fear, and reverence simultaneously. Otto emphasized that such experiences are fundamentally non-rational, surpassing logical comprehension and intellectual categories, and belong to a unique mode of human consciousness in relation to the sacred.

In Christianity, Armstrong explains that the doctrine of the Trinity Father, Son, and Holy Spirit emerged as an interpretive framework developed by early Church leaders to articulate diverse human experiences of God. God was understood simultaneously as Creator (Father), as the divine presence incarnated in Jesus (Son), and as the continuing divine presence in human history (Holy Spirit). This doctrine is not explicitly formulated in the biblical texts, but rather evolved through theological reflection and ecclesiastical deliberations, particularly in councils such as the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century CE. Armstrong argues that the Trinity represents an attempt to express complex spiritual experiences within a unified framework of divine oneness. Although often misinterpreted as a form of polytheism, it remains fundamentally monotheistic in intention, seeking to preserve unity within multiplicity.

Within the Jewish tradition, Armstrong highlights the concept of the One God (YHWH) as the central foundation of Israelite faith. God is not merely one in numerical terms but is absolutely unique and incomparable. The experience of God in Judaism is portrayed as dynamic, relational, and mysterious rather than purely intellectual or conceptual. Armstrong observes that Jewish monotheism historically developed from monolatry the worship of one God without denying the existence of others toward a fully developed form of exclusive monotheism, in which YHWH alone is recognized as the sole divine reality.

In Islam, Armstrong identifies Tawhid as the most uncompromising and philosophically coherent expression of divine unity. Allah is indivisible, cannot be incarnated, and cannot be compared with any created reality. Tawhid is not merely a theological doctrine but also a spiritual, ethical, and existential orientation, affirming that all existence originates from and depends upon the One God. Armstrong further notes that Sufi thinkers such as Al-Hallaj and Ibn 'Arabi contributed to a deeper metaphysical interpretation of Tawhid as existential unity, in which all being is understood as a manifestation of divine presence rather than as independent reality.

Through comparative reflection, Armstrong concludes that despite theological differences among Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, all three traditions ultimately seek to affirm the oneness of God. The Trinity in Christianity, the Shema in Judaism, and Tawhid in Islam represent distinct religious responses to humanity's encounter with transcendent reality. Armstrong also critiques modern rationalistic approaches that attempt to objectify God as a purely conceptual entity. In ancient religious consciousness, God was not primarily an object of rational explanation but a mystery to be encountered, experienced, and lived.

From a historical-anthropological perspective, early human civilizations appear to have developed concepts of a supreme, transcendent deity prior to the emergence of full



polytheistic systems. This view resonates with Wilhelm Schmidt's (1912) theory of primitive monotheism, which argues that early tribal societies recognized a transcendent sky deity prior to formal religious institutions. Karen Armstrong (1993) challenges the dominant evolutionary thesis that polytheism necessarily preceded monotheism, proposing instead that early human awareness of mortality, cosmic vastness, and existential limitation generated the need for a personal, transcendent, and *сверх*-human (superhuman) sacred reality. Anthropologically and psychologically, this development reflects humanity's confrontation with finitude, death, and vulnerability, which produced the symbolic need for a transcendent, personal divine presence although such concepts initially emerged in highly abstract forms (Syatiri, 2025).

Based on the above analysis, the differences in the concepts of God within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam originate not from contradictory theological intentions, but from diverse human experiences of transcendent reality. Ultimately, God remains a sacred mystery one that cannot be fully grasped through rational explanation alone, but must be encountered through lived spiritual experience.

b. Historical Shifts and the Evolution of the Concept of God

This work focuses on the historical development of the idea of God within the three Abrahamic monotheistic (Farid & Tasnim, 2023) traditions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam due to their profound influence on the formation of the modern world. Karen Armstrong invites readers to trace the long historical trajectory of divine concepts as they have been shaped by changing social, political, and cultural contexts over a period of approximately four millennia. This historical approach is not merely descriptive but interpretive, emphasizing that theological ideas emerge from human experience rather than existing as fixed and immutable truths (Anasri, 2023).

Armstrong continues her earlier personal narrative by reflecting on her early spiritual quest and her initial critique of rigid and unchanging religious doctrines. She recounts her experience of entering a religious order and becoming a nun as an attempt to encounter a living and present God one that she had failed to find within the abstract theological definitions learned in childhood. Her motivation was rooted in a deep longing for authentic spiritual presence rather than conceptual belief. However, contrary to her expectations, life within the monastery did not provide a sense of divine presence. Despite the intensely spiritual environment, Armstrong continued to experience God as absent and inaccessible, unable to perceive the divine reality as vividly as it had been described by saints and prophets.

Within Christian institutional life, Armstrong also observed a strong devotional focus on Jesus Christ rather than on God the Father. This theological emphasis, in her view, contributed to the increasing distance and abstraction of the concept of God the Father from lived religious experience. These experiences reinforced her realization that the concept of God she had inherited was not a timeless and absolute truth, but rather a human construction formed gradually across historical time.



Armstrong's personal disillusionment ultimately became the catalyst for her scholarly project. Her failure to encounter a "present" God within formal religious institutions motivated her to investigate historically how concepts of God emerged, transformed, and diversified across civilizations. In *A History of God*, Armstrong integrates autobiographical reflection with religious history to articulate a broader theory of human spirituality.

After leaving the monastic life, Armstrong describes a period of profound psychological and spiritual crisis. She recounts feelings of failure, inner pressure, and existential exhaustion, which led to the gradual erosion of her personal faith. At one point, she even considered the possibility that God might be an unnatural construct—an "aberration" that humanity had outgrown. This perspective, she notes, reflects a common modern secular attitude toward religion, in which belief in God is interpreted as a historical anomaly rather than an existential necessity.

Nevertheless, Armstrong's extensive study of religious history ultimately led her to a different conclusion. She argues that human beings are inherently spiritual beings (*homo religiosus*). Religion, in her view, is not an artificial cultural invention but a natural dimension of human existence that has accompanied humanity since the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. From the earliest stages of human history, religious practices developed alongside artistic expression, symbolic representation, and ritual activity. The creation of religion and the creation of art, Armstrong suggests, are parallel expressions of humanity's search for meaning.

Like art, religion functions as a symbolic and existential response to suffering, mortality, and the fragility of human life. It represents an effort to construct meaning and value in a world marked by loss and impermanence. Armstrong further contends that secular modernity the separation of religion from the public sphere is a historically recent phenomenon. Secularism constitutes a new and untested social experiment in human history, the long-term consequences of which remain uncertain.

Taken as a whole, Armstrong's intellectual trajectory marks a significant shift from personal disappointment with an abstract and distant God toward a broader anthropological and historical understanding of spirituality as an intrinsic human capacity. She ultimately affirms that spirituality is a constitutive dimension of human nature, and that concepts of God arise from this fundamental spiritual need (Otten & Armstrong, 1994)

Armstrong further maintains that ideas of God do not need to conform to scientific or strictly logical criteria in order to remain meaningful. Religious concepts function symbolically and existentially rather than empirically. When a particular concept of God loses its relevance or existential effectiveness, it is naturally replaced by new, sometimes radically different, theological interpretations. For monotheistic believers, this process of transformation need not be a source of anxiety, since the idea of God itself is not static or sacrosanct in conceptual form, even though the divine reality is regarded as sacred (Armstrong, 2011).

c. The Importance of Myth and Orthodoxy

Karen Armstrong examines the role of myth and transcendent experience in the formation of religion, introducing one of the central arguments of her work concerning the nature of the concept of God. She maintains that spirituality is an inherent dimension of human existence and proceeds to explain how ideas about God emerge and function within human consciousness. According to Armstrong, transcendent experiences such as feelings of surpassing physical reality, ecstasy, or revelatory insight are intrinsic to the human psyche. Religion arises as a cultural and symbolic system that integrates these experiences into the broader framework of human life through myth (Zifamina, 2022).

Myth, in Armstrong's understanding, is not merely fictional storytelling or imaginative narrative. Rather, it is a creative symbolic act through which human beings interpret existence, suffering, and mortality. Myth enables the expression of meanings that cannot be adequately conveyed through ordinary language or rational discourse. It operates in a symbolic register that transcends empirical explanation, allowing humans to articulate existential realities that remain inaccessible to scientific or purely logical frameworks. In this sense, myth is not opposed to truth, but represents a different mode of truth existential rather than empirical.

Armstrong's central thesis emphasizes that ideas about God are never static. Instead, they are continuously reconstructed by each generation in accordance with cultural needs, historical conditions, and social contexts. Concepts of God across different civilizations may appear contradictory, incompatible, or even mutually exclusive. Even within the same religious tradition, the understanding of God undergoes constant transformation over time. Focusing particularly on the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Armstrong demonstrates that the history of God is a dynamic and evolving process rather than a fixed theological narrative. The idea of God is thus historically conditioned, culturally produced, and continually reshaped by human experience (Otten & Armstrong, 1994).

Armstrong further elaborates on the function of myth as a means of creating what she terms "existential consciousness." Myth is not designed to explain scientific facts or historical events, but to cultivate awareness of existence, meaning, and purpose. Because fundamental human problems such as suffering, death, and existential anxiety are permanent features of human life, the need for myth is also continuous. While myths may be reformulated by different generations, their essential function remains unchanged: to provide symbolic structures through which human beings interpret the meaning of existence.

In Christian theology, this symbolic structure is reflected in dogmatic formulations concerning the nature of God. Classical Christian doctrine distinguishes between divine attributes that are incommunicable such as self-existence, immutability, unity, omnipresence, and eternity and communicable attributes, such as wisdom, knowledge, power, faithfulness, justice, holiness, compassion, and love, which can be reflected in human moral life. Central to Christian belief is the doctrine of the Trinity,



which affirms that God is one in essence yet reveals Himself in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is understood as the Logos of God who became incarnate, not merely as a prophet but as the divine Word made human. Divine communication to humanity is thus mediated through the Messiah and the Spirit of Christ, representing God's self-disclosure in human history.

The Trinitarian concept, however, has historically generated complex theological debates. The idea of one God in three persons has been difficult to conceptualize, particularly within Western Christian thought, where Jesus Christ is often identified with the Logos or God Himself. Karen Armstrong acknowledges both the strengths and limitations of this doctrine. She explains that while Trinitarian theology sought to preserve divine unity, it also produced internal controversies, particularly during the early Church period. Disagreements such as those between Arius and Athanasius illustrate the deep intellectual and theological tensions surrounding the nature of Christ and divine unity. Armstrong interprets Trinitarian theology as the belief that God the Father gives the fullness of divine being to the Son, fully communicating Himself through the divine Word. This view parallels traditional Church doctrine, which teaches the unity of the Father and the Son. Armstrong further argues that the meanings attributed to God in different historical periods inevitably vary, and that no single generation's understanding of God can claim absolute universality. Concepts of God are shaped by historical experience, cultural conditions, and intellectual frameworks, and therefore remain subject to transformation across time (Juwaini, 2021).

Armstrong also maintains that modern humanity tends to approach God through practical reasoning, empirical experience, and scientific rationality. When religious meanings from earlier periods are imposed rigidly on contemporary contexts without reinterpretation, theological dissonance and conceptual conflict inevitably arise. As she explicitly states, "a concept of God formed by one generation may no longer be meaningful for another" (Juwaini, 2021). God, as the Absolute and the Infinite, transcends time, space, and human cognition; therefore, divine reality cannot be fully grasped by rational thought alone.

Furthermore, Armstrong emphasizes the diversity of religious expressions throughout history. Each era produces distinct forms of devotion, religious practice, and spiritual discipline. There has never been a single uniform model of religious life across human history. Instead, religious expressions have always been plural, diverse, and sometimes contradictory. Nevertheless, attitudes of reverence, silence, devotion, and respect toward the sacred have persisted across traditions and civilizations. These enduring spiritual dispositions are not limited to Christianity but are present in all major religious traditions, even into the rise of Western modernity. Armstrong's personal narrative reinforces this theoretical position. As a young nun, she engaged deeply with religious life, studying theology, apologetics, and monastic history, and actively participating in religious discipline. Despite her intense commitment to prayer, ritual, and spiritual practice, she did not experience the presence of God in the manner described in



religious tradition. Her persistent effort to encounter God through devotion and contemplation did not result in a felt experience of divine presence, reinforcing her later conviction that religious meaning cannot be reduced to institutional forms alone (Nasution, 2019).

2. The Concept of God According to Ibn ‘Atha’illah al Sakandari

a. The Light of Ma‘rifah

Several arguments put forward by Ibn ‘Atha’illah al-Sakandari concerning God begin with both linguistic and theological definitions. Linguistically, the word “God” in the Indonesian dictionary (Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia) is defined as “something believed in, worshiped, and adored by humans, as the Creator, the Almighty, the All-Powerful, and so forth.” Theologically, the term “God” refers to Allah, as affirmed in the Qur’an, for example in Surah Muhammad (47:19): “Know that there is no god but Allah, and ask forgiveness for your sin and for the believing men and believing women. Allah knows your movements and your resting places.” Likewise, Surah al-Baqarah (2:163) states: “Your God is One God; there is no god but Him, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate,” and Surah al-Baqarah (2:255) affirms: “There is no god but Allah, the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him.” From these verses, God is understood as Allah, the Creator of the universe who alone deserves worship.

The discussion of God has always been broad and intellectually compelling, from classical Greek civilization to the present day. Among the many perspectives that exist, the author is particularly interested in the view of a Sufi thinker who was also skilled in rational argumentation and philosophical reasoning, namely Ibn ‘Atha’illah al-Sakandari (d. 709 H/1309 CE). He was a prominent Sufi master, widely recognized as the third spiritual authority (grand master) of the Shadhiliyyah order. Born in Alexandria in 648 H/1250 CE, he devoted his life not only to Sufism but also to teaching Maliki jurisprudence in major intellectual institutions such as al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo and the al-Manshuriyyah madrasah in Alexandria.

The distinctive feature of Ibn ‘Atha’illah’s doctrine of divinity lies in his understanding of tawhid (the oneness of God). For him, true monotheism is not merely a conceptual or intellectual construction but an existential-spiritual state achieved through the stage of fana’ (self-annihilation in God). At this stage, the experience of unity (often associated with monism or wahdat al-wujud) is transformed into an experience of differentiation, in which the Sufi realizes that, in an absolute sense, God is distinct from creation. Through fana’, a person forgets everything other than Allah and attains true tawhid (Faza, 2021).

Ibn ‘Atha’illah carefully constructed his mystical and theological doctrines to avoid intellectual conflict and sectarian tension. This was understandable given the fragile social, political, and religious conditions of Egypt at the time, where divisions and hostilities were common, even among Sufi groups themselves. Historical examples



include acts of hostility toward figures such as Ibn ‘Arabi by rival Sufi groups. The greatness of Ibn ‘Atha’illah’s thought is evident in his ability to integrate diverse Islamic intellectual traditions that previously stood in opposition to one another, each claiming its own exclusive truth.

As the author of *al-Hikam*, whose full name is Shaykh Abu al-Fadl Taj al-Din Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karim ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Abd Allah ibn Ahmad ibn ‘Isa ibn Husayn ‘Atha’illah al-Sakandari al-Juzami al-Maliki al-Shadhili, he was not only a Sufi but also a scholar of Islamic theology (*kalam*). He mastered rational and philosophical argumentation in developing his intellectual framework. Although some scholars regard him as a Sunni Sufi with a primarily practical (*amali*) orientation, while others classify him as a representative of philosophical Sufism, his works show that he employed not only mystical analysis but also theological, philosophical, and juridical approaches. Therefore, further research is necessary to uncover the fundamental epistemological and methodological foundations he used in discussing the concept of God.

In general, Muslim thinkers understand God as the Creator, with everything outside Him being His creation. Jurists (*fuqaha*) perceive God as the Supreme Judge, whose relationship with human beings is structured through obligations, prohibitions, and legal consequences. In Sufism, God is seen as the Beloved of the heart, the center of longing, love, and human action. Philosophers, on the other hand, view God as the ultimate source of all truth and ultimate reality, which can only be comprehended through disciplined and systematic reasoning (Faza, 2021).

The personal conception of God is found in the world’s major religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. God is understood as a personal being with distinct attributes and names, active in the world, and possessing multiple forms of perfection. God is not merely a human conceptual construct but is known through divine revelation conveyed by prophets and messengers. In sacred scriptures, God is depicted as the Creator and Sustainer of the world, and in Islam He is named Allah.

The name “Allah” as a designation for God was already known in Arab society before the emergence of Islam in the 7th century CE. This is evidenced not only in pre-Islamic poetry but also in ancient inscriptions and historical records. Various Arab tribes recognized a supreme deity called Allah and acknowledged Him as the Creator of the universe (Assakandari, 2007). Before reaching the spiritual station of *wushul* (direct communion with God), a seeker (*salik*) experiences *mu’anasah*, a state of intimacy and inner comfort in closeness to Allah. The opening of this state often begins with a sense of weariness toward worldly attachments and other creatures. However, the seeker must still maintain social relations and fulfill social and religious responsibilities, such as *da’wah* and communal duties, while preserving inner closeness to God.

From a spiritual perspective, prayer is an expression of human dependence on Allah and a recognition of His perfection in all His attributes—attributes of *kamal* (perfection), *jalal* (majesty), and *jamal* (beauty). True prayer is guided by God Himself,



through divine inspiration that awakens both the outward tongue and the inward heart. This is known as *du‘a’ mujarrab* (efficacious prayer). The gnostic (*‘arif*) always feels a deep need for Allah, perceiving His perfect power and protection, and therefore constantly seeks closeness to Him, feeling restless when distant from Him.

This divine light is the manifestation of God’s attributes: divine knowledge, inner experiences, and sacred mysteries related to His majesty. These illuminate the depths of the human heart, becoming the “sun of the heart” that never sets. There are three levels in receiving this inner light: receiving it from afar (*maqam al-Islam*), receiving it from closeness (*ahl al-muraqabah*), and receiving it in unity (*ahl al-ma‘rifah*) (Assakandari, 2007). In conclusion, according to Ibn ‘Atha’illah al-Sakandari, God is Allah the One who is absolutely needed by human beings, perfect in all His attributes of *kamal*, *jamal*, and *jalal*. Allah draws near to the *‘arif* (the gnostic), who perceives His perfect power and protection. Therefore, the *‘arif* continually seeks closeness to God and finds no peace when separated from Him.

b. The Importance of the Heart and Trust in God (Tawakkul)

When a person’s spiritual state becomes stronger, they begin to view their actions not merely as rituals, but as a means of drawing closer to God. Their heart is no longer attached to worldly or even heavenly rewards; instead, they seek divine grace from Allah, such as the removal of spiritual veils that conceal the inner heart (*qalb*). At this stage, a person feels that their actions bring them nearer to God. They often associate their spiritual progress with the quantity of their religious practices such as remembrance of God (*dhikr*), voluntary prayers, fasting, and other acts of devotion. When they fail to perform these habitual practices, they feel distant from God, even if they have not committed any sin. This condition reflects the early stage of the spiritual journey, where closeness to God is pursued primarily through self-purification and outward discipline.

Some believers rely solely on actions, while others rely on God through their actions. Both groups believe that righteous deeds bring blessings and goodness. The first group is firmly attached to outward practices physical and visible acts of worship as a form of effort (*ikhtiar*). If their efforts fail, their motivation and hope may collapse. Meanwhile, those on the early path of the spiritual way (*tariqa*) tend to rely more on inner practices, such as prayer and remembrance of Allah. When they neglect these practices, their hope in receiving divine grace weakens; and when they fall into wrongdoing, their sense of divine closeness may feel completely severed.

This excessive focus on action also includes dependence on knowledge, whether visible or invisible. Visible knowledge refers to rational, intellectual understanding used to manage worldly affairs. Invisible knowledge refers to spiritual sources such as the Qur’an, supplications, and unseen spiritual forces. Many people believe in the blessings of prayers, verses, and efforts themselves, while forgetting Allah as the true source of all blessing. When God permits, a person’s inner state rises to a higher level, where the meaning of the phrase becomes deeply rooted in the heart: “There is no power and no

strength except through Allah.” As stated in the Qur’an: “Allah is the One who created you and what you do.”

Everything that exists is a gift from Allah and belongs to Him. A person who truly understands divine decree no longer sees blessings as originating from human actions, including their own. This spiritual station is known as the station of the ‘arif (the one who truly knows God). Such a person no longer depends on deeds themselves, but becomes deeply devoted in worship. They accept whatever Allah decrees with contentment (*ridha*), remain calm in loss, and do not perceive creation as independent actors or controllers of events.

In the journey toward closeness to Allah, this person remains committed to righteous deeds in obedience to divine command. At first, good deeds are seen as the path to God. Later, however, a transformation occurs: the heart no longer views deeds as the sole means of nearness, but recognizes closeness to Allah as a pure divine gift (*fadh*). Spiritual veils are lifted, self-knowledge emerges, and the person recognizes their own weakness, poverty, and insignificance. They see themselves as powerless, ignorant, and needy, while recognizing Allah as the All-Sufficient (*al-Ghani*), the All-Powerful, the All-Wise, the Most Noble, and the Absolute Will. Their inner vision becomes focused solely on the will and power of Allah. This is the sign of true self-knowledge and true knowledge of God. Such a person becomes wise, fully reliant on Allah alone, constantly turning toward Him, surrendering to Him, and seeking only Him. They recognize themselves as nothing but a poor servant before Allah (Assakandari, 2007).

From this explanation, Ibn ‘Atha’illah al-Sakandari’s concept of God can be understood as follows: closeness to God begins through action, but the heart must be free from attachment to worldly and even spiritual rewards, seeking only divine grace. God elevates the inner state of a person to the realization that “there is no power and no strength except through Allah.” God may be approached through good deeds, yet true closeness is ultimately a gift from Him alone. Allah is the All-Sufficient, the All-Powerful, the All-Wise, the Most Noble, and the Absolute Will, and true reliance (*tawakkul*) belongs to Him alone.

c. The Purpose of Life: Ma‘rifatullah (Knowing God)

According to Ibn ‘Atha’illah, *ma‘rifah* means truly knowing Allah both His Essence (*Dhat*) and His Attributes (*Sifat*). Truly knowing Allah is extremely difficult, because nothing resembles Him. Ibn ‘Atha’illah teaches that every human being is obligated to know Allah, just as Allah commands His servants to know His Names, Attributes, and Essence. In the Hereafter, a person will behold and witness Allah in accordance with the level of *ma‘rifah* they attained in this world, including their recognition of His Names and Attributes. This is because *ma‘rifah* in this world will manifest as direct spiritual vision in the Hereafter, just as rice grows from a seed. To reach true knowledge of Allah, a person must pass through seven essential stages: *al-juhd* (spiritual striving), *al-tadharru’* (humble supplication), *ihtirāq al-nafs* (burning the ego),



al-inābah (returning to Allah), al-shabr (patience), al-shukr (gratitude), and al-ridhā (contentment). The fruit of *maʿrifah* is luminous knowledge: the removal of barriers between the servant and God, and the attainment of inner, essential knowledge directly bestowed by Allah upon His servant (Fuad, 2014).

Shaykh Ibn ʿAthaʿillah al-Sakandari, the great Sufi scholar and author of *al-Hikam al-ʿAthaʿiyyah*, taught profound spiritual wisdom that guides the soul toward deep knowledge of Allah. In one short but deeply meaningful litany (*wirid*), he formulated three fundamental spiritual statements that build strong *muraqabah* (spiritual awareness): “Allah is with me. Allah observes me. Allah sees me.” These are not mere words, but living remembrances engraved in the hearts of those who wish to live continuously within the presence of God. Allāhu maʿī (الله معي) “*Allah is with me.*”

This creates a deep sense of spiritual peace and tranquility. A servant who feels that Allah is always with them will not fear life’s hardships. True strength does not come from people, status, or wealth, but from the presence of God. As Allah says: “*Indeed, I am with you both; I hear and I see*” (Qur’an, Ṭāhā: 46). Even when abandoned by others, Allah never abandons His servant. Allāhu nāẓirun ilayya (الله ناظرٌ إليّ) “*Allah is watching me.*” This expresses *muraqabah*: the certain awareness that Allah observes every thought, intention, and action not with anger, but with love, care, and mercy.

This awareness purifies the heart and character, not through fear of punishment, but through the feeling of being loved and watched over by God. Allāhu yarānī (الله يراني) “*Allah sees me.*” This is the highest spiritual consciousness: *ihṣān*. A person who truly understands this lives as if standing before Allah at every moment. As the Qur’an states: “*Does he not know that Allah sees?*” (Syarif, 2025).

Maʿrifah, according to Ibn ʿAthaʿillah, is the correct understanding of Allah’s Essence and Attributes. Because nothing resembles Him, this understanding is inherently difficult. Yet every human being is obligated to know Allah, for Allah commands His creation to recognize His Essence, Names, and Attributes. In the Hereafter, one will experience God according to the level of *maʿrifah* attained in this life. Worldly *maʿrifah* transforms into direct spiritual vision in the Hereafter, like a seed becoming a rice plant. This path requires passing through seven crucial stages: striving, humility, purification of the ego, return to God, patience, gratitude, and contentment. The result is enlightened knowledge and unveiled truth, where the veil between servant and Lord is lifted and divine knowledge is directly granted by Allah.

Shaykh Ibn ʿAthaʿillah also taught that within trials and hardships lie hidden secrets of piety that can only be understood by those who possess *basirah* (inner vision). Feeling weak, broken, and detached from worldly ambitions is itself part of the divine purpose of trials. Wherever a servant feels most humbled, there divine help is closest. Hardship does not destroy a person nor diminish their sustenance; rather, it is a divine gift when received with acceptance. As stated in Sufi tradition: “*Allah crushes His servants with hardship so that they may become gold.*” (Salahuddin, 2024).



Rational reflection also leads to recognizing Allah. A sound intellect concludes that the orderly and harmonious universe cannot exist by itself; it must have a Creator and Regulator Allah SWT. This is affirmed in the Qur'an (Ali 'Imran: 190): "*Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day are signs for people of understanding.*" (Purba & Salamuddin, 2016).

The name "Allah" is understood linguistically to derive from *lahu* ("to Him belongs"), preceded by the definite article *al*, meaning "to Him alone belongs everything." This meaning is reflected in Qur'an al-Baqarah: 255. Before creation, nothing existed except Allah. Allah is Ahad (One, Absolute, First), as stated in Surah al-Ikhlās: Allah existed without beginning, without origin, and without dependence on anything. According to Sunni creed (*Aqidah Ahl al-Sunnah*), Allah is One, Pure, Transcendent, Eternal without beginning, Ever-Living without end, Everlasting without annihilation, Manifest and Hidden, the First and the Last. He resembles no creation, is not confined by space, time, heaven, or earth, and nothing can oppose His will or alter His decree (Ulumuddin, 1992).

Allah is the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*). The existence of the universe, the Throne, the heavens, and the earth proves the existence of a Creator whose existence is eternal and independent Allah alone (An-Nawawi, 2020). Thus, according to Ibn 'Atha'illah al-Sakandari, humans are obligated to know God (Allah), as Allah commands His servants to know His Names, Attributes, and Essence. In the Hereafter, humans will witness Allah according to their level of *ma'rifah*. The path to knowing Allah passes through seven spiritual stages: striving, humility, purification of the ego, return to God, patience, gratitude, and contentment. Allah is always with His servants, as stated in Qur'an Tāhā: 46: "*Indeed, I am with you.*" Allah is the True Existent (*al-Wujūd al-Ḥaqq*). The Qur'an presents Allah as the Lord of humanity and the Lord of the universe, distinct from other theological concepts of God in other scriptures. Allah possesses the Most Beautiful Names (*Asma' al-Ḥusnā*), such as al-Khāliq (The Creator), al-Malik (The Sovereign), al-'Azīz (The Mighty), and al-Baṣīr (The All-Seeing). Every action begins with *Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm* "In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate" (Krogt, 2023).

According to Mulla Ṣadrā, the path to attaining ultimate truth (Allah) requires opening the inner self (*mukāshafah*) and attaining divine knowledge (*'ilm ladunī*) that does not contradict rational proof (*burhān*) and is strengthened by revelation. This philosophical-spiritual system is known as al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyah (Transcendent Theosophy), which integrates: (1) Philosophical reasoning, (2) Theological thought (*kalam*), (3) Mystical purification (*irfan/tasawwuf*) leading to true monotheism and spiritual unveiling (*mukāshafah*), (4) Illuminative philosophy (*al-ḥikmah al-ishrāqiyyah*), combining rational philosophy with spiritual experience (Gunawan, 2019). Finally, Wahdat al-Wājib affirms that God alone is the absolute, necessary existence independent, self-subsisting, and not dependent on anything else (Mihrob, 2021).



D. Conclusion

This comparative study shows that Karen Armstrong and Ibn Ataillah al-Sakandari both understand God as a transcendent, supreme, and incomparable reality. They agree that God cannot be fully grasped through rational definitions or abstract concepts, but must be experienced spiritually, making inner experience the core of the human divine relationship.

Their fundamental difference lies in ontology and epistemology. Karen Armstrong views the idea of God as a product of historical, cultural, and symbolic processes, where religious myths and spiritual experiences shape the human understanding of the divine; therefore, the concept of God is dynamic and contextual. In contrast, Ibn Ataillah al-Sakandari affirms God (Allah) as an absolute, truly existent Being, One (Ahad), holy, and perfect in essence and attributes, who is approached through the Sufi path of ma'rifatullah, moral practice, purification of the heart, and spiritual annihilation (fanā') in the realization of tawhīd.

Thus, this study identifies two distinct paradigms of divinity: Karen Armstrong represents a spiritual historical approach that understands God as a transcendent reality mediated by symbols, history, and human experience, while Ibn Ataillah al-Sakandari represents a spiritual metaphysical (Sufi) approach that understands God as an absolute ontological reality accessed through inner spiritual transformation. Together, these perspectives enrich the understanding of the concept of God in a cross-traditional spiritual historical framework.

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