

How do we speak of God? Part 1 - Un/Naming - July 19, 2009

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Scripture Text: Exodus 3:1-6, 13-15

God, Deus, Yahweh, Allah
Mother, Father, Peacemaker, Warrior
Creator, Judge, Redeemer, Lover.

How do we respond if we are asked to “name the Divine?” Do we even dare?

Oh that we were given the opportunity to ask God's preferred identifier. That we, like Moses, could inquire “What is your name, so that I might answer others?”

But would that even satisfy us? Could we be content? For we know that try as we might, the Holy One surpasses every name we can possibly ascribe.

There's no coincidence that God's response to Moses' question isn't so much a name as it is a statement. I am who I am. I am.

Not “this is who I am.” But simply “I am.”

Sure that's easy enough for God to say! Still our human words nevertheless come up short whenever we attempt to speak of the one who has been, is, and always will be.

So why even bother? Why even try to speak of God, to name the unnameable?

Because we must. Because as transcendent, beyond reason, understanding, and description, that the Divine might be, God is also immanent, here among us, through us, within us. As we open ourselves to the transformative power of God, we cannot *not* speak.

And so we do.

We speak of the Holy, Higher Power, bound as we are by the limits of our language, our history, our imagination. We speak and hear in church buildings and worship services, around shared tables and in private prayers, in shopping malls, automobiles, books and televisions, and the vast digital expanses of the internet.

Every day, everywhere, every way, we speak of, and name, God.

Of course, we're not the first people who have sought to name the Holy. I imagine that as long as we humans have been able to contemplate the mysteries of life we've been trying to figure out just who or what we should address our ponderings, petitions, and prayers to.

And here we are, all these millenia later, still coming up short. Whatever names and words we clever people create, God continues to surpass them.

Maybe that's not such a bad thing, with regards to how we relate to the Divine. Mystic thinker Meister Eckhart once put it this way: “the unnameable is omni-nameable.”

Or we might put it in mathematical terms – Infinity is understood to be greater than the sum of any set of given numbers, yet it is the sum of any endless set of numbers.

Still though, there are some limits on our naming of God – while we can never envision a name that can be truly encompassing, we can recognize when some names are not accurate or even conflict with the nature of the Divine.

Always, despite our efforts, the complex, omninameable nature of God always seems to wriggle out of our grasp.

Why couldn't we just agree to settle on a name for God? Joe, Sally, Sam, or something like that?

As silly as this may seem, we have tried. OK, maybe *we* haven't, but it has been tried before.

The holy name, Yahweh, so holy that most Jews, ancient or modern, would never speak it aloud. Commonly believed to have been derived from God's statement – I am who I am, it is used in much of the Old Testament.

It's a bit obscured in our modern English translations, but it's there if you look for it. Most of the time it is printed as the word LORD in all upper-case letters.

And so the divine was named by the ancient Israelites, as were the gods of many other religions of the ancient times.

However, strong senses of monotheism, mystery, and reverence prevented speaking of the One God in the same manner as the gods of others. Rather than speak the divine name, other ways of speaking of and naming God were adopted and created: phrases like Most High, the Almighty, and others were used to describe God. When reading the biblical text aloud, the word *adonai* would be used. It is from *adonai* we derive the translation LORD used nowadays.

Our bibles and our histories are filled with other creative ways of speaking of God. Ways we sometimes find inspiring, and sometimes foreign or even frightening.

Fast forward a few thousand years and we find that Christians have imagined our own ways of speaking and naming the Transcendent One.

Our understanding of the trinity reflects the multi-faceted omninameability of God.

Yet the traditional naming of the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” leaves many of those facets unnamed or even ignored. The more recent version: “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer” while preferable with regards to gender inclusivity, leaves behind the language of intimate, familial, connection.

This realm of gender-specific language is one area where many people are currently recognizing how God supersedes our language and names.

Naming the Divine as Father and Lord certainly have a strong history in recent popular spirituality, as well as deep biblical roots. Using male pronouns for God has been the de-facto standard in the English language, with the claim that historically “he” and “his” could also be used when the gender of a subject was unknown.

Yet our understanding and interpretation of language has changed. We've become much more aware and sensitive of gender and sexuality, and since so many of our names and ways of speaking of God are based in male-ness, we have limited our understanding and envisioning of the Holy.

Therefore we must constantly engage not only in the process of naming, but also un-naming. Recognizing that our names and ways of speaking of God can sometimes become idols. Whenever we reduce God to an intellectual object, whenever we attempt to clearly, once-and-for-all, define or name God, we participate in a kind of conceptual idolatry.

I'm not trying to say that naming God in ways that imply male gender are to be eliminated or shunned, but rather that we cannot fall into the temptation of ascribing male gender to God. The same holds true for female imagery for God.

While I wholeheartedly support using names and language for God that reflect a diversity of gender, we cannot make idols of our understandings. Yes, both female and male language may be used to describe God, but neither can fully or even adequately name a God that is both without and beyond gender.

So what do we do about such longstanding patterns of naming the divine as Father and Lord, and relying on male pronouns to refer to God?

We must engage in a spiritual practice of naming and un-naming, of faith-filled mindfulness as we speak of God.

Often we can find balance in using female language, for example naming God as Mother, or reclaiming Sophia as the feminine wisdom of the Spirit.

But then what do we do with names such as Lord, which reflect not only male-ness, but also bring to mind patriarchal systems of power? Gail Ramshaw, one of many scholars seeking to discover more inclusive language to speak of God, suggests “the Living One” or “the Living God” as a suitable, if somewhat radical, option. It reflects the self-reference of God – I am who I am – that refers to God's very being. It recognizes the ongoing action of God in our world and in our lives. Since Lord is often also used to refer to Jesus Christ, the Living One is also appropriate here as it names God's presence in the life and resurrection of the Messiah.

Many other possibilities exist for claiming God that is beyond the limits of our human capacity to name.

Coming up with creative, meaningful names is sometimes challenging, especially when we know that any name we devise is also immediately negated. Yet it is often even more difficult to grapple with the related linguistic issue of pronoun use. Of pushing back against a God who is always “he.”

As our language and understandings continue to evolve, we have become aware of how the use of exclusively male pronouns to speak of God is inadequate.

While there are many languages in which grammatical gender, whether a word itself is masculine or feminine, does not immediately connote the physical gender of an object or titled person, English has long struggled with this.

It is only recently that words like doctor, priest, and host have come to mean either women or men, and only recently we've become more sensitive to changing our ways of speaking from chairman, stewardess, mailman, to chairperson, flight attendant, and mail carrier.

The same is true of our use of masculine pronouns to refer to non-male subjects. In our contemporary way of speaking, it is no longer seen as acceptable to refer to a generic person of unknown gender as "he." So if we insist on relying on "he" "him" and "his" as we speak of and name God, we are either being linguistically inaccurate, or worse we are assuming God is male.

Balancing "he's" with "she's" is sometimes a helpful option, but it can quickly become confusing or distracting. Many times over there have been attempts at introducing a single-person, un-gendered pronoun into the English language, but none have succeeded, so it seems the best course of action may be to avoid pronoun use altogether when speaking of God.

While not as easy as using different names, eliminating pronouns in our language and liturgy is not all that difficult. It just requires us to think a little more before we speak. Never a bad thing in my opinion.

Hymns and scriptures are more problematic, though often replacing male pronouns with forms of the word God is a possibility.

Speaking of and naming God, the Living One, the Great I AM, is not an easy task for the faint of heart. And maybe that's the way it should be.

Thankfully, the Holy One to which we speak does not require us to get the words right before listening to us. Our naming and un-naming are as much for ourselves and others as for God. For deepening our own spirituality and understanding, and exposing the divine to new or un-believers in ways that are fresh and inviting.

The spiritual discipline of naming and un-naming is one that we engage in both in private devotion and in the company and support of community.

As we move into our time of response today, in addition to our usual invitation to whatever is resonating within you, speaking the thoughts this message has stirred up in your mind, I also invite you to consider how it is you go about this process of naming and un-naming. How do you find it helpful or hurtful? What names for God would you share, and where do you challenge us to un-name?