

Maimonides was a Jewish philosopher of the 12th Century. He emphasised the use of negative language to describe God. His book, "The Guide for the Perplexed" pointed out that humans can know that God exists but not know anything about God. God does not experience any emotion. This idea is supported in the Bible with the quote, "I am who I am". God is beyond description.



THE VIA NEGATIVA

This suggests that people can only talk about God in negative terms. God is beyond our experience and so we cannot say what he is. However, we can say what God IS NOT.

The title "Via Negativa" literally means negative way because God can only be described in terms of what he is not. This philosophy of this idea comes from Plotinus (2nd Century). He follows on from the thinking of Plato where the highest Form was the Form of the Good. Plotinus believes that the Form of the Good is linked with God.

Via Negativa and Language

Language cannot describe God. God is beyond human understanding and is ineffable. We can say things about God but our language does not tell us anything because our knowledge of something is from a human perspective and so is limited.



Pseudo – Dionysius suggested that if we said that God is good then we really have to say that God is NOT good as we do not understand what it means to say that God is good. He said that God is "Beyond assertion" and "beyond denial" meaning that we cannot truly say what God is and nor can we truly say what God is not.

Brian Davies quoting Pseudo Dionysius says,

"God is beyond assertion since he is the "perfect and unique case of all things." He is beyond denial by virtue of how pre-eminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation."

Within Christianity, the view of the Via Negativa has been influential. The language has been used by mystics who have religious experiences.

A problem

If we are not sure what we are talking about, can we really be sure that there is something to be talked about? If God is a lot of not's, could it be possible that he is nothing at all?

