Henri IV, the Huguenot King of Navarre, finally succeeded in taking the throne of France in 1590 after he renounced his Calvinist roots. Apt but unlikely legend has it that he said, at the time, that Paris vaut bien une messe (“Paris is well worth a mass.”) Despite his Calvinist upbringing and his subsequent conversion to Catholicism, Henri IV continued in bad habits: he kept mistresses and even made two of his illegitimate sons bishops, one at the age of six and the other at the age of four, and this despite the reforms introduced after the Council of Trent. Although many of the local clergy of Gallican sympathies disliked Henri IV, the French Jesuits did their best to deal with the reality of the only king they had, once he was established in Paris.1

The Jesuit Pierre Coton even served as the king’s confessor. One of the prevailing vices of Henri IV was a habit of blasphemy. Je renie Dieu, he would cry out in a moment of exasperation: “I renounce God.” In his typically Béarnais pronunciation, that exclamation by Henri IV would sound more like Jarnidieu. Hoping to help his penitent to renounce the evil habit of renouncing God on a regular basis, Père Coton suggested to Henri IV that he substitute for that blasphemy Je renie Coton, “I renounce Coton.” In the Béarnais dialect that came out as Jarnicoton, and the non-blasphemous curse word entered into the French language. On the internet you can find information about a Connemara pony nearly forty years ago named Jarnicoton, as well advertisements for a pricey non-sulfite blend of Cabernet and Merlot from
the south of France called Jarnicot. The Jesuits popularized many other non-blasphemous curse words in French of that era. *Sacre Dieu!* (“Holy God!”) became *Sacrebleu!* (“Holy Blue!”), a favorite exclamation of Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot. I believe this French spoken curiosity is the origin of what we call today blue language.²

The name of God, and the very fact that human beings are or are not allowed to call God by name, has a long history in the world’s traditions of faith. This evening, I will concentrate on the privilege and the danger—the quandary, perhaps—that confronts Jews, Christians and Muslims in naming God.

I. Naming or Not Naming God in the Jewish Tradition

In the Hebrew Bible two principal names are given to God, one rather generic and the other quite unique. The generic name for God, 'Elohim, is plural in form but singular in meaning when it refers to the God of Israel. But other speakers of Semitic languages in the ancient Near East also used words with the same basic root, 'el or 'il, to denote a force or forces external and superior to human beings, gods or even something approaching God with a capital G.³ In the first chapter of Genesis 'Elohim dominates the action of creation: “When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen 1:1-3).⁴

A shorter version of the name 'Elohim, or perhaps a vocative form of that name, 'El, appears in what is called grammatically “construct”: God of X, Y or Z or perhaps ‘O God of X, Y or Z.’ There are several such numinous names ascribed to God and by which God is invoked in the Hebrew Bible, not all of them entirely obvious in their significance. Many of them seem to
be archaisms, especially those found in the Book of Job and in the Psalms.\textsuperscript{5} The fact that Biblical Hebrew uses a plural-sounding word to designate the utterly singular God of Israel more than two thousand times should not surprise us. When '\textit{Elohim}' is used with a singular verb, it quite obviously means ‘God’ with a capital G, and when it is used with a plural form of the verb, it sometimes means ‘gods.’ Psalm 82 plays on this ambiguity, imagining a divine triumph in judicial imagery picturing a single God demoting and finally condemning lesser gods to death: “\textbf{God ['Elohim] stands in the divine assembly; among the divine beings ['elohim] He pronounces judgment” (Ps 82: 1). It should also be noted that the word, 'elohim, apparently plural in form, resembles the plural form of abstract words like hayyim, meaning life, and may simply represent an abstraction, “the Divinity.” In any case, the earliest Israelite perception of God may be better characterized as henotheistic: exclusive worship of one God (‘our God’, ‘the God of Israel’) without denying the existence, power and even threat of other gods (‘the gods of the nations’).

Such henotheism may have prevailed in Israel at least until the era of Second Isaiah (the late sixth century BCE), when that prophet, famous for his world-wide vision, speaks with God’s voice to declare that “I am the LORD, and there is none else; besides Me, there is no god” (Is 45:5).\textsuperscript{6} The God of Israel was sometimes addressed with respect as a king might be, or the owner of a slave, or the husband of a wife: 'adoni: ‘my lord.’ That term of address was rendered in the plural when it referred to God, a plural that corresponded with the plural form of 'Elohim. Thus God could be addressed as 'Adonai (“my Lord”), even apart from the more usual substitution of this royal divine name in speech for the Tetragrammaton (YHWH), to be discussed below.

The text of the Book of Genesis and the rest of the Torah are ascribed by scholars to the human authorship of blended literary sources, referred to as the Yahwist (J), the Elohist (E), the
Deuteronomist (D) and the Priestly source (P). All four sources use the more generic name for God, 'Elohim, sometimes in combination with the unique name ascribed to God in the account of the experience Moses had at the burning bush. That unique name of God belongs to no category of common or proper nouns and is said to be the third person singular form of the name God gave himself (or did not give himself, some would say) when God was speaking to Moses. It is a combination of two identical first-person singular verbs linked by a pronoun: 'Ehyeh-'Asher-'Ehyeh. Most English translations of the Bible opt for translating that Hebrew name as something like “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex 3:14), often in small capital letters, as does the New Revised Standard Version (1989). The Jewish Publication Society translation (1999) simply transliterates the Hebrew,\(^7\) possibly as a way to avoid controversy as to how it should (or should not) be translated. The name so expressed can be construed as a revelation of the divine name or as a refusal to disclose the divine name, not unlike the refusal to reveal a name by the One who wrestled with Jacob by night: “Jacob asked, ‘Pray tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘You must not ask my name!’” (Gen 32:30).

The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, came into existence at various times between the third century BCE and the early second century CE.\(^8\) In the Septuagint, ‘Ehyeh-‘Asher-‘Ehyeh is rendered in Greek as Ego eimi ho-on. Translating this Greek can prove as problematic as translating the Hebrew. Let me start with “I AM THE ONE WHO IS,” most neutrally, or “I AM THE EXISTENT ONE.”\(^9\) As such this translation of the Hebrew original preserves the personal character of God, a God very different from the Greek philosophical term to on, which is neuter: “Being,” in a general or overarching and non-personal sense.\(^10\) But it must be said immediately that the Greek translation of the Septuagint not only suggests a metaphysical definition of God, but also, in using a masculine present participle made into a substantive,
suggests subliminally that “THE ONE WHO IS” or “THE EXISTENT ONE” is to be understood as “HE WHO IS.” The choice of a masculine present participle serving as a substantive may be less significant than the fact that this Greek translation chooses a personal pronoun, in this case the “unmarked” or generic personal pronoun in the pairing of masculine and feminine possibilities, and by choosing this personal substantive participle it insists on the Personhood of God over a concept of God as a transcendent It.

The Hebrew original of what God said to Moses does not specify or even hint at any gender, since first-person singular verbs in Hebrew have no gender; the same thing is true of the first-person singular verb in the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate. For any human being to speak about God—even for the Scriptures to speak about God—is to stammer. For you to listen to me talking about the Scriptures talking about God may make you think I am not only stammering but even confused. I must also note, to further complicate this subject, that the pronoun between the two verbs of the divine name or the refusal to disclose a divine name need not be translated so personally; it could be rendered “I AM WHAT I AM.”

But do the verbs in that name so clearly designate a present-tense God? It is quite possible that ’Ehyeh-'Asher-'Ehyeh means “I AM WHO I WILL BE,” or “I WILL BE WHO I AM,” or “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.” Biblical Hebrew has no future tense, dividing all verbs into the continuous (imperfect) and the completed (perfect) modes. Note that within the context of the same chapter of Exodus, just before the revelation of the divine name, future actions planned by God are mentioned: “I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt . . . I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain” (Ex 3:10, 12).
The great medieval Torah commentator known as Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak, 1040-1104 CE) certainly interprets the divine name disclosed to Moses in the burning bush as future-oriented. According to Rashi, ’Ehyeh-’Asher-’Ehyeh “means that God ‘‘will be’ with them [the Israelites] in this predicament [Egyptian bondage] ‘what I will be’ with them in their [future] subjugation by other kingdoms.”14 Rashi goes on to say that the next words that follow in Exodus 3:14, “’Ehyeh sent me to you,” indicate that God is only informing the Israelites about divine accompaniment in their present Exodus distress, without telling them that there will be many more such situations of distress in their future from which they will have to seek rescue from God. Those future situations necessitating divine rescue are, according to Rashi, implied in the second and third words of the divine name (’Asher-’Ehyeh: “WHO I WILL BE”). Thus Rashi writes that “[Moses] said before [God]: “O Lord of the universe! Why should I mention to them another trouble? They have enough [problems] with this one.”15 Rashi here follows the lead of the tractate Berakoth in the Babylonian Talmud, a work probably completed no later than the sixth century CE: “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Go and say to Israel: I was with you in this servitude, and I shall be with you in the servitude of the [other] kingdoms. [Moses] said to [God]: Lord of the Universe, sufficient is the evil in the time thereof! Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Go and tell them: I AM has sent me unto you.”16

Much more could be said about the divine Self-naming in the Book of Exodus, or the understanding of that Self-naming in later Jewish writings.17 Moses, of course, had to transform the first-person singular name of ’Ehyeh into the third person singular (“HE IS/HE WILL BE’’), to make clear to the people that he was not speaking in his own voice. The spelling of that third-person verbal name in Hebrew is called the Tetragrammaton, usually symbolized by the four consonants YHWH, or simply by writing twice the consonant yod, the first of the four
consonants in the Tetragrammaton. Although the people of Israel pronounced the Tetragrammaton before the Babylonian Exile, in the Second Temple period (approximately 515 BCE to 70 CE) it became customary to substitute for the Tetragrammaton another divine name mentioned earlier, 'Adonai (“my Lord”), with the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton reserved to Aaron and his descendants, the High Priests, alone commissioned to bless the people with the divine name (Num 6:22-27). When the Masoretic scribes in the late first millennium CE supplied vowels above and below the consonants of the Hebrew Bible to aid in the pronunciation of the consonantal Hebrew text of the Bible, they put above and below the consonants of the Tetragrammaton the somewhat adapted vowels of the word 'Adonai. Christian translators of the Hebrew Bible into German and some other languages after the Reformation mistakenly read the Tetragrammaton with the vowels of 'Adonai in such a way as to create the ersatz word ‘Jehovah.’ Jehovah Witnesses continue this usage down to modern times. Most translations of the Hebrew Bible into English simply print “LORD” (the ordinary substitution for the Tetragrammaton) in small capital letters every time that unique divine name occurs.18

In parts of the Torah where the sources are blended, the name of God is, as it were, hyphenated: the Tetragrammaton precedes the name 'Elohim, the combination translated as “the LORD God.” Thus, in the second account of creation in Genesis, considered the work of the Yahwist, we are told that “When the LORD God made earth and heaven . . . the LORD God formed ha-’adam [the human being] from ha-’adamah [the dust of the earth]” (Gen 2: 4b, 7).19

*Genesis Rabbah*, a commentary on Genesis written by rabbis between the second and fifth centuries CE, compares the combination of the two divine names, “the LORD” and “God,” in the Yahwist’s story of creation to the combination of hot water and cold water in one glass by a king; each type of water by itself would break the glass, but combined they temper each other.
God the King in this parable explains his creative process: “If I create the world on the basis of mercy alone, its sins will be great; on the basis of judgment alone, the world cannot exist. Hence I will create it on the basis of judgment and mercy, and may it then stand!’ Hence the expression, THE LORD God.” The Tetragrammaton, then, in this tradition of Jewish commentary in the early centuries of the Common Era, is the name of God’s mercy and Elohim is the name of God’s judgment. We shall return to this tradition in what follows.

II. Jesus and the Names of God

Over fifty years ago I first heard someone from Upstate New York exclaim, “Judas Priest!” The exclamation patently served as a way to avoid the exclamation “Jesus Christ!”, but I had never heard it before and presumed it must be some curious Upstate aberration. Christian avoidance of expressing exasperation with the name of Jesus points to what is new about the Christian tradition of faith that emerged from a Jewish matrix: its centering on Jesus as both Messiah and LORD. The Decalogue forbade the Israelites to “swear falsely [or take in vain] the name of the LORD your God” (Ex 20:7); Christians to the present day surround the name of Jesus, whose very name in Aramaic means “the LORD saves” (see Mt 1:21; Lk 1:31), with special reverence, such as a slight inclination of the head or even doffing of the biretta at the utterance of that name—for those who still wear birettas!

Until the Gospel was brought to Gentiles, there was no need for the preachers of the earliest Christian communities to insist on the theme of monotheism, something that could be presumed among Jews and Jewish Christians. Thus the first Jewish Christian evangelists, preaching to their fellow Jews, focused their preaching on two themes: the Messiahship of Jesus and his LORDship. To proclaim the Messiahship of Jesus could be deemed a political act,
encouraging allegiance to Jesus as a new king of Israel, even if Jesus eschewed such political aims, whatever may have been the ambitions of his disciples. To proclaim the Lordship of Jesus—his identity with the One who spoke to Moses in the burning bush—proved to be something utterly new in a Jewish setting: insisting on the meeting of the divine and the human in Jesus of Nazareth in a way that would strike most Jews as blasphemous. This proclamation of Jesus as Lord was something very new for Jews, even scandalous, as the Gospels make evident.

The Gentiles to whom Paul and other evangelists of the late first century CE brought the Good News about Jesus were peoples who revered “many gods and many lords” (1 Cor 8:5) in their traditional religious setting, ranging from Zeus (Jupiter) on the most exalted level to Divus Augustus, the divinized Roman emperor, on the lower end of the scale. For such non-Jewish hearers of the Gospel, the first Jewish and Gentile Christian missionaries had to insist not only on the Lordship and Messiahship of Jesus but also on the oneness of God. Christian preaching ever since has had to steer a difficult course, as it were, through choppy theological waters between the rock of God’s oneness and the shoals of the identity of Jesus as “true God and true man.” What eventually developed as the doctrine of the Trinity in the early Church took its origins from the New Testament, the first crystallization of how Jewish Christians understood and proclaimed Jesus in the second half of the first century CE. The Jews and eventually Gentiles who embraced the Way of Jesus had to find new language to express their faith in one God only, as well as their faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. How did they manage to do that? In some sense, the naming of God was all-important in this process.

Jews at the time of Jesus, the late Second Temple era, had for some time avoided pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton, the unique name of God in the Jewish tradition. One technique for such avoidance simply referred to the Tetragrammaton as ha-Shem, “the Name.”
Many references to “the name” (to onoma) of God in the New Testament would be better understood, in my opinion, if we recognized in those words in Greek a rendering of the Hebrew ha-Shem (“the Name”), the surrogate for the Tetragrammaton. Thus, for instance, in the prayer of Jesus quoted in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the phrase “the Name” occurs at the very beginning: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name” in Matthew (Mt 6:9) and “Father, hallowed be your name” in Luke (Lk 11:2).23 What does it mean to ‘hallow’ the divine Name? I would suggest that this first sentence in the Lord’s Prayer, both in Matthew and Luke, is really an interjection, urging the first Christians, Jewish and especially Gentile, to keep in mind the contemporary Jewish tradition of the utmost reverential avoidance of pronouncing God’s unique Name (ha-Shem). Paradoxically that avoidance of pronouncing the divine Name is combined with addressing the One whose name is so reverentially avoided as ‘Father,’ in Aramaic, Abba.

In his mortal lifetime the Aramaic-speaking Jesus called God Abba, especially in prayer. Mark tells us that Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane cried out: “‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want’” (Mk 14:36). The Aramaic word Abba is simply the equivalent of the Hebrew ha-’ab, “the Father,” understood as vocative in form: ‘O Father!’ 24 In so addressing God as Abba, Jesus seems to claim a unique personal relationship to God, a relationship based on themes already adumbrated in the Hebrew Bible. But the relationship of Jesus to the One he called ‘Father’ seems more intimate, more individualized and uniquely personal than the Father-Son relationship of God to the whole of Israel, expressed with such eloquence in Third Isaiah: “Surely You are our Father: /Though Abraham regard us not,/And Israel recognize us not,/ You, O LORD, are our Father” (Is 63:16).25 The closest parallel in the Hebrew Bible to the use of Abba by Jesus may perhaps be found in the Psalms where God suggests to David that he should address the LORD with such intimacy: “‘You
are my father, my God, the rock of my deliverance’” (Ps 89:27). The Second Book of Samuel likewise promises a personal Father-son relationship between the LORD and King David: “I will be a father to him and he a son to Me” (2 Sam 7:14). Such family intimacy between David and God led to the tradition of the king of Israel being characterized as an adoptive son of God in a royal psalm, possibly one used at an enthronement: “Let me tell of the decree:/ the LORD said to me/ ‘You are My son,/ I have fathered you this day” (Ps 2:7)

The use of the vocative Abba by Jesus so struck some of the writers of the New Testament that they simply transcribed the Aramaic word Abba in Greek. We have already seen Mark’s transcription of that word in the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane. Paul in the Letter to the Galatians, written around 54 CE, tells us that those redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus become adopted children of God: “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal 4:6). In his letter to the Romans, written a few years later, Paul returns to the theme: “You have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:15-17). One could perhaps say that Christian Trinitarian faith centers on the way Jesus addressed God as Abba, and the way God’s Spirit enables those redeemed by Jesus to do the same.

Let me return to the importance of ha-Shem, the unpronounced name of God in the Jewish tradition, for understanding the New Testament account of Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew ends with the so-called Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). I would suggest that the Greek of this verse in Matthew’s Gospel has not been translated adequately in the New Revised Standard Version (1989) or in many other translations. So
translated, it give the impression that the disciples are deputized to baptize on behalf of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But the text more radically declares that the first disciples should make disciples among all the Gentiles, and that they should do so by plunging those disciples into the Name (eis to onoma)—into the ineffable divine Reality (ha-Shem), the Lordship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Having so plunged these new disciples into the inner life of God, and having taught them to obey “everything that I have commanded you,” Jesus promises both the original Jewish followers of Jesus and their later Gentile disciples that the Exodus accompaniment of God’s People will continue into their future: “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20). There is perhaps a parallel here with the Talmud’s tractate Berakoth and Rashi in their future-oriented understanding of the Tetragrammaton: “I was with you in this servitude, and I shall be with you in the servitude of the [other] kingdoms.”

The one who is praying, Jewish or Gentile, must remember the privilege involved in addressing God by Name with a capital N, ha-Shem. The secular Greek word kyrios, usually rendered in English as ‘lord’ with either a small l or a capital L, denotes in Greek what the Hebrew word ’adon signifies. In the Septuagint, the related periphrasis for the Tetragrammaton, Adonai in Hebrew, is also rendered kyrios, Lord in small capital letters. Translators of the New Testament are sometimes unsure how to translate kyrios in key New Testament passages, and especially how to translate its vocative form, kyrie. In secular Greek it could be used for any gentleman, and especially for an exalted ruler. Should kyrie be rendered “Sir,” or “LORD” in this passage or another? It depends on the context. Even when the word is addressed to Jesus, it may have begun its history as simply a polite “Sir,” or even a somewhat ironic “Sir,” as when the woman of Samaria reminds Jesus that he has no means to supply her with fresh water from a
well: "Sir [Kyrie], you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" (Jn 4:11). But even within that intriguing dialogue, the woman of Samaria comes to use the term with less irony: “Sir [Kyrie], I see that you are a prophet” (Jn 4:19). John’s Gospel reaches one of its two conclusions with the clearest example of the divine use of the word Kyrios. The disciple Thomas, who had doubted the testimony of his fellow disciples about the risen Jesus, was confronted by the risen Jesus in the midst of the disciples a week later: “Thomas answered [Jesus], ‘My LORD and my God!’ (Jn 20:28). In those words of Thomas, linking the words LORD and God in reference to Jesus, one senses a certain parallel with the theme enunciated in Genesis Rabbah commenting of Gen 2:4, where we are told that those two divine names, ’Elohim and the Tetragrammaton, express God’s judgment and God’s mercy, cold water and hot water combined so as not to break the glass. In this context the glass involved was the fragile faith of doubting Thomas.

Paul in his epistles uses the word Kyrios most obviously in the way that his Jewish contemporaries used Adonai or even ha-Shem. In a famous hymn he quotes in the Epistle to the Philippians, written in the late fifties of the first century CE, the divine name of the LORD (ha-Shem) is bestowed on Jesus in his resurrection and ascension as a result of his suffering and death: “Therefore God also highly exalted him/and gave him the name/that is above every name,/so that at the name of Jesus/every knee should bend./in heaven and on earth and under the earth,/and every tongue should confess/that Jesus Christ is Lord,/to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:9-11). That hymn echoes a passage in Second Isaiah in which the Lord exults: “To Me every knee shall bend/ Every tongue swear loyalty” (Isa 45:23). Note, however, that all those knees in Paul’s hymn should bend not exactly for the name ‘Jesus,’ a not uncommon Jewish
man’s name, but for the Tetragrammaton (YHWH), the unique divine name, “the name that is above every other name,” bestowed upon Jesus as LORD.27

In John’s Gospel, however, even if others address Jesus as Lord (Kyrie), Jesus himself seems to use the phrase “I AM” of himself in a way that signifies the same thing as Ehyeh in the Tetragrammaton, and in speaking of himself this way he astounds and even horrifies his hearers. Many English translations of John do no justice to that phrase, rendering the Greek ego eimi as if it simply meant “I am he.” But Jesus says “I AM” quite starkly, without a predicate, several times in John’s Gospel, three times in Chapter 8 alone: “I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I AM.” (8:24); “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.” (8:28); “Amen, Amen, I tell you, before Abraham was, I AM.” (8:59).28 The third of those usages of ego eimi in Chapter 8 provokes outrage: “So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (Jn 8:59). In John’s account of the storm at sea after the multiplication of the loaves, Jesus restores calm to the sea and his disciples with the same words: “They saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, ‘I AM; do not be afraid’” (Jn 6:19-20). Another significant usage of that phrase strikes terror in the hearts of those who come to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Then Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him, came forward and asked them, ‘For whom are you looking?’ They answered, ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ Jesus replied, ‘I AM.’ Judas, who betrayed him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, ‘I AM’, they stepped back and fell to the ground” (Jn 18:4-6). 29

Those theologians of recent centuries who have wished to deescalate the New Testament claims for Jesus have difficulties with John’s Gospel; there are few clearer presentations in the
New Testament of the central paradox of the tenting of the LORD God in the Word made Flesh. Let me conclude these remarks with an attempt to translate the last verse in the prologue to John’s Gospel “God no one has ever seen,” John warns us. And yet, the evangelist insists that “God the Only Begotten, existing inside the Father’s breast—He himself has made [God’s] meaning clear” (Jn 1:18).

III. The Most Beautiful Names of God in Islam

The use of a phrase that begins so much in a Muslim setting, “In the name of God” (bi-’smi’llahi) eventually developed into a noun in Arabic, basmala, designating the very process of so invoking God by name. Many activities performed in a Muslim setting begin with that short phrase: the eating of meals, the writing of books, the beginning of a journey. Every sura of the Qur’an but one (Qur’an 9) begins with a more elaborate version of the basmala: “In the name of God, the Merciful One Filled with Mercy” (bi-’smi’llahi-r-rahmani-r-rahim).

To speak the name (ism) of any human person in Arabic is to address him or her by the single part of longer Arabic nomenclature that denotes the person as such apart from any relationship to other persons (parents, children) or other realities (ethnicity, profession). Although there are traditionally ninety-nine “most beautiful names of God” (asma’ al-husna), Allah is the quintessential name of God. To begin anything “in the name of God,” then, does much more than signify a certain authorization by God of what follows. Rather it enables the person praying with the basmala to locate himself or herself spiritually in God’s Name, giving them a certain entry into or presence within the Reality of God. All of the preliminaries to worship—purifications by ablution, formulation of the intention to worship, response to the call
to worship—lead up to positioning of the devotee in the Reality of God symbolized by the name of the One to whom prayer is directed.

Allah is a name for God that is not unique to Arab Muslims; it served as the name for God among other Arabic-speaking monotheists, even before the time of Muhammad. In Allah the word for a god, ilah, is combined with the article al- to become Allah (the god), not unlike the Septuagint and New Testament Greek ho theos. Thus the Qur’an states: “Say: As for me, I am only human like you; it has been revealed to me that your god (ilahukum) is an only God (ilahun wahidun). Then seek the straight path to Him, beg His forgiveness. Woe to those who ascribe partners to Him” (Qur’an 41:6). The pre-Islamic Arabs, however, seem to have included Allah as one among many in a loosely configured pantheon, even ascribing daughters to Allah: al-Lat, al-‘Uzza and Manat (Qur’an 53:19–20). Each of these three goddesses was associated with territories economically and politically important for Muhammad and his first followers. The strict monotheism of the revelation that Muhammad received regarded all cultus directed toward these three goddesses or any other divinities as shirk, the sinful ascription of associates to God.

In the Islamic tradition ninety-nine “most beautiful” names of God are enumerated, traditionally thought to be mentioned in the text of the Qur’an: “To God belong the most beautiful names. Call on Him with them; scatter those who blaspheme with His names” (Qur’an 7:180). In actual fact, more than ninety-nine names of God can be found in the Qur’an, and the lists of those names are not consistent. Most writers consider the name Allah, which occurs more than 2500 times in the Qur’an, to be the first of the ninety-nine, although a few scholars claim that it is the hundredth name. The names of God in most lists emphasize the numinous nature of
God, his *jalal* (majesty), as well as his *jamal* (beauty). Muslims in celebration or in distress glorify God in pungent exclamations like the *takbir,* “God is greater [than anything]!” (*Allahu akbar*). The devout hedge every future hope, trivial or profound, with a wish that it may come to pass “if God allow” (*in sha’ Allah*). Immediately after pronouncing the name of God many Muslims interject *subhanahu wa ta’ala* (“Praised be He and exalted!”).

The first words of revelation, according to much of Islamic tradition, were the initial verses of *Surat al-‘alaq* (the *Sura* of the Blood Clot: Qur’an 96). These initial verses epitomize in brief the Quranic proclamation about God, as well as its own self-definition as God’s Word made available for recitation by human beings: “Recite: In the name of your Lord who created,/ Created humankind from a blood-clot/— Recite: Your Lord is the most generous,/ Who taught by the pen./ Taught humankind what it did not know “ (Qur’an 96:1–5). In the first two verses of Qur’an 96 the creative power of God, intimately disclosed to the already monotheistic Muhammad not simply as “the Lord” but as “your Lord,” is particularly concretized in terms of one demonstration of God’s creative power: the conception and birth of a new human being “from a blood-clot.” The basis for some of the ninety-names of God can be glimpsed even in those five brief verses: God as Creator (*al-Khaliq, al-Bari’*), God as most generous (*al-Karim, Dhu’l-jalali wa’l-‘ikram*), God as Knower and Teacher (*al-‘Alim, al-Khabir*).

In my somewhat clumsy translation of the *basmala* (“In the name of God, the Merciful One Filled with Mercy”) and of the two most common of the “most beautiful names” of God enshrined in the *basmala,* I am striving to grasp the interrelatedness of these two words in Arabic. Both *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim* derive from the tri-consonantal root *R-H-M.* The former, *al-Rahman,* seems to have been a name for the supreme god presiding over a hierarchy of lesser
gods in pre-Islamic south and central Arabia. This root connoting mercy points imagistically to the womb (rahim or rihm). To connect the mercy of God with feminine characteristics or connections is to understand God’s perfection as including all that is most tender in created reality, including the generative and loving characteristics of mothers. A famous hadith attributed to Muhammad narrates that he restrained a companion from engaging in struggle in the path of God (jihad) precisely because the companion’s mother was still alive. That companion would not attain heaven by a martyr’s death, Muhammad averred, but by filial devotion to his mother: “Then stay with her and look after her needs. Your heaven lies under her feet.” The male-centeredness of so much contemporary Islamic rigorism loses sight of these very tender elements in the Qur’an and in the Prophet’s thought.

Of the great medieval Muslim commentators on the first verse of the Opening Surah of the Qur’an, Abu Ja‘far al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) has the most to say, relying on earlier exegetes of the Qur’an. He quotes the seventh-century Qur’an expert Ibn ‘Abbas to the effect that the basmala meant, in its original context, “Recite with the invocation of God, your Lord. And stand and sit with the invocation of God.” From Ibn ‘Abbas he also derives the definition of Allah as “He Who possesses the attributes of divinity (al-ulahiyyah) and of being worshipped (al-ma’budiyyah) with respect to all his creatures.” On the names of God as al-Rahman and al-Rahim al-Tabari concludes with his own judgment that the former name, the one of greater import, is reserved to God alone: “God speaks of Himself specifically as al-rahman: ‘Say: ‘Call upon Allah, or call upon al-rahman; whichever you call upon, to him belong the Names Most Beautiful’” ([Qur’an] 17:110), and He has forbidden any of his creatures to be so called, even though there are some among His creatures who deserve to be named with some of its meanings. Therefore al-rahman comes second to His name Allah. However, as for his name al-rahim,
we have already said that it is permissible to describe someone other than Him by it. . . . this is why His name Allah come before His name al-rahman, and his name al-rahman before His name al-rahim.”

Muslim men as a result can be called ‘Abd al-Rahman (“Servant of the Merciful One”), but never simply Rahman, although I must say I have known some men named ‘Abd al-Rahman who are familiarly called ‘Rahman.”

Sufis, the mystics of the Islamic tradition, have often speculated about the names of God and have even asked if there is a “greatest name” of all. The thirteenth-century Egyptian mystic Ibn Ata’ullah of Alexandria sought from God “to make me know by means of Your treasured-up Knowledge, and protect me by means of the mystery of Your well-guarded name.”

Shaykh Nizam al-din Awliya, a mystic of Delhi in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, when asked about “the greatest name” cited a saying of the early Muslim mystic, Ibrahim Adham: “‘Yes, I do know it, and I will tell you about it . . . First, you should cleanse your stomach of unlawful food, then you should empty your heart of love of this world, and then after that by whatever name you call upon God that is the Greatest Name.”

At least where the puritanical influence of Saudi Arabia’s neo-Hanbalism (so-called ‘Wahhabism’) has not been intensely felt, the subha or ‘Muslim rosary’ is often seen entwined in the fingers of the devout. Some practitioners of this devotion recite the ninety-name names of God on the ninety-nine beads of such a rosary; more recite three times thirty-three beads, each third concentrating on one or another of the many ejaculatory prayers that serve Muslims as succinct recollections (adhkar) of God. The most common form of this devotion entails thirty-three utterances of Subhan Allah (“Glory be to God”), followed by thirty-three utterances of Al-hamdu l’illah (“Praise be to God”), ending with thirty-three utterances of the most basic
expression of praise for God in the Islamic tradition: *Allahu akbar* (“God is greater [than anything]”).

The recitation of the names of God as well as simpler recitations of *adhkar* with beads bring God close to mortal human beings. A folk tradition, known in many parts of the Islamic world, maintains that the principal lines in a left hand mimic the number 81 in Arabic (٨١) and the lines in the right hand mimic the number 18 in Arabic (١٨). Thus the palms of their two hands, extended before faithful Muslims in prayer, remind them quite simply of both the majesty and the closeness of God. A more literal than usual rendering of the Throne Verse, a Quranic verse replete with names for God, might suggest similar reflections: “God—there is no god but He, the Living, the Eternal! Neither fatigue nor sleep seizes Him! To Him belong whatever is in heaven or on earth. Who can intercede with Him unless He allows it? He knows what lies in their hands before them and what lies behind their backs. They cannot comprehend anything He knows except by His leave. His Throne encompasses both heaven and earth: His maintaining heaven and earth does not tire Him. He is the Exalted, the Glorious One!” (Qur’an 2:255).

**Conclusion: Wrestling with God**

Merely mortal words—Jewish, Christian or Muslim—can never completely wrestle God to the ground. We cannot force the divine Wrestler to reveal to us the ineffable name in any exhaustive sense. Perhaps that is part of what Ludwig Wittgenstein meant when he formulated his famously unexplained seventh proposition: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”\(^\text{41}\) Wittgenstein went through many stages of understanding that proposition. The late philosopher and theologian, Paul Ricoeur (d. 2005), notes more positively that in hymns of
celebration, supplication, and thanksgiving, “God becomes a ‘you’ to the human you.” Ricoeur goes on to assert that “the word ‘God’ cannot be understood as a philosophical concept, not even ‘being’ in the sense of medieval philosophy or in Heidegger’s sense. The word ‘God’ says more than the word ‘being’ because it presupposes the entire context of narratives, prophecies, laws, wisdom writings, psalms, and so on. The referent ‘God’ is thus intended by the convergence of all these partial discourses. It expresses the circulation of meaning among all the forms of discourse wherein God is named.”

Preachers on television who babble on about God so confidently, as well as teenagers who text each other with the acronym OMG! (“Oh My God!”—I translate for those of you who are neither teenagers nor texters): both populations could imbibe wisdom by contemplating the history of the naming or non-naming of God in the monotheistic traditions that trace their historical origins to the Middle East. Whether we avoid pronouncing the ineffable name of God, or bow our heads at the personal name of the Word of God made Flesh, or follow the mention of God’s name with the exclamation subhanahu wa ta‘ala (“Praised be He and exalted!”), we who put our faith in one God recognize deep down the mystery with which we are forced to deal so tentatively. Words may elude us. Still, in the words of T. S. Eliot, “Words, after speech, reach/Into the silence.” But perhaps we can and must do more than keep silence. Silence about God seems too gloomy a conclusion to my reflections this evening. We must, like Jacob, struggle with the nameless divine Wrestler by night. Other verses from Eliot may help to illuminate the darkness of that wrestling: “I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you/ Which will be the darkness of God.”
NOTES


2 I am grateful to a French Jesuit who recently visited Fordham to use its archives, Nicolas Steeves, who introduced me to this aspect of French and Jesuit history.

3 In ancient Ugarit, a cultural area that flourished on the Mediterranean coast of present day Syria in the second millennium BCE, the name ’El designated the highest god in their pantheon. Like many of the so-called “high gods” in African traditional forms of faith, the Ugaritic ’El “generally fades into the background and plays a minor role in the preserved myths” (Louis Hartmann/ S. David Sperling, “GOD, NAMES OF,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed, (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA/Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 2007), 7:672b, available online. The same cannot be said of the homonymous God in the ancient tradition of Israel.

4 Here, as in other quotations from the Hebrew Bible that follow, I use the *JPS Hebrew English-Tanakh*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999/5759).

5 Examples of such preserved but not entirely understood ancient titles of God include ’El ’elyon, often translated as God Most High, ’El ’olam, often translated as God the Everlasting, ’El shaddai, usually but probably erroneously translated as God the Almighty, ’El ro ’i, translated either as God of Vision or God Who Sees, and finally ’El berit, fairly obviously meaning God of the Covenant. The name ’Eloah, found forty times in the Book of Job, may well be a more formal singular form of ’Elohim than ’el. See Hartmann/Sperling, “GOD, NAMES OF,” 7: 672b-674b.

7 The JPS Tanakh does this as “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” Franz Rosenzweig in 1929 wrote a most insightful essay on the problems involved in translating the Tetragrammaton and the difference between the translation he was working on with Martin Buber and the much earlier translation of the Torah by Moses Mendelssohn (d. 1786): “‘The Eternal’: Mendelssohn and the Name of God,” reproduced in Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, Scripture and Translation, tr. Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, ca. 1994), 99-113.


10 It may have been the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides who first used the term ‘being’ (to on) as an abstraction. See “The Poem of Parmenides,” 8.35. For commentary on this passage, see Plato and Parmenides: Parmenides’ Way of Truth and Plato’s Parmenides, ed. and tr. Francis MacDonald Cornford (Indianapolis/New York: Bobbs-Merrill, ca. 1957), 43.

11 On these linguistic categories, see “Marked and Unmarked Terms, Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language, ed. Tom McArthur (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), available online at www.Encyclopedia.com. The article gives a pithy example: “In the pair
horse/mare, horse is the more general, unmarked term, while mare is marked for femaleness. In the pair cow/bull, cow is unmarked, while bull is marked for maleness.” In the last forty years or more, the unmarked quality of masculine pronouns in the English language has been radically challenged.

12 Furthermore, the Greek is not content with the purely verbal form of the first person singular of the verb ‘to be’ (eimi), a grammatically possible parallel to the Hebrew Ehyeh. The Greek insists on the emphatic specification of “I” (ego) as the subject of the verb, as does the Latin Vulgate.

13 Modern Hebrew does have a future tense, created in imitation of European languages.


15 Ibid.


18 When the translators of The Jerusalem Bible in English (1966) followed the example of the original French Bible de Jerusalem (1956) and rendered the Tetragrammaton as “Yahweh,” the Bishops of England and Wales asked them to substitute ‘the LORD’ in lectionaries for liturgical usage. The Holy See took up this topic later and in 2008 Cardinal Francis Arinze, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, forbade the usage of the Tetragrammaton in liturgical texts. See the Catholic News Agency report of this on September 3, 2008
Bishop Arthur Serratelli (Paterson, NJ), chairman of the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on Divine Worship, is quoted in the same source as saying that it might have “some impact on the use of particular pieces of liturgical music in our country.” It would seem that hymns like the very popular “Yahweh, I Know You are Near,” composed by Dan Schutte, might be affected. From the Blogosphere it looks like the revision of this hymn—if it ever happens—will not be popular.

19 This is my rendering of the Hebrew, not the JPS translation.


21 All New Testament quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of 1989 (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

22 See Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007), #469.

23 Luke’s version may be more original while Matthew’s, beginning with “Our,” reflects the liturgical use of the Lord’s Prayer in the early Church. The late first-century Didache, a catechetical treatise in Greek written most likely in the late first century CE contemporaneously with most of the New Testament writings, orders that the Our Father in Matthew’s form be said by Christians three times a day (Didache 8.2). See The Didache or The Teaching of the Lord to the Gentiles by the Twelve Apostles, available online at www.annomundi.com/bible/didache.

24 Note that this interpretation modifies the supposed status of the name ‘Abba’ as a term of childlike endearment, not unlike ‘Papa’ and ‘Daddy.’ See Máire Byrne, The Names of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: A Basis for Interfaith Dialogue (London/New York: Continuum, 2011), 56-75.
The prophet Jeremiah (3:19 and 31:9) as well as Malachi (1:6 and 2:10) both allude to God as a Father to Israel in a corporate sense.

See pages 5-6 and note 13 above.

“Concealed within the name of Jesus is the tetragrammaton, the mysterious name from Mount Horeb, here expanded into the statement: God saves.” Thus Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives (New York: Image/Crown Publishing Group, 2012), 30. The name ‘Jesus’ in its Aramaic and Hebrew origins, Yeshua‘ and Yehoshua, literally means “The LORD saves.”

I have here adapted the NRSV translation.

The late Raymond Brown, S.S. (d. 1998), a leading American scholar of the New Testament, succinctly points out the ambiguity suggested by the use of the words ‘I AM’ in John’s Gospel, especially when those words are used without a predicate: “Since the usage goes far beyond ordinary parlance, all recognize that the absolute ego eimi has a special revelatory function in John. . . Divine theophanies . . . often have this formula: Do not be afraid; I am the God of your ancestors.” The Gospel according to John [The Anchor Bible 29] (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), I: 533-34.

This is my own translation. The NRSV renders these words more simply: “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” The New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE) of 2011 renders it thus: “No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him.” The one word in Greek translated as “has made him known” by the NRSV and “has revealed him” by the NABRE, exegesato, suggests the work of an interpreter, even an exegete. Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) suggested just this in an early work: “One could almost say, in reference to
the Greek text, that it [the Word made Flesh] has become the ‘exegesis’ of God for us.” See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, tr. J. R. Foster, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 54. Hans Urs von Balthasar has even written an article using such imagery in its title: “God is his own exegete,” *Communio* 4 (Winter 1986), 280-87. I wish to thank my colleague, Joseph Lienhard, S.J., for directing my attention to this article of von Balthasar.

31 Why Qur’an 9 does not begin with the *basmalah* is a matter of much speculation.

32 The usual sequence of traditional Arabic nomenclature includes at least four and sometimes five elements. The first is the *kunyah*, which relates the one named to his or her child (Abu X: ‘Father of X’), Umm Y (‘Mother of Y’). Normally a *kunyah* is followed by the second element in nomenclature, a person’s own proper name (*ism*). The *ism* is often the name of some great figure from the past, preferably with a Muslim historical referent, but not always. The *ism* is sometimes constructed from the word for ‘servant’ (*‘Abd*) and one of the names of God (*‘Abd Allah, ‘Abd al-Rahman, and the like*). The third element in nomenclature is the *nasab*, an indication of the person’s personal descent: *Ibn* X or *Bint* Y (son or daughter of X or Y). Such a descent group can be traced back many generations and usually names both men and women by their descent from male ancestors. The fourth element is the *nisbah*, the adjectival indication of the person’s tribal, geographical, juristic, mystical or professional connections, for example: *al-Khazraji* (the member of the tribe of the Banu Khazraj), *al-Iskandari* (the Alexandrian), *al-Maliki* (the adherent of the juristic school of ‘Abd al-Malik), *al-Tijani* (the member of the Tijaniyyah Sufi confraternity); *al-Khayyati* (the member of a clan of tailors; if the person so named is actually a tailor, the long *i* is omitted from the professional *nisbah*). The fifth element in some Muslim nomenclature, the *laqab*, is sometimes called in English ‘the nickname.’ Early Muslim nicknames can be honorific (*al-Rashid*, ‘the Just’) or mocking (*al-Himar*, ‘the Jackass’);
they sometimes begin with the Arabic words *Dhu* (masculine) or *Dhat* (feminine), indicating possession, real or metaphoric, of something. Other popular varieties of *laqab* indicate political importance: *Nizam al-Mulk* (‘Order of the Realm’). Many famous Muslims in past history are best known by their *laqab*. See Editors, “ISM,” *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: New Edition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960-2009), 4:179a-181b. Henceforth this source will be cited as *EI 2*.


34 The source of this famous *hadith* (saying of Muhammad) is the ninth-tenth century CE collector of hadith, Ahmad al-Nasa’i. It can be found in his famous *al-Sunan al-kubra*, the “Large Hadith Collection.” There are several fond references to this *hadith* on Muslim websites, most notably [www.islaam.org](http://www.islaam.org). I first learned the *hadith* from my *shaykha* in Islamic studies and dissertation director, the late Annemarie Schimmel (d. 2003), who quoted the *hadith* on the memorial card for her late mother, Anna Ulfers Schimmel (d. 1978), for whom Professor Schimmel took the greatest care until her death.


36 Tabari, I: 55.

37 Tabari, I: 58-59.


40 The beads used are often called *misbaha* or *tasbih*.

41 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. C.K. Ogden (London/New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 188-89. The original German is just as succinct: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.”


45 “East Coker,” iii, ibid., 186.