

A Comparative Analysis of the Divine Names and Attributes in the Thought of Imām Khomeynī and Maimonides: An Ontological and Phenomenological Approach

Sayyid Masoud Omrani¹ , and Hassan Mohammadi² 

1. *Corresponding Author*, Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Farhangian University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran. Email: emrani@cfu.ac.ir
2. PhD in Theology and Islamic Studies, Field of Study: History and Civilization of Islamic Nations, Islamic Azad University, Mashhad, Branch Mashhad, Iran. Email: hasanmohammadi1967@gmail.com

Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article type: Research Article Article history: Received 05 May 2025 Received in revised form 09 June 2025 Accepted 09 July 2025 Available online 23 August 2025 Keywords: Imām Khomeinī, Ibn Maymūn (Maimonides), semantics, ontology, asmā wa-ṣifāt (divine names and attributes)	The discourse on the <i>asmā' wa-ṣifāt</i> (divine names and attributes) constitutes one of the central issues in Islamic theology (<i>kalām</i>), as the knowledge of these names and attributes strengthens faith and deepens human understanding of God and the relationship between humankind and the Divine. This article undertakes a comparative study of the views of two prominent thinkers: Mūsā b. Maymūn (Ibn Maymūn, i.e., Maimonides) in the Jewish tradition and Imām Khomeinī in the Islamic tradition, specifically on the question of the Divine essence and attributes. Employing a comparative-analytical methodology and focusing on the key works of these two thinkers—most notably Ibn Maymūn's <i>Dalālat al-hā'irīn</i> (Guide for the Perplexed) and Imām Khomeinī's philosophical-mystical writings such as his <i>Ta'liqā 'alā al-Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam</i>—this study addresses the central research question: What are the points of similarity and difference between Ibn Maymūn's and Imām Khomeinī's approaches to the Divine essence and attributes, and what doctrinal and methodological foundations underlie these differences? The findings of this study indicate that Ibn Maymūn, relying on negative theology and Aristotelian rationalism, reduces the attributes either to negations of imperfection or to divine actions. By contrast, Imām Khomeinī, synthesizing <i>ḥikmat-i muta'āliya</i> (Transcendent Philosophy) with Shī'ī mysticism, interprets the attributes as manifestations of the Divine perfections across the gradations of being. Beyond delineating similarities and divergences, this article proposes a model for comparative research in the philosophy of religion across different intellectual traditions.
Cite this article: Omrani, S. M., & Mohammadi, H. (2025). A Comparative Analysis of the Divine Names and Attributes in the Thought of Imām Khomeynī and Maimonides: An Ontological and Phenomenological Approach. <i>Theology Journal</i>, 12(1), 119-140. https://doi.org/10.22034/pke.2025.20775.1969	

Introduction

The discourse on divine names and attributes (*al-asmā' wa al-ṣifāt*) constitutes a foundational pillar of belief in the Abrahamic traditions, profoundly shaping the understanding of the human-divine relationship. This paper undertakes a comparative study of the doctrines of divine attributes through an ontological and phenomenological lens, focusing on the thought of two eminent figures: **Moses Maimonides** (Mūsā b. Maymūn, d. 1204 CE/601 AH), a towering Jewish philosopher and author of *The Guide for the Perplexed* (*Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*), and **Imam Khomeini** (d. 1989 CE/1409 AH), a prominent Shi'i jurist, mystic, and philosopher deeply influenced by the Transcendent Theosophy (*al-ḥikmah al-muta'aliyah*) of Mullā Ṣadrā and the theoretical mysticism (*irfān nazārī*) of Ibn 'Arabī. The central research question is: What are the fundamental convergences and divergences in their respective explications of the Divine Essence and its attributes, and what are the distinct intellectual and methodological origins that underpin their theological systems? Addressing this question not only holds theological significance but also provides a deeper understanding of comparative theology and opens new avenues for interfaith dialogue.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical methodology. Its primary sources are the works of Maimonides, particularly *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, and the philosophical and mystical writings and lectures of Imam Khomeini. Data collated from these primary texts and relevant secondary scholarship are subjected to a rigorous comparative analysis. The focus is on elucidating the ontological, semantic, and hermeneutic foundations of each thinker's system. This approach aims to systematically reveal their respective intellectual frameworks and to present a documented and structured comparison of their views on divine names and attributes.

Findings

The research reveals that while Maimonides and Imam Khomeini converge on the principles of divine unity (*tawḥīd*) and transcendence (*tanzīh*), they adopt two starkly contrasting paradigms for reconciling the Divine Essence with the multiplicity of its attributes.

The Apophatic (*Salbī*) Theology of Maimonides: Heavily influenced by Aristotelian philosophy and Islamic theology (notably Avicenna and the Mu'tazila), Maimonides posits an absolute identity between God's Essence and His existence. To safeguard pure monotheism, he **rejects all affirmative essential attributes** (*ṣifāt thubūtiyya*), arguing they would imply multiplicity in the Divine Essence and lead to anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*). He therefore champions a **negative theology** (*via negativa*), asserting that God can

only be described by negating imperfections (e.g., “God is not ignorant”). Semantically, he argues that terms like “merciful” are applied to God and creatures through **homonymy** (*ishtirāk lafẓī*), with no shared meaning. Knowledge of God’s unknowable essence (*kunh al-dhāt*) is impossible; He can only be known through His **actions** (*af‘āl*). Thus, attributes like “Creator” describe divine acts, not intrinsic perfections. His key doctrines include the radical rejection of any composition in the Godhead, creation *ex nihilo*, and the ineffable Greatest Name.

The Theophanic (*Ījābī*) Ontology of Imam Khomeini: Operating within the Islamic philosophical-mystical tradition, Khomeini advances a positive theology (*via positiva*). Grounded in the Sadrian principle that reality is Being (*wujūd*), he holds that the Divine Essence is Absolute Being and the font of all perfections. Consequently, **affirmative attributes** like knowledge and power are identical to the essence (*‘ayn al-dhāt*). He explains the attributes as hierarchical modes of the essence’s **self-disclosure** (*tajallī*): the Essential Theophany (*al-tajallī al-dhātī*) in the state of pure Oneness (*maqām al-aḥadiyyah*), the Theophany of Names (*al-tajallī al-asmā’ī*) in the state of Unity (*maqām al-wāḥidiyyah*), and the Theophany of Acts (*al-tajallī al-af‘ālī*) in the Sacred Effusion (*al-fayḍ al-muqaddas*) that constitutes creation. Semantically, he affirms an **analogical or univocal relationship** (*ishtirāk ma‘nawī*) between divine and creaturely attributes. While the Essence remains unknowable, a cognitive and experiential knowledge of God is attainable through His names, acts, and supremely through the **Perfect Man** (*al-insān al-kāmil*), who is the ultimate locus of the Greatest Name (*al-ism al-a‘ẓam*). His epistemology synthesizes reason (*‘aql*), mystical intuition (*shuhūd ‘irfānī*), and revelation (*naql*).

A comparative analysis highlights fundamental divergences alongside shared principles (divine unity, simplicity, transcendence, and the need for allegorical interpretation, *ta’wīl*). Maimonides’ apophaticism leads him to reject affirmative attributes, which he sees as a threat to unity, while Khomeini’s theophanic ontology, based on the principle of the “Simplicity of Reality” (*basāṭat al-ḥaqīqah*), explains the multiplicity of attributes as manifestations within the absolute unity of the essence. Their intellectual lineages—Aristotelian rationalism versus Sadrian theosophy—result in contrasting views on key issues such as divine knowledge (homonymous vs. analogical/presential) and creation (*ex nihilo* vs. emanation, *fayḍ*).

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that despite profound methodological and philosophical differences, both Maimonides and Imam Khomeini share the core theological imperative of safeguarding divine unity and transcendence. To preserve God's absolute oneness, Maimonides embraces an apophatic theology, effectively bracketing affirmative attributes and confining the human-divine relationship primarily to the ethical and legal spheres. In contrast, Imam Khomeini, by integrating philosophy, mysticism, and jurisprudence, constructs a theophanic framework that affirms a path to cognitive and experiential knowledge of God through His names and attributes. This vision accounts for multiplicity within unity and encompasses the intellectual, spiritual, and social dimensions of faith. This comparative analysis provides a valuable model for interfaith dialogue and the philosophy of religion, illustrating how two distinct traditions can address the shared problem of divine ineffability, arriving at consonant conclusions through divergent yet intellectually rigorous paths.

Author Contributions: First author: 90%. Second author: 10%.

Data Availability Statement: Not Applicable.

Acknowledgements: Not required.

Ethical Considerations: The authors avoided data fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, and misconduct.

Funding: This research was not financially supported.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process: 5% of the work involved the use of artificial intelligence.