



## **EPISTEMOLOGICAL INTEGRATION OF THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN WESTERN AND EASTERN PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE**

**Muta Ali Arauf**

Universitas Islam Negeri Prof. K.H. Saifuddin Zuhri Purwokerto, Indonesia

*mutaali@uinsaizu.ac.id*

### **ABSTRACT**

The concept of God is one of the central themes in philosophical studies, both in Western and Eastern traditions. Differences in cultural background, history, and frameworks of thought have given rise to various understandings of God, ranging from theism and deism to pantheism and non-theism. This article aims to examine and integrate the concept of God in Western and Eastern philosophy through a literature review approach. The method used is a literature study of classical and contemporary philosophical works. The results of the study show that despite differences in rational and intuitive approaches, Western and Eastern philosophy have common ground in their efforts to understand the highest reality as the source of existence and meaning of life. This study contributes to the affirmation that the integration of these two traditions opens up space for constructive philosophical dialogue in understanding God holistically.

**Keywords:** *The Concept of God, Western Philosophy, Eastern Philosophy*

## A. Introduction

The understanding of God is one of the most important subjects in the endless study of philosophy and theology (Sayed, 2002). Many books have been written and published discussing the philosophy of God in both the East and the West. The issue of God is at the first level of philosophical speculation. The relationship between God and humans and nature is a new phenomenon in modern society's understanding of God, making an epistemological approach a necessity (Mahfud (2015).

Differences in understanding of God in the Eastern and Western worlds. The Eastern world places more emphasis on mystical life, which reveals the experience of God through the inner self. This differs from the West, which is more rational and uses reason as a tool and command to encounter the 'ultimate truth'.

The study of divinity has been a major concern of philosophers since ancient times. In Western philosophy, discussions about God have been greatly influenced by the traditions of rationalism and empiricism, while Eastern philosophy emphasises metaphysical, intuitive, and inner experiences. These differences often give rise to a dichotomy between rational and spiritual approaches.

The rational understanding of a transcendent God is nothing more than an attempt by living beings, namely humans, to understand the unseen or invisible nature of God and to strengthen their belief in the existence of God, who is considered to influence all aspects of life. At the same time, there are people who claim not to believe in God and who also have the desire to rationally negate God, whether they intend to reject God or are simply unable to comprehend God's existence.

Starting thousands of years ago, discussions about God have been numerous and have undergone much criticism and refinement that are still relevant to be revealed and discussed across generations, even to the contemporary generation today. In every field of science, discussions about God have a significant place and are taken seriously. Hidayat (2004) says that the issue of God is not only the monopoly of philosophy; other sciences also take the discussion of God very seriously. In fact, the first main theme of philosophy is the issue of God. As explained by Louis Leahy, quoting an American philosopher, "Investigating the main philosophical theme, which in my opinion is the issue of God... It is quite strange that Western philosophy, even though it claims to have been freed from mythology and theology, still eagerly debates the issue of God as in the past... Therefore, it must be acknowledged and various efforts must be made to prohibit it, but the question of God remains a central theme in Western history, and not only in the West. The question of God is at the forefront of philosophical speculation." (Davies, P in Hamzah's translation, 2012).

Therefore, for the reasons mentioned above, the issue of divinity will always be interesting to analyse and study, even as long as humans continue to live in this world. This is because human interaction with transcendent reality is a fact that has existed throughout human history.

On the other hand, God is essentially an elusive figure who seems to be defined more through intellectual abstraction than imagination. From all the doctrines of belief that we have acquired and accepted since childhood, it seems that we understand more about the concepts of heaven and hell; in reality, hell is a more frightening reality than God Himself because hell itself is something imaginative that we can truly understand (Armstrong, 2012), and the same goes for heaven.

However, behind all that, the author believes and is aware that humans are essentially not only *homo sapiens* but also *homo religious*. Although culture and tradition also play a role in shaping human understanding of God Himself. According to Al Jabiri (2014), human thought and understanding depend on language, but language itself depends on the local culture and tradition. Therefore, language 'provides boundaries and forms a circle around all human knowledge'. This then becomes the initial basis for the meaning of divinity, which is termed Eastern and Western. The concept of Eastern and Western divinity in this study is a term that has a paradoxical or contradictory meaning regarding an entity that is inherent or tends to be inherent in its nature.

Historically, 'belief' has been heavily influenced by anthropomorphic tendencies (*tasybih*). This has drastically changed the concept of God, which was initially very transcendent and elusive, to become so prevalent and cohesive within the cultural and social sphere of patriarchal societies. Armstrong (2012) confirms this. He argues that most of our understanding and proposals about God (especially in the three Abrahamic religions) are based on God being applied to the needs and desires of humans themselves. Reflecting God as human fear and longing in its development—which has a specific meaning—God is a creative imaginative product, like music and art, which are so inspiring.

This article is not about the indescribable reality of God, who exists beyond time and change, but rather about the explanation of human perception or history of God, which will be explained in terms of Eastern and Western concepts of God. This is because the human perspective of God is a historical issue related to the context of time, place and human culture (Anas, 2012). In short, the idea of God is essentially a construct of human society in a particular generation. However, it may not have the same meaning in other generations. Even the statement, 'I believe in God,' has no objective meaning, but is like any other statement in general.

This study utilised a literature review method (library research). Data sources were obtained from classical and modern philosophy books, scientific

journals, and works by Western and Eastern philosophers relevant to the theme of God. Data were analysed descriptively and analytically by comparing the main concepts of both philosophical traditions.

The God of the East is the God who has long been commonly believed in by heavenly religions (Armstrong, 2012). Around 1400 years ago, the East became a place where ideas about God slowly grew. Initially, this belief grew tens of years ago when humans believed in the main cause of the movement and dynamics of nature. Initially, God was not represented by any image and did not have priests or places of worship to serve Him. God was considered to be transcendent and too sublime for inadequate human worship. Humans expressed their love and longing for God and believed that God was always watching over them. However, in the end, strangely enough, God was not present in human activities and lives, there was no specific cult, and God was never depicted. So, in the end, humans replaced God with something more accessible. This eventually led to the worship of idols (fetishism) or animism.

Then, the God of the Western term is a new God. A God who was born during the Enlightenment in the 18th century and became more widespread during the feminist movement in Europe, especially France. The conflict between religious groups and scientists marked a new milestone in history. This included theological discussions. Many enlightened figures such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Giordano Bruno, Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo and others became promoters of this era and sometimes also criticised religious authorities, which at that time appeared authoritarian and also received patronage from scholastic philosophers. Explicitly, the Western God did not appear in the discussions of the 'Enlightenment', a term based on a new alternative description as a form of resistance to religious authoritarianism, which at that time was very exclusive and doctrinally apologetic.

However, in the context of globalisation of thought and cross-cultural dialogue, efforts to integrate the concept of God are important. Researchers want to examine this by dissecting the contexts of Eastern God and Western God using a literature approach based on writings in journals and published research, which are then analysed based on text, historical analysis and ideological criticism. This integration does not aim to standardise thinking, but rather to find common ground and complementarity between these two major philosophical traditions. Therefore, this article seeks to examine the concept of God in Western and Eastern philosophy and the possibility of their integration.

## **B. Philosophical Discourse on the Existence of God**

In this world, humans have various beliefs or concepts about God. How they discover these beliefs or concepts about God varies greatly; some are based on rational arguments, while others are based on blind faith. Usually, these beliefs are

obtained from personal experience, education, or indoctrination. Many of these beliefs are inherited from birth, where parents and the environment bring these beliefs that we believe in. This point has been criticised for hundreds of years by philosophers, especially Western philosophers and most scientists in general.

Amstrong (2012), quoting Wilhemt Schmidt, states that humans originally created one God. According to Schmidt, primitive monotheism existed before humans worshipped gods. An Oxford history expert, Hahari (2019), has a different view. According to him, animism was born and existed first. Typically, animism existed among ancient hunters and gatherers in the past.

Unlike Harari, Amstrong and Schmidt do not explain what caused this belief to arise, but go straight to the standard concept of the belief. In his writing, Harari expresses the view that humans have a unique ability that is difficult to explain, namely the ability to believe in something that cannot be seen, touched or smelled. Black (2017) explains that there are many reasons behind the existence of stories or understandings about God, but it seems that humans are created to grow, mature and learn to ignore it.

Meanwhile, according to Islamic scholars (Shihab, 1995), belief (read: religion) is considered to arise from human discovery of truth, beauty and goodness. Humans have an innate curiosity, which is based on a continuous effort to obtain what is most beautiful, true and good.

Many other explanations lean more towards mystical traditions. A simple explanation is that if the universe could explain itself, and in fact it cannot explain itself, then it is explained by something outside of it—God. However, what data can explain God? Or the age-old riddle, ‘Who created God?’ is very dangerous because it leads to an infinite regress. The only apparent escape is to assume God as a necessary and personal being (Davies, 2012).

Nevertheless, Aristotle described a God who was very distant from humanity, an Unmoved Mover, incapable of inspiring spiritual enlightenment as expected by mysticism. It is acknowledged that mysticism originally arose when humans did not believe in the separation between the two worlds. However, we must also accept that, to a certain extent, all religions are anthropocentric (Amstrong, 2012) because, historically, the universe is anthropocentric, with every particle pointing towards living beings (humans) (Black, 2017). Therefore, it is highly likely that our description of God cannot be separated from our human nature. It is not surprising that we experience differences in views among the many perspectives on God, because basically all religions originate from anthropomorphism to a certain extent (Amstrong, 2012). Thus, belief in an absolute adikrodati (God) tends to be based on human consciousness. In this case, it is an acknowledgement of one's weaknesses and limitations. Rather than being rational, this principle is built on a cosmic consciousness that is ethical in nature.

It is likely that many scientists harbour deep suspicions about mysticism. It is not surprising that mysticism differs greatly from rational thinking, which forms the basis of the scientific method. Even most philosophers argue that such ideas

are incoherent and meaningless. Of course, humans cannot understand such truths. Furthermore, mysticism is sometimes associated with occultism, the paranormal, and other fringe beliefs (Davies, 2012). Because mysticism centres on the highest questions of science and logic, it cannot explain anything to us. However, this line of thinking does not mean that the idea of existence necessarily becomes self-contradictory.

Mark Both's holistic approach examines this issue. Assessing God as if He were human is indeed problematic, but early humans had the idea that 'God's mind' might not be any better than that of an old man with white hair sitting on a cloud. This is the same mistake made by primitive tribes. Even if we acknowledge the possibility of God's existence, why must He be like us? Why must His thoughts be the same as ours? (Black, 2017). Does He get angry and disappointed like us? This will be discussed in the next sub-chapter.

### **C. The Concept of God in Eastern Philosophy**

Unlike Western philosophy, Eastern philosophy tends to view God in a more immanent and holistic manner. In Hindu philosophy, the concept of Brahman is understood as an absolute reality that encompasses everything. Brahman is not only transcendent, but also immanent in human beings (Atman).

In Buddhism, the concept of God is not personified. The main focus lies on the highest reality in the form of Nirvana, which is liberation from suffering and the cycle of rebirth. Meanwhile, Taoist philosophy views Tao as a cosmic principle that governs the harmony of the universe.

Eastern philosophy generally emphasises direct experience, meditation, and inner awareness as the path to understanding the highest reality, including God. Al-Kindi's concept of divinity is based on metaphysics. His metaphysics focuses on the nature of God, evidence, and the attributes of God (Habibh, 2020).

In the eastern hemisphere, there is a greater emphasis on intuition, inner feelings, spirituality, and mysticism. They believe that God exists and is real, because it is God who gives them comfort and peace in their hearts. Based on this, easterners believe that if they have a good soul, they will achieve goodness and wisdom in life. In the East, it is believed that humans are part of nature, and that 'to be is more important than to do' (human presence is more important than actions), so they dislike conflict and confrontation (Kebung, 2011). Therefore, they believe that wisdom comes from God.

The Eastern way of thinking can be seen in how they view the world, how they view themselves and others, and how they depend on God. Their comprehensive thinking is that the world and our existence and fellow human beings are God's doing. Sometimes people try to be the same, but sometimes they fail. The Eastern philosophical perspective is more human and religious. Therefore, all goodness comes from God. The understanding of religion and the cosmos is



inherent and plays a full role in the way of life of Eastern people. Their approach is more emotional-spiritual than rational-theoretical. Thus, understandings such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, etc. have developed. For example, Indian philosophy is divided into two, namely Hindu philosophy and Buddhist philosophy, while Chinese philosophy is influenced by Taoism and Confucianism. Not to mention the many mixtures and encounters between one philosophy and another, for example, Buddhism, which has its roots in Hinduism, but has become more influential in China than in India. Eastern philosophy is a term used to describe philosophical thoughts originating from the East or Asia, such as Buddhist philosophy, Indian philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Islamic philosophy, etc.

The philosophical view of Easterners, based on observing the various sociocultural aspects and conditions of society embraced by people in the East, shapes the way they think and view the world and their lives, which becomes the Eastern view of cosmology. Easterners view the cosmos as something created by God and given to humans. The Eastern philosophical view of the cosmos is a world with something that is created and given by the power. The cosmos is always associated with something divine, because no human, angel or other creature governs the cosmos except God. Easterners believe that it is impossible for the universe, with all its harmony, to run itself without something driving it, such as the earth revolving around the sun on its axis. and it is truly impossible for any creature to control it except God. The cosmos is sacred and holy, so it is considered a form that controls humans, and humans must respect and worship it (Kebung, 2011).

Many people seek tranquillity in the East because they consider it to be a peaceful and calming place. Eastern philosophy focuses more on the surrounding reality, thinking more about the world and others.

#### **D. The Concept of God in Western Philosophy**

In Western philosophy, the concept of God developed alongside the development of human rationality. Plato viewed God as The Good, the source of ultimate goodness and truth. Aristotle introduced the concept of the Unmoved Mover, the first mover that is the cause of all motion in the universe. There is also a view that thoroughly and argumentatively defines God, ranging from a personal God described with human-like characteristics to a transcendent God (Siswadi, 2024).

According to Aristotle, God is the mover of the universe (Sumanto, n.d.). God as the mover is not a material being. God is non-material, always existing behind matter and moving it. Without God, matter would not exist and would not be able to move. Therefore, Aristotle refers to God as the First Mover. This does not mean that God moves the universe one by one, but rather that God is the immaterial form

as the highest goal, causing everything to move in its own way (Andini & Widayat 2023).

In the Middle Ages, thinking about God was greatly influenced by Christian theology, especially through figures such as Thomas Aquinas, who integrated Aristotelian philosophy with theological doctrine. Aquinas viewed God as *actus purus*, a perfect being that is independent of anything else.

Entering the modern era, philosophers such as René Descartes and Immanuel Kant examined God through rational and critical approaches. Kant, for example, viewed God as a postulate of practical reason necessary to support morality, not as an object of empirical knowledge.

At the end of the 16th century, the West had begun a process of technicalisation that shaped a society different from the new ideals of humanity. This influenced Western perceptions of the role and nature of God, which was related to natural theology as a critique of the Middle Ages (Sutendy, 2015).

From the subchapter above, we have seen the birth of the idea of God from the East. Of course, this idea has developed over time in accordance with its variations. Beliefs or polytheism gave birth to monotheistic religions everywhere, but these religions are still marginal, partly because they have failed to digest their own message (Harari, 2012). Here we see a gap between theological theory and historical reality. Humans should understand that comprehending the concept of God means understanding the limitations of the conception of God (Bernadien, 2004).

The idea of a personal God began to develop in Judaism, Christianity, and to a lesser extent in Islam. This created a tendency to believe that this idea was the best form of religion (Harari, 2012). During this period of industrialisation, especially during the upheaval of Western science in the 18th century, it was difficult for religious leaders to distinguish between religion and spirituality. Ultimately, religion was used as a stepping stone for the interests and dark desires of religious leaders. For religions that flourished in the Middle Ages (Christianity and Islam), spirituality was a dangerous threat, as was science (Harari, 2012).

Philosophy in the Age of Enlightenment developed into two major branches, namely rationalism and empiricism. However, both, through their scientific approaches, attempted to find new conceptions of what is referred to as supernatural power or God, which is easier to understand than that of religion (Sutendy, 2015). This is because religion is essentially pragmatic in nature; the idea of God does not always have to be logical and scientific, even if you do not understand it, as long as you accept it (Amstrong, 2012). Several concepts of God in Western philosophy are as follows:

First, Classical Theism views God as the supreme reality (Supreme Being) who is eternal, unchanging, omnipotent, omniscient, and the first cause of all existence. The roots of this thinking originate from Greek philosophy, which was



developed systematically in medieval scholastic philosophy. Plato put forward the concept of Demiurgos as the rational and benevolent creator of the cosmos. Aristotle then formulated God as the Unmoved Mover, the first cause that moves everything without being moved. This concept was synthesised by Thomas Aquinas through a rational-theological approach known as the five ways.

Second, Deism views God as the creator of the universe who established the laws of nature but is no longer directly involved in worldly life. This concept developed rapidly during the Enlightenment as a critique of church authority and dogmatic theology. God in deism is rational and impersonal, and can be recognised through human reason without revelation.

Third, Pantheism, identifying God with the universe. There is no separation between the creator and creation; God is the Single Substance that manifests itself in all reality. Baruch Spinoza is a leading figure in modern pantheism with his idea of Deussive Natura (God or Nature). Panentheism, which states that nature is within God, but God transcends nature. This view rejects the absolute separation between God and the world while avoiding equating God with nature. Hagel views God as an absolute spirit that manifests itself through history and human consciousness.

Fourth, process theology views God as a dynamic reality that develops alongside the cosmic process. God is not static and absolute as in classical theism, but relates persuasively with the world. This concept was developed by Alfred North Whitehead and continued by Charles Hartshorne.

Fifth, religious existentialism emphasises the subjective and personal relationship between humans and God. God is not proven through metaphysical arguments, but is experienced through faith and existential decisions. Soren Kierkegaard emphasised the concept of the leap of faith as the core of humanity's relationship with God.

Sixth, Atheism and criticism of the concept of God. The philosophy of God also gave rise to criticism of the traditional concept of God. Feuerbach viewed God as a projection of ideal human characteristics, Marx saw religion as a form of social alienation, and Nietzsche declared 'The Death of God' as the collapse of metaphysics and absolute morality.

Seventh, Agnosticism, the existence of God cannot be known with certainty by human reason. Kant limited the ability of reason to know God and placed Him in the realm of the miraculous.

The integration of Western and Eastern philosophical concepts of God can be achieved through a dialogical and comparative approach. Western philosophy, with its strength in rational analysis, can complement Eastern philosophy, which emphasises spiritual experience. Conversely, the spiritual depth of Eastern philosophy can balance the tendency of Western philosophy to be overly abstract and conceptual. Both agree that God is the highest reality that is the source of

existence and meaning in life. Thus, this integration not only enriches the study of the philosophy of God, but also contributes to the development of a more inclusive religious and humanistic thinking.

### E. Conclusion

Referring to the main discussion of this study, it can be concluded that the discourse on the concept of God in Western and Eastern philosophical perspectives has fundamental differences, namely in terms of approach and emphasis. However, both still have significant points of similarity. The integration of these two traditions allows for a more comprehensive understanding of God, namely by combining rationality and spirituality.

This study contributes to the affirmation that there is potential for dialogue on the concept of God in Western and Eastern philosophical epistemology. The limitations of this research are still theoretical in nature, and further studies are needed to relate it to the practical construction of religiosity in the social sphere.

### References

- Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God: The 4.000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Terj. Zaimul Am, Sejarah Tuhan: Kisah 4.000 Tahun Pencarian Tuhan dalam Agama-Agama Manusia. Cet. V; Bandung: PT Mizan Pustaka, 2012.
- Andini, G.A. Widayat, A. 2023. Korelasi Tuhan dalam Pandangan Aristoteles Dengan Konsep Sataning Panembah. *Jurnal Dinamika Sosial Budaya* 25(2):94-102. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26623/jdsb.v25i3.6131>
- Aquinas, T. (2002). *Summa Theologica*. New York: Christian Classics.
- Aristoteles. (1998). *Metaphysics*. Translated by Hugh Tredennick. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Black, Jonathan. *The Secret History of The World*. Terj. Isma B. Soekato dan Adi.Toha, Sejarah Dunia Yang Disembunyikan. Cet. XI; Tangerang Selatan: Alvabet, 2017
- Bertens, K. (2006). *Sejarah Filsafat Barat*. Yogyakarta: Kanisius.
- Clayton, P. (2004). *Mind and Emergence*. Oxford University Press.
- Descartes, R. (2008). *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Habiba, S. 2020. Filsafat Ketuhanan Alkindi. *Dar,Elilmi. Jurnal Studi Keagamaan, Pendidikan, dan Humaniora* 7 (1). <https://doi.org/10.52166/dar%20el-ilm.v7i1.2025>
- Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Damaring Tyas Wulandari Palar, *Sapiens: Riwayat Singkat Umat Manusia*. Cet. XI; Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia, 2019.
- Hartshorne, C. (1948). *The Divine Relativity*. Yale University Press.

- Hegel, G.W.F. (1977). *Henomenology of Spirit* (A. V. Miller, Trans). Oxford University Press.
- Herbert of Cherbury, E. (1991). *De Veritate*. University of Brisol Press.
- Hume, D. (2007). *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Oxford University Press.
- Kant, I. (2002). *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1987). *Either/or* (H.V. hong & E.H. Hong Trans. Princeton university Press.
- Locke, J. (2005). *The Reasonableness of Cghristianity*. Dover Publications.
- Mahfud. 2015. Tuhan Dalam Kepercayaan Manusia Modern (Mengungkap Relasi Primordial Antara Tuhan dan Manusia). *Cendekia: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 1 (2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37348/cendekia.v1i2.8>
- Nadler, S. (2006). *Spinoza's Ethics: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nasr, S. H. (1993). *Knowledge and the Sacred*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (2006). *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (A. Del Caro, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of The Idols and The Anti-Christ*. Terj. Hartono Hadikusumo, *Senjakala Berhala dan Anti-Krist*. Yogyakarta: Narasi-Pustaka Promethea, 2017.
- Plato. (2007). *The Republic*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Plato. (). *Timaeus* (D.J. Zeyl, Trans). Hackett Publising.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (2009). *Indian Philosophy*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Safawi, Sayed G. "God in Greek and Islamic Philosophy." In *A Comparative Study on Islamic and Western Philosophy*. London : Salman Azadeh Publication, 2002.
- Siswadi, G.A. 2024. KOnsep Tuhan Dalam Tradisi Barat Serta Kritik Terhadap Pandangan Tentang Tuhan Personal dan Non Personal. *Jurnal Ilmu Agama dan Budaya Hindu: Tampung Penyang* 2(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33363/tampung-penyang.v22i1.1191>
- Spinoza, B. (1996). *Ethics* (E. Curley, Trans). Penguin Classics.
- Sutendy, Uu Adkur. 2015. "Dampak Penemuan-Penemuan Ilmu Pengetahuan Terhadap Konsep Ketuhanan Pada Zaman Pencerahan", *Jurnal Artefak* 2 (2) DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.25157/ja.v3i2.1102>
- Voltaire. (2002). *Philosophical Dictionary* (T. Besterman. Trans). Penguin Classics
- Watts, A. (1957). *The Way of Zen*. New York: Panth
- Whitehead, A.N. (1978) *Process and Reality*, Free Press.