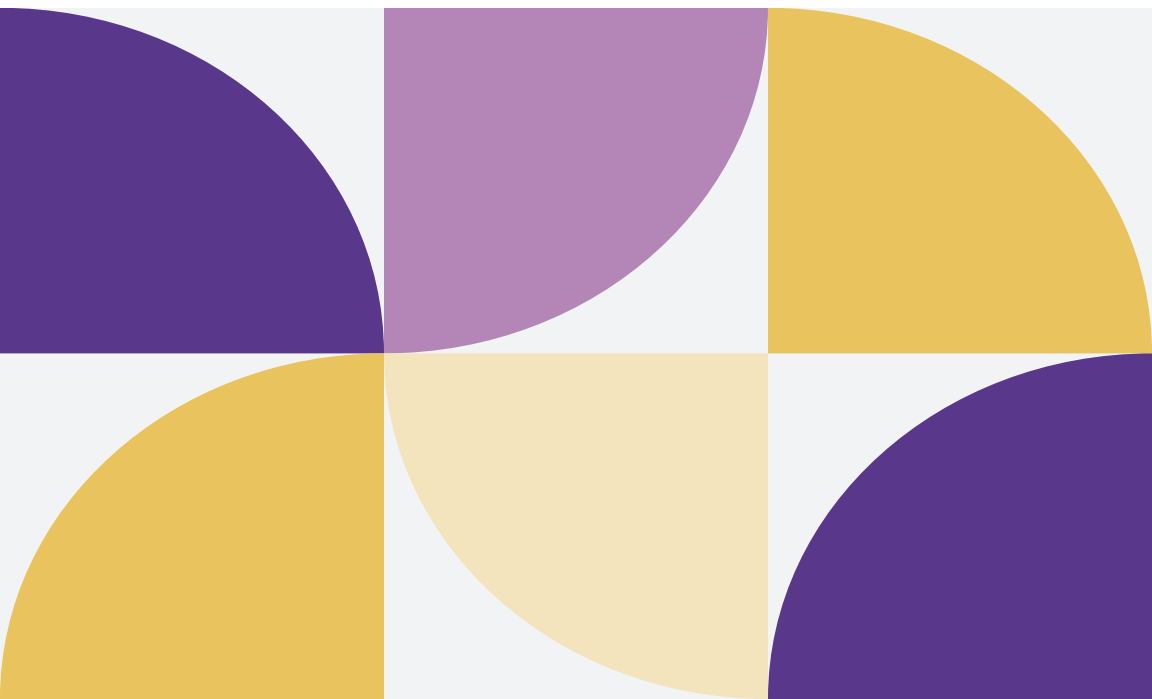




CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES

NAMING GOD

LUCINDA MOSHER, Editor



NAMING GOD

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NAMING GOD

CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES

A Record of the Nineteenth Building Bridges Seminar

Hosted online by
Georgetown University
June 7–11, 2021

Lucinda Mosher, Editor

Georgetown University Press / Washington DC

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Participants in the Building Bridges Seminar 2021

Hussein Abdulsater, University of Notre Dame, USA
Muhammad Modassir Ali, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Qatar
Ahmet Alibašić, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Mehdi Azaiez, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium; University of Lorraine, France
John Azumah, The Sanneh Institute, Ghana
Jonathan Brown, Georgetown University, USA
Yousef Casewit, University of Chicago, USA
Emmanuel Clapsis, Hellenic College and Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, USA
Maria Massi Dakake, George Mason University, USA
Susan Eastman, Duke University Divinity School, USA
Lucy Gardner, St. Stephen's House, Oxford, UK
Christopher M. Hays, Biblical Seminary of Colombia, Colombia
Damian Howard, SJ, Jesuit British Province, UK
Tuba Işık, Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany
Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Fuller Theological Seminary, USA
Daniel Madigan, SJ, Georgetown University, USA
David Marshall, World Council of Churches, Switzerland
Mahan Mirza, University of Notre Dame, USA
Esther Mombo, St Paul's University, Limuru, Kenya
Lucinda Mosher, Hartford International University for Religion and Peace, USA
Kenan Musić, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Martin Nguyen, Fairfield University, USA
Elizabeth Phillips, University of Cambridge; Durham University, UK
Christoph Schwöbel, University of St. Andrews, UK
Reza Shah-Kazemi, Aga Khan Centre, UK
Muna Tatari, University of Paderborn, Germany
Staff: Samuel Wagner, Georgetown University, USA

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Introduction

In one sense, Muslims and Christians agree that God is unnamable. So asserted moderator Dan Madigan as he introduced the topic on which the nineteenth convening of the Building Bridges Seminar would focus. That is, he clarified, both traditions affirm that “God is not just one of the things-in-the-world that can be named and so identified and defined.” In another sense, however, Muslims and Christians would agree that God has many names. These are *not* names that humans invent for God, he explained. Rather,

they are names that God reveals to humanity; names by which human beings are to call upon God; names that reveal not so much *what* God is, but *who* God is, and more to the point who God is *in relation to us*. God cannot be constrained or contained by the names, but God can be praised by them, can be called upon in supplication, can be remembered by them for the wonderful works God has done and continues to do. Repeating the names, praying them, praising by means of them leads us more deeply into the life of faith, even to the point of being re-made, as it were, in the image of God. Clearly, each of our traditions would understand this way of expressing things in its own way, but we can recognize a certain commonality that makes our dialogue possible.¹

This is the shared, sensitive, and sometimes contentious environment into which Christians and Muslims venture when they speak to one another about the proper naming of God. After three years of wrestling with public themes (divine and human power; inequality of several sorts; divine and human freedom), the Building Bridges Seminar was ready to turn its attention to such questions.

Believed to be the longest-running international dialogue of Christian and Muslim scholars, the Building Bridges Seminar was initiated in 2002 by then-Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey. Rowan Williams sustained the dialogue during the ten years of his tenure in that office. Since 2012 it has been stewarded by Georgetown University. The Building Bridges Seminar's practice is to invite selected Christian and Muslim scholar-believers into a conversation circle for the purpose of dialogical close reading of texts (scriptural and otherwise) over several days.

At Building Bridges Seminar convenings—which have been held in the United Kingdom, the United States, Qatar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Italy, Singapore, and Switzerland—Christian and Muslim participants are always nearly equal in number. A significant number of each are women. Most of the Christians are Anglican or Roman Catholic, but some have been Orthodox, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, or Presbyterian. Most Muslims are Sunni, but Shi'a have always taken part. The collection of texts that participants are expected to read, analyze, and comment upon are chosen and organized to prompt deep discussion of a carefully framed, multilayered theme such as prophethood, prayer, revelation, human destiny, community, or forgiveness.

Plans for a June 2020 convening in Tübingen, Germany, were upended by the rapid global spread of the novel coronavirus. In 2021, rather than postpone again, the Seminar determined to meet online. The topic chosen for 2020, *Naming God*, was retained. The agenda featured three themes: the naming of God in Christian and Muslim scriptures; reflection on the nature of these names in Christian and Muslim foundational philosophical and theological traditions; and Christian and Muslim practices of calling on God by God's names in communal and private prayer. Some might say that this last theme is the most significant of the three since, as Dan Madigan explained,

only prayer can lead us more deeply into the reality of God. However, it also ties us into our scriptures and into the history of interpretation and reception of those texts. Our calling on God's Name both grows out of scripture and constantly leads us back there. It binds us into a community of faith that spans the centuries.

The approach taken by the Seminar to consideration of Christian and Muslim perspectives on "naming God" was consonant with strategies employed in its earlier study of "monotheism and its complexities."²² That is, the planners (while acknowledging that engagement of Christians and Muslims with one another on the topic of God per se has always been direct and

forceful) endeavored to avoid making the traditionally contested doctrine of the Trinity the conversation's starting point. They preferred instead to begin from the concern in both traditions, each in its own way, to affirm God's uniqueness. Thus, the primacy remains with the God who reveals Godself rather than with a concept of a unity that is, as it were, the thing that qualifies God to be God.

Whatever the topic it takes on, the Building Bridges Seminar strives always to help participants gain better understanding of each other's tradition, to wrestle with theological complexities, and to improve the quality of their disagreements. Its structure facilitates this by conducting almost all of its work in closed session; by organizing the participants into small discussion groups that remain constant throughout a convening; and by opening and closing each day with a robust plenary conversation. This last element was missing in 2021. Meeting virtually across many time zones precluded systematic scheduling of daily plenaries. Often a convening of the Building Bridges Seminar includes a public session featuring overview lectures. In 2021 planners opted for the simplicity and informality of closed sessions. On day 1 of the 2021 Building Bridges Seminar, participants heard six lectures, each introducing a set of texts to be studied on one of the days to come.

When asked to assess the experience of a virtual convening, one scholar noted that it had certain advantages: "no one had to get a visa or cross a border." Another, however, lamented its lack of opportunity for experts to sit together and talk informally. "Those soft instructional experiences happen," she quipped, "only when we're trapped together in a retreat center!" Even so, another participant was quick to acknowledge that the online conversation had worked better than she had anticipated—perhaps even as well as would have been the case had the seminar met in-person. In part, this was the result of beginning from a point of familiarity: everyone involved had participated in at least one previous seminar. "We were right to not invite new persons this time," she said.

Indeed, the online small groups were a lot like the "in-person" small groups of previous years. Each had its own style, its own variation on the Seminar's method. What was consistent from one group to the next was palpable closeness among the members of each of those virtual study circles. While preference for meeting face-to-face was nearly universal, there was also consensus that—in spite of almost overwhelming time-zone challenges—it is possible for the Building Bridges Seminar to convene in cyberspace in a manner marked by collegiality and considerable depth.

To encourage further study and dialogue, each lecture from the 2021 convening is presented in this volume as an essay, followed immediately by the

set of study texts it introduces. Hence, each of the three parts that make up the bulk of this book includes four chapters. In part 1, Naming God in Scripture, “Walking the Knife-Edge: Christian Scripture on Labeling the Ineffable” by Christopher M. Hays, is followed by “Bible Passages on Naming God,” which offers selections from each testament. “Calling God by His Names: The Subject and Object of ‘Naming God,’” by Maria Massi Dakake, is followed by “Qur’an and Hadiths on Naming God: Selections for Dialogue.” This chapter provides eighteen passages from fifteen suras grouped under three headings: God’s “Most Beautiful” Names; false gods as “names that you have named”; and devotional/ritual invocations of God’s Name. Six hadiths are also included—among them, a list of the ninety-nine Beautiful Names.

Part 2, Naming God in Theological Discourse, opens with “What’s in a Name? A Christian Historical Perspective on Naming God” by Christoph Schwöbel. “Christian Theological Discourse on Naming God: Selections for Dialogue” provides excerpts from the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, and Martin Luther, plus a portion of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646). “Commentaries on the Divine Names: Two Exemplars from the Islamic Tradition,” by Yousef Casewit, is followed by “Muslim Theological Discourse on Naming God: Selections for Dialogue”—excerpts from the writings of al-Juwaynī, al-Ghazālī, and al-Tilimsānī.

In part 3, Naming God in Devotional Practice, Lucy Gardner’s essay, “Naming God in Christian Prayer and Worship: Its Impact on Spiritual Formation,” is followed by “Christian Devotional Literature on Naming God: Selections for Dialogue”—texts of various hymns. “A Matter of Theurgy: The Impact of Naming God in Muslim Devotional Practice,” by Reza Shah-Kazemi, is followed by “Muslim Devotional Literature on Naming God: Selections for Dialogue,” offering excerpts from the writings of Ibn ‘Aṭā’illah and Rumi, plus two litanies. Part 4, Reflection, provides “Conversations in Cyberspace” by Lucinda Mosher—an overview of themes discussed and a sampler of interactions among the 2021 seminar participants.

Throughout this volume, diacritics are employed sparingly. Dates are “CE” unless otherwise indicated. We are grateful to many publishers for permission to use the material excerpted in this volume. All are credited as they occur. Unless otherwise noted, Qur’an quotations are according to *The Study Quran*, edited by S. H. Nasr, et al. (HarperOne, 2015); used by permission).³ Unless otherwise noted, Bible passages are according to the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in

the USA (used by permission; all rights reserved). We are especially grateful to Professor Hossein Kamaly (Hartford International University for Religion and Peace) and Dr. Rasoul Naghavi Nia (Mufid Academic Seminary) for their help with the translation and transliteration of one of the examples of Muslim devotional literature included in part 3.

Deep appreciation goes to Georgetown University president John J. DeGioia for his ongoing support of the Building Bridges Seminar. As in previous years, David Marshall (the project's academic director) and Daniel Madigan (its chair) were instrumental in setting the 2021 theme, organizing the roster of scholars, and—in careful conversation with those designated as presenters—choosing the texts to be studied. Two others also played strategic roles in the 2021 gathering: Lucinda Mosher (Hartford International University), the Seminar's rapporteur; and Samuel Wagner, who, as Georgetown University's director of dialogue and Catholic identity, serves as the Seminar's coordinator, working closely with the chair and academic director in planning the annual meeting. Finally, gratitude is extended to Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, which provides an ongoing base of operations and online presence for the Seminar and has made the publication of this book possible; and to Al Bertrand and the staff of Georgetown University Press for their patient assistance.

Notes

1. From Daniel Madigan's "concept note" to the Building Bridges Seminar staff and planning team, January 30, 2020.

2. For the 2016 proceedings, see Lucinda Mosher and David Marshall, eds., *Monotheism and Its Complexities: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018).

3. Quran verses: 1:17; 2:31–33; 6:118–121; 7:70–72, 114–115, 180, 255; 12: 39–40; 17: 107–110; 22:58–65, 34–35, 39–41; 24:35–38; 25:58–63; 40: 1–3; 53:19–23; 59:22–34; 87:1, 14–15 from *The Study Quran* by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Editor-in-Chief, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E.B. Lumbard, Mohammed Rustom. Copyright 2015 by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

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Part One

Naming God in Scripture

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Walking the Knife-Edge

Christian Scripture on Labeling the Ineffable

Christopher M. Hays

Contemplating God is dangerous business. The Babylonian Talmud (Hagigah 14b) tells of four men—Simeon ben ‘Azzai, Simeon ben Zoma, Rabbi Elisha ben Abuyah, and Rabbi Akiba ben Yosef—who had visions of heaven. Ben ‘Azzai cast a look at the divine realm and died forthwith. Ben Zoma went mad at the sight. The heavenly revelations made Elisha ben Abuyah into a heretic. Later rabbis refused to use his name; they called him simply Aher (The Other Guy). Only Akiba emerged unscathed from his mystical ascent: orthodox, sane, and alive.

Similarly, when someone names God—attempting thereby to define some aspect of God—they walk a knife-edge between the venerable Rabbi Akiba and the heretic Aher. After all, naming God entails labeling the ineffable. And yet the Bible itself oscillates between denying that God can be seen and describing how God shows Godself anyway. In this chapter I outline how Old Testament texts name God, their authors sometimes drawing on the names of Canaanite gods, in conjunction with their own experience with the divine. Thereafter I turn to the Greek New Testament, exploring how Christians, in response to their experience of the divine in Jesus, continued that process of naming God in ways that, in the eyes of many Jews, made them no better than Aher the heretic. But if one is to trust the truthfulness of the Scripture, these audacious ventures to name God were ultimately revelatory, even if being hardly exhaustive of who God is. This chapter describes how the biblical authors dared to apply names to God in ways that drew on their ancestral tradition and yet sometimes threatened to violate that tradition as they responded to the theological insights of their pagan neighbors and even to new experiences of the divine.

Naming God in the Jewish Scriptures

The three most common names for God in the Old Testament are Elohim, Adonai, and YHWH (often called “the Tetragrammaton”). Elohim is the standard epithet for the divine in Hebrew, simply translated “G/god” and capable of denoting Israel’s deity or “gods” more generally (e.g., Ex. 12:12; Josh. 24:15).¹ Another common name for Israel’s God is Adonai; it is aptly translated “L/lord,” and, as with the English term *lord*, Adonai can denote the divine Lord (with a capital L), as in Isaiah 6:1 (see also Gen. 15:2; Deut. 3:24; 2 Sam. 7:18–20), or a human master (Gen. 24:14, 27, 35–36).² Most importantly, there is the Tetragrammaton, the four-consonant name YHWH, which is also translated “LORD” in English but written with small caps to differentiate it from the translation of Adonai as “Lord.”³ When scholars read out this name, we pronounce it “Yahweh,” but one does well to be circumspect in enunciating the name outright because Jewish people have stringently avoided uttering it since well before the time of Christ.⁴ Instead of saying “Yahweh,” the more generic term *Adonai* was verbalized.⁵ Eventually, to remind oral readers of the Hebrew Bible to do this, the vowels from *Adonai* were written above and below the YHWH consonants of the Tetragrammaton, which subsequently led to the practice of translating the divine name as “Jehovah.”⁶ In any scenario, the Israelite deity’s most characteristic and unique name was YHWH, although biblical writers often combine and oscillate between the Tetragrammaton and the more generic Elohim.

YHWH Means Being Israel’s Covenant God: Exodus 3

The “origin story” of the Tetragrammaton is found in Exodus 3, when Moses meets the LORD at the burning bush. Moses quickly comes to understand that this Elohim is his ancestral deity, but he has to prod God a bit to disclose their identity specifically as Yahweh. God explains that unique name with the statement “I will be who I will be”—*’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh*, or *’ehyeh* for short (Exod. 3:14).

The text explains the name of Yahweh through a sort of popular or punning etymology based on the similarities between *’ehyeh* and Yahweh; the two words look like first- and third-person singular conjugations of the related verbal roots *hayah* and *hawah*, meaning broadly “to be.” This popular etymology has, frankly, not aged well—at least if it was intended to provide listeners with clarity—because what *’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh* means is hotly contested.⁷ The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, called the Septuagint (LXX), rendered the phrase as *egō eimi ho ōn*, “I am the one who is”—a rendering that will be important for our interpretation of the Greek New

Testament. That Greek translation, which lies behind the traditional English rendering “I am who I am,” emphasizes God’s absolute being or transcendent existence in ways that fit with the sort of Greek philosophical interests that predominated at the time the LXX was being translated.

In spite of this tradition, *’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh*, composed of two imperfect Hebrew verbs, can be more satisfactorily rendered “I will be who I will be.”⁸ The text should not be understood as a statement about abstract divine ontology but as an affirmation of the LORD’s freedom to act as the LORD will.⁹ As the context makes clear (3:7–9, 15–22), this freedom should not be construed in simple libertarian terms; it is a freedom that commits without coercion to being the covenant God of Israel, fulfilling the vows made to Israel’s ancestors, delivering the Israelites from slavery, and leading them into the land promised to their forefathers.¹⁰ To be YHWH means to be the God of the Patriarchs, the God of Israel’s past, and simultaneously the God who will guide them into the future.

Seeing and Explaining YHWH: Exodus 33–34; Isaiah 6

This interpretation of the name of the LORD in terms of God’s unfolding covenant relationship with Israel is made even more explicit as the book of Exodus progresses.¹¹ Consider the events of Exodus 33–34, which occur right between the golden calf incident (an event of grievous covenant violation; Exod. 32) and the covenant renewal (34:10–28). After Moses pled with God to have mercy on the Israelites, and succeeded (Exod. 33:17), the prophet decided to press his luck, and entreated the LORD, “Show me your glory” (33:18).

This might seem a rather foolhardy thing for Moses to request. As God explains to Moses in verse 20, for a sinful mortal to see God’s face will result in death; much the same perspective lies behind Isaiah the prophet’s cry of despair (Isa. 6:5) “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips . . . ; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts (Yahweh Tzebaoth).”¹² Nonetheless, other passages affirm that Moses *did* speak to God face-to-face, including Exodus 33:11, just seven verses prior to Moses’s request!¹³ These contradictions likely owe to the divergent sources combined in the Torah, but that is not to say that the Torah editors were ignorant of them. Maintaining both ideas—that you cannot see God and that some people do see God—is one canonical way of communicating the paradox of an infinite God who chooses to reveal Godself to unworthy mortals.

Within this particular episode, that same point is made in a slightly different way. Here God denies Moses’s request to see the divine glory but concedes to him the revelation of divine *goodness* in combination with the

proclamation of God's own name (33:19–20). Perhaps expressing a similar compromise in more physical terms, God says that Moses will be allowed to see not the divine face but the divine back (33:22–23).

God then passes by Moses and declares the name YHWH, the meaning of which is explained as “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.”¹⁴ These phraseologies are strikingly similar to the earlier affirmation of divine freedom “I will be who I will be.”¹⁵ This interpretation of the name fits with God's promise to reveal the divine goodness to Moses (Exod. 33:19). Thus, the LORD explains that being YHWH consists essentially in choosing to show mercy to whomever they will, particularly the covenant people (who had just committed gross idolatry), without thereby suspending the prerogative to judge and punish as well.¹⁶

The Naming of Israel's God Outside of Israel: Numbers 24; Genesis 14

Although the biblical authors present the LORD's identity primarily as Israel's covenant God, they also selectively adapted names for God from their Canaanite neighbors. For example, the Old Testament often calls God 'El or 'El 'Elyon, the latter of which is translated “God Most High,” or as *ho hupsistos* in the LXX.¹⁷ 'El could be a generic appellative denoting deity, but 'El was also the name of the high god of the Canaanite pantheon, and 'Elyon was an associated Canaanite deity.¹⁸ The Old Testament authors, being fully aware of the Canaanite antecedents for this language, worked those names into their descriptions of YHWH, as in the account of Melchizedek in Genesis 14.

Melchizedek was the king-priest of the city of Salem, who blessed Abraham after the patriarch routed the military forces of an enemy king. Melchizedek is called a “priest of 'El 'Elyon” (14:18) and he blesses Abraham in the name of his god, claiming that Abraham was granted victory by 'El 'Elyon, whom Melchizedek describes as the “maker of heaven and earth” (an attribute that Canaanite religion ascribed to 'El).¹⁹ Rather than disputing the pagan priest's theology, Abraham appears to assent to Melchizedek's assertion, only pausing to ascribe to YHWH the name “'El 'Elyon, maker of heaven and earth” (v. 22). In other words, Abraham accepts the veracity of the pagan priest's assertions about 'El 'Elyon and links the Canaanite creator god with his own covenant deity.

Or consider Balaam, a pagan oracle hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the Israelites so that Balak could drive them out of his territory (Num. 22:4–6). Although Balaam accepts the maledictory commission, he finds himself unable to do what he was paid for because when he attempts to jinx

Israel, the spirit of Elohim comes upon him (24:4) and YHWH puts words of blessing in his mouth (22:38; 23:5, 12, 16). Even though Balaam describes himself as “one who hears the words of ’El, and knows the knowledge of ’Elyon, who sees the vision of Shaddai” (Num. 24:15)—using three names for Canaanite deities—the blessing Balaam pronounces derives from the LORD. Thus, Israel’s God absorbs the names of Canaanite gods while co-opting their oracle for Israel’s blessing.

Allow me to say a bit more about the name *Shaddai*, that third divine epithet invoked by Balaam (Num. 24:15). The etymology of *Shaddai* is contested, but the LXX often translates *Shaddai* as *pantokratōr*, which is why English translations of the name read “God Almighty.”²⁰ At times, this seems apt, as when ’El Shaddai is depicted as a God of war (Ps. 68:14; Isa. 13:6; Ezek. 1:24; Joel 1:15; Job 6:4); in such contexts, ’El *Shaddai* is functionally similar to the moniker “Lord of Hosts,” *Yahweh Tzebaoth*, that appears in Isaiah 6:5 as well as pervading the former and latter prophets.²¹ Both those names exalt God’s power as the one who directs the armies of men (1 Sam. 17:45) and of angels (1 Kings 22:19; 2 Kings 21:5).

Nonetheless, there is a strong case to be made that *Shaddai* derives from the word *shad*, which means “breast.” *Shad* was an epithet for *Asherah*, a female Canaanite fertility deity who was ’El’s consort and was associated with breastfeeding.²² While the Hebrew Bible does not describe YHWH as a goddess, various texts do associate the LORD with maternal characteristics, indicating that YHWH bears attributes that polytheistic religions associated with female deities.²³

Accordingly, the LORD is sometimes called *Shaddai* specifically in the capacity of providing offspring, as in the fertility promises to the patriarchs (Gen. 17:1–6, 28:3, 35:11, 48:3–4).²⁴ The connection of *Shaddai* to fertility is most explicit in Jacob’s deathbed benediction of Joseph, which invokes *Shaddai* to bless Joseph with *birkot shadayim*, “blessings of the breasts and of the womb” (Gen. 49:25). By calling the LORD *Shaddai*, the Israelites expressed that YHWH was the source of the fertility blessings, which Canaanites attributed to *Asherah*. “Orthodox” Yahwists would not go so far as to affirm the existence of *Asherah* but, having already subsumed pagan conceptions of ’El into their view of the LORD, they also incorporated key virtues of ’El’s consort.²⁵

Naming God Out of the Experience of God: Genesis 16

One of the most overt examples of Israelites adopting non-Israelite theology appears in Genesis 16, with Hagar. Hagar is an Egyptian slave girl whose mistress, Sarah, gives her to Abraham as a surrogate. When Hagar conceives,

Sarah grows jealous and abuses Hagar, who subsequently flees back toward Egypt. She makes it as far as a spring on the road to Shur, where she encounters the “angel of the LORD” (Gen. 16:9–11), who informs her that God has taken heed of her abuse and will recompense her with a multitude of descendants through the son she carries.²⁶ She is told to name him Ishmael, which means “God hears.” By naming her son in this fashion, the angel tells her how to interpret her experience of being abused by Sarah and blessed by the LORD.

Hagar marvels: “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” (Gen. 16:13). At this juncture in the narrative both Hagar and the author claim, staggeringly, that she has seen not just the angel of the LORD but indeed the LORD themselves. This is likely the consequence of redactional layering in the Genesis account. Gerhard von Rad argues that the oldest versions of the tradition narrated a direct encounter between the LORD and Hagar and that the angel of the Lord was later introduced as a mediating figure to soften the notion that Hagar really saw the LORD directly.²⁷ This reconstruction seems reasonable since this precise interpretive maneuvering can be viewed in LXX translations of some Hebrew texts.²⁸ But in the canonical form of this passage, the logic of Genesis 16:13 depends on Hagar understanding the angel of the Lord as “a form in which Yahweh appears. . . , God himself in human form.”²⁹

While it is extraordinary that Hagar saw the LORD and survived, what she does in response to that experience is unparalleled in the Hebrew Bible: she creates a name for God. The name she invents, ‘El-Roi, means “The God Who Sees Me.”³⁰ With this name, Hagar underscores that God is a God who sees her and acts on her behalf. God had told her how to name her son, interpreting for her the experience of being heard; she in turn named God, interpreting her experience of being seen.³¹ Hagar—the exploited Egyptian slave girl, trafficked from her homeland, bedded by an octogenarian man (Gen. 16:16), and physically abused by his jealous wife—that invisible girl was seen by God. Out of a personal encounter between Abraham’s God and an Egyptian trauma survivor, there arose personal theology.³² And even though Hagar was never integrated into the lineage of the Israelites (in contrast with other non-Israelite women like Ruth or Tamar), her theologizing—affirming that the LORD is a God who sees the invisible and exploited—is canonized in Jewish Scripture.

Heavenly Figures: Daniel 7

Genesis 16 introduced the angel of the LORD as a mediating figure between God and humanity. In addition to the angel of the LORD, who represents

God in interactions with humans, the Old Testament speaks of the spirit of God not as a distinct divine person so much as an expression of the presence, wisdom, and power of the LORD (see, for example, Isa. 11:2; 63:10; Ps. 51:11; Gen. 1:2).³³ On the other end of the celestial spectrum, further away from the divine spirit and the divine-ish angel of the LORD, there exist the ordinary angels. Angels are nondivine supernatural beings in intertestamental Judaism and the New Testament, but at various points in the Hebrew Bible we perceive hints of their relationship to the old pagan idea of a divine counsel, the lesser deities of which have been downgraded in Israelite thought so they are no longer gods but mostly anonymous members of the heavenly host (see, for example, Gen. 11:6–7; Job 1:6; Ps. 82:1; 1 Kings 22:19–23). Israelite religion responded to polytheism by ascribing to YHWH some congenial names and attributes of pagan deities, while denying the reality of other gods and reconstruing the heavenly council in terms of a host of angels surrounding the LORD.

The complexity of the ways in which the Old Testament describes the heavenly host and the mediators of the LORD would create space for Christians to negotiate their unfolding development of the doctrines of the deity of Christ and the Trinity. But no text so lent itself to subsequent Christian hermeneutical innovation as did Daniel 7. In a nocturnal vision, Daniel witnesses the establishment of multiple thrones in heaven (Dan. 7:9). On one of them sits a white-haired and fiery God, surrounded by legions of celestial beings (7:10). God is called the “Ancient of Days,” in keeping with descriptions of the Canaanite God ’El, who was called the “Ancient One” or “Father of Years.”³⁴ This description also aligns thematically with the description of God as ’El ’Olam, the eternal God.³⁵

Then, in verse 13, Daniel sees another figure with a human form, “one like a son of man” (*cəbar ’enosh*, *huios anthrōpou*) approaching the Ancient of Days while being borne along by clouds. In Canaanite religion, it was the god Ba’al, son of ’El, who rode on the clouds, so the Psalms sometimes attribute that mode of transport to YHWH (Ps. 68:4; 104:3), claiming for the LORD the majesty the pagans ascribed to Ba’al.³⁶ But in Daniel’s vision the cloud rider like a son of man is distinct from and enthroned *alongside* the Ancient of Days, (much like Ba’al would have been seated alongside ’El). Moreover, to the figure like a son of man there is presented universal and eternal dominion. All of this was problematic for the sort of Jewish monotheism celebrated in the Shema (Deut. 6:4). But a few centuries later this crowded heavenly scene would serve as fodder for the theological speculations of a Jewish sect that came to think that their crucified Messiah might be divine.

Naming God in the New Testament

In the Greek New Testament we encounter a collection of writings, mostly authored by Jews, that grapple with unexpected experiences of divinity. Much like Hagar, who named God out of her experience of the LORD as the God who saw her, the earliest Christians felt that they had encountered God in Jesus and sought to name God in ways that interpreted their experiences as truly as they could without overtly violating their Jewish faith. While it would take centuries to systematize language to account for their high Christology and Trinitarian theology, the New Testament texts bear witness to the beginning of that process and provided the linguistic data that would shape patristic doctrinal formulations.

The Gospel of Mark provides insight into the ways that early Christians described the deity they perceived in Jesus, using three titles—Son of God, Son of Man, and Lord—all of which were extremely semantically elastic. The expression “Son of God” (Mark 1:1), for example, could be used to describe a normal human (Ps. 8:4; Ezek. 37:3), a divinely favored leader, like King David (Ps. 2:6–8), or a celestial being (Gen. 6:2, 4).³⁷ Similarly, the phrase “Son of Man” could refer simply to a human being (under the influence of Aramaic idiomatic usage), or it could be used as a Messianic title (under the influence of Dan. 7:13).³⁸ Finally, the word *kurios*, “lord,” could just mean “boss” but was also the preferred Greek term for translating YHWH in the LXX.³⁹ The ambiguity of these terms afforded Christians some lexical leeway in communicating the divinity they perceived in Jesus.

Son of Man: Mark 2 and 14

This ambiguity is on full display in Mark 2, where the Pharisees criticize Jesus’s disciples for gleaning on the Sabbath (an action that they understood as a violation of the commandment not to work on that day). Jesus responds by defending the disciples’ participation in such life-sustaining activity, contending, “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath” and then buttoning his argument with the daring statement, “so the Son of Man is *kurios* [L/lord] even of the sabbath” (v. 28).

Here polysemy is key to interpretation. Since the phrase “Son of Man” could be used as a synonym for “a human,” and since *kurios* could just be understood as “boss,” Jesus could just be interpreted as saying that the Sabbath should be a blessing for people, not a burden. But the reader of Mark knows (a) that Jesus uses “Son of Man” self-referentially;⁴⁰ (b) that *kurios* was the standard Greek translation of YHWH; and (c) that the Old Testament defines the Sabbath as God’s.⁴¹ All of this indicates that Jesus “shares with

God the identity as κύριος [*kurios*] of the sabbath.”⁴² Mark never affirms the Lordship of Christ to the exclusion of the Lordship of the heavenly God of whom Jesus speaks and to whom he relates. Rather, “There is one κύριος [*kurios*], and yet two figures, God and Jesus, share this name. . . . This, in Mark’s view, does not compromise monotheism, but certainly reinterprets monotheism.”⁴³

At the end of his life, Jesus becomes rather less coy about his identity. Mark 14 narrates Jesus’s interrogation by the Jewish high priest, who was hoping to get Jesus to admit to being a Messianic claimant—that is, an aspirant to the throne of Israel—so he could bring Jesus up on charges of political sedition before Pontius Pilate, his Roman overlord.⁴⁴ He asks, “Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?”⁴⁵—revealing thereby the way in which the Messiah was often referred to with the title “Son of God,” by analogy to David (Ps. 2:6–8).

Jesus’s response, however, gives the high priest everything he wanted and a great deal more. He admits to being the Messiah by saying “I am,” and then doubles down on that admission by interpreting his Messianic identity with an allusion to Daniel 7: “you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.”⁴⁶ We have already discussed how Daniel 7 was a theological minefield since it implies divinity for a human-like figure. Jesus, however, barrels across that minefield, identifying himself with that godlike Messianic entity using the words *I am*, “I am,” a phrase that evokes the name of God in Exodus 3:14 (*Egō eimi ho ōn*) and texts like Deuteronomy 32:39 (or Isa. 43:10; 46:4), in which God affirms “I am (*Egō eimi*) and there is no God except me.”⁴⁷ In other words, when asked if he is the Davidic Messiah, Jesus responds, “If by ‘Messiah’ you mean a divine figure who will not only save Israel but be enthroned in heaven, then yes, I am that kind of God.” The high priest picks up exactly what Jesus was putting down and condemns it as “Blasphemy!” (Mark 14:63–64).

Divine? Since When? Luke 1 and John 1

Later New Testament texts use names of God to affirm that Jesus’s divinity extended back to the beginning of his human existence. For example, in Luke 1 the angel Gabriel announces that Mary will conceive the Messiah, despite her virginity, and that his kingdom would be unending, much like Daniel 7:14 indicated. The angel explains that her conception will be the result of an “overshadowing” by “the power of the Most High” (a.k.a. ‘Elyon, a.k.a. the Holy Spirit). As such, her child would be called “Son of God” (Luke 1:35) and equivalently, *huios hupsistou*, “the Son of the Most High” (1:32). Even though the appellation “Son of God” could be used in a purely

political Messianic sense, the angel indicates that Mary's child would in fact be Son of God in (for lack of a better term) "genetic" fashion.

Luke makes the divine identity of the baby more explicit when Mary hurries off to see her cousin, Elizabeth, who herself had just miraculously conceived a son, the prophet John. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (v. 41), she recognizes what has happened in Mary and asks delightedly how she could be so blessed "that the mother of my Lord (*tou kuriou mou*) comes to me?" It is clear from Luke 1:38 and 46 that *kurios* is being used in reference to God, such that Jesus, who is conceived by God's Spirit, is likewise identified as God. As in Mark's Gospel, Jesus and God are both identified as *kurios* from Jesus's very conception, without collapsing the distinction between the two.⁴⁸

John's gospel clarifies that the deity who became Jesus existed even prior to his conception, saying, "In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God" (John 1:1). While this opening evokes various strands of Jewish religious language (divine wisdom, the *memra*, personification of the Torah, etc.⁴⁹), this verse draws especially on the Stoic and Middle-Platonic philosophical use of the word *logos* to denote the divine active rational principle, which the Stoics believed organized and pervaded all creation.⁵⁰ John uses this term, already evocative of divinity, to affirm that, prior to the incarnation (v. 14), the *logos* (a) existed, (b) was God, and yet (c) was "with God" and therefore was somehow distinguishable from God. Being God and being distinguishable from God: this is basically the same antinomy that Luke and Mark express in their use of *kurios* for both God and Jesus.

John goes on to clarify that, contrary to what a Stoic conception of the *logos* could countenance, the *logos* became flesh in such a way that, in the *logos*, humans could witness the glory of God. John thus picks up the Old Testament belief that God's glory cannot be seen directly and contends that in Jesus all could see a semblance of God's glory. "No one" he says, "has ever seen God," at least not fully, and yet the *logos*, the "only begotten God (*monogenēs theos*) who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known." John uses the language of Father and Son (1:14, 18) to characterize the relationship between *theos* and the *logos*.⁵¹ The Old Testament only describes the LORD as Father on a few occasions, always indicating that the Father's children are humans, not deities.⁵² But John reworks the terminology to communicate that God and the *logos* are conjointly divine, that, because of Jesus's filial relationship to the Father, the incarnate *logos* can authentically present God to and interpret God for (v. 18) humanity.

In brief, John 1 enhances the high Christology of the synoptic Gospels by adopting Old Testament (Father) and Stoic (*logos*) terms and reshaping

their usage in innovative ways that articulate something of the mysterious relationship of *theos* with the person whom John knew as Jesus.

The Resurrected God: John 20 and Revelation 1

The baldest attribution of the title “God” to Jesus occurs in John 20, when the resurrected Christ appears to the disciples and Thomas cries out, “My Lord and my God.”⁵³ Although the gospel opened with the assertion that the *logos* was with and was itself *theos*. Thomas explicitly ascribes to Jesus both the titles of *kurios* and *theos*. Nonetheless, this application of deity to Jesus does not collapse the Godhead into Jesus; for, when Jesus appeared to the women disciples a week earlier, Jesus had told them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (John 20:17), thus maintaining a clear distinction between himself and God the Father.

The interplay between divine names and attributes of the resurrected Christ becomes more elaborate in the book of Revelation, when the Seer has a vision of God in the heavenly throne room. In keeping with the Old Testament, the Seer refers to God as the Almighty, the Pantocrator (Rev. 1:8), a Septuagint term used to translate Shaddai in Job and Yahweh Tzebaoth in the Former and Latter Prophets. He also calls God the Alpha and Omega (Rev. 1:4), emphasizing the Lord’s eternity in accordance with the Old Testament description of God as the Ancient of Days and ‘El ‘Olam.

Thereafter, the Seer claps eyes on Jesus, who appears with characteristics both of an angelic being (especially as per Dan. 10:5), and of God (especially as per Dan. 7).⁵⁴ The Seer describes him as “one like a Son of Man,” which calls to mind Daniel 7’s description of the celestial enthronement of such a figure. But whereas Daniel saw one like a son of man being presented *before* the Ancient of Days, here that figure is described *very much like* the Ancient of Days. Like the Ancient of Days, his hair is bright white (Rev. 1:14; Dan. 7:9); his eyes are like a flame of fire, just as fire flowed from the presence of the Ancient of Days (Rev. 1:14; Dan. 7:10). Further, when the Son of Man introduces himself, he uses the formula *egō eimi*, “I am,” calling to mind the name of the LORD from Exodus 3:14 and Isaiah 43:10, 46:4.⁵⁵ And if one were initially uncertain whether such an allusion was intended through the *egō eimi* phrase, the Son of Man then predicates of himself the very attributes of eternity the Lord had just claimed in 1:8. So although the divine names in this text (Almighty, Alpha and Omega, Lord) are applied primarily to the Father (a title used in 1:6), the resurrected Son of Man is attributed the characteristics corresponding to those names, reinforcing his incorporation in the Christian understanding of God.

The Name Above Every Name: Philippians 2

Revelation 1 is not the only text that underscores both the preexistence and future reign of the Son; Paul does the same in a way that is even more explicit about the application of the divine name to Jesus.

As part of an exhortation to the Philippian believers to prioritize the needs of others over their own (Phil. 2:1–5), Paul invokes how the preexistent Christ took on humanity and allowed himself to be crucified (2:6–8) such that God consequently exalted Jesus and “gave him the name that is above every name” (2:9). As every Jew knew, the name above every name is Yahweh, and that point is made utterly clear in verse 10, when Paul cites something that the prophet Isaiah said about Yahweh.⁵⁶

In the book of Isaiah, the uniqueness of the name of the Lord is repeatedly celebrated (41:13; 42:8; 43:11; 44:5; 45:18).⁵⁷ God declares, “I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other” (Isa. 42:8).⁵⁸ God swears that eventually “all the ends of the earth” (45:22) will recognize the LORD as the only true God. “To me,” he says in Isaiah 45:3, “every knee will bow, every tongue shall swear.” It is this text that Paul applies to Jesus (Phil. 2:10–11), declaring that the fulfillment of the expectation (in Isaiah 45) of YHWH’s universal dominion comes precisely in universal submission to Jesus Christ as LORD (*kurios Iēsous Christos*; Phil 2:11). As in the Gospels, YHWH does not cease to be *kurios* by naming Jesus as *kurios*; both share the title of being the one *kurios* (again, bear in mind Isa. 42:8), and for that reason the exaltation of Jesus is precisely for the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:11).⁵⁹

The Son with the Father and the Spirit: Matthew 28 and John 14

We are finally in a position to examine how “Spirit” emerges as a name for God, which transpires in conjunction with the attribution of divine names to Jesus, as Christians discerned that Jesus related to God not only as the Father but also and distinctly as the Spirit.

To be clear: attributing deity to the Spirit of the LORD was not a Christian innovation; the Old Testament speaks often of God’s Spirit. Early Christianity, however, differentiates the Spirit from the Father. So at the end of Matthew’s gospel, the risen Christ declares to his followers, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18⁶⁰), thus alluding to Daniel 7:14, in which the Son of Man received dominion over all the nations of the world. He then tells the disciples to teach others to obey him, baptizing them “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”⁶¹ This bespeaks a distinction between the Spirit and the Father, just as the Son was distinct from the Father and Spirit.

Since the Father and Spirit were always considered divine, baptizing in Jesus's name as well as theirs implies that Jesus is also divine. What is odd in this instruction, however, is the singular "name," *onoma*, in the phrase "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." One would expect the plural *onomata*, "names," if the baptism were to be performed in the three discrete names of Father, Son, and Spirit. The singular "name" suggests the shared identity of Father, Son, and Spirit, and perhaps even implies baptism into the one name the Father gave to Jesus (Phil. 2:9; John 17:11): the name of the LORD, YHWH.⁶²

The commissioning of the disciples concludes with the promise "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20), alluding to one other name for Jesus: Emmanuel, a Hebrew name from Isaiah 7:14, meaning "God (is/be) with us." Prior to Jesus's birth, the angel of the Lord declared that Jesus's conception was "from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20) such that Jesus should be called "God is with us" (Matt. 1:23) because in the incarnation God came to dwell bodily with Israel. Matthew's gospel therefore concludes with the promise that, even after Jesus's resurrection, he did not desert his followers.

The (logical) worry that Jesus might have abandoned the disciples after his death also pops up in John 14 (vv. 2–3, 13). There Jesus reveals that in his impending death (John 13:31–38) he would proceed to the Father, which emboldens Philip to request, "Lord, show us the Father." To this Jesus replies (in accordance with John 1:18; 14:6–7), "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," thus confirming the unity of Jesus and the Father.⁶³ This unity is so robust that Jesus affirms that when the disciples would later invoke Jesus's name and Jesus would act on their behalf, the Father would thereby be glorified in the Son (John 14:13–14; the logic is similar to that behind Phil. 2:11), for Jesus had come in the name of the Father (John 5:43; 10:25).⁶⁴

John then adds an additional dimension to this intradivine relationality. Jesus clarifies that after his death the Father would send the Advocate (*paraklētos*, cf. 16:7), the Holy Spirit, to accompany the disciples (14:26).⁶⁵ That Spirit would be sent, however, not in the name of the Father (as Jesus was), but in the name of Jesus himself in a way that both reinforces John's representation of the Son as part of God and uses "Holy Spirit" as a name for an entity of the one God distinguishable from the Father and the Son.⁶⁶ As Gary Burge says, "The rudimentary Trinitarian implications of 14:25–26 are inescapable."⁶⁷ It would of course take centuries for terms like "hypostasis," "person," "substance," and "essence" to coalesce and then to be used in coherent and agreed-upon fashions. But before Christians had technical dogmatic theological terminology for God as Trinity, they had names for

God as Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Lord. Naming God is theologizing. And theologizing, as I have said, is dangerous business.

Continuing to Name God?

This chapter has examined how the Jewish Scriptures unfold their understanding of the LORD and ascribe to God certain names of Canaanite deities. Although the LORD was Israel's covenant God, they accepted that non-Israelites like Melchizedek and Balaam could also speak truly about YHWH. This study has also examined how Christians named God. They were deeply rooted in the Jewish Scriptures and yet they were shaped by their personal experiences of Jesus and the Holy Spirit and drew on their knowledge of pagan ideas such as the Stoic *logos*. The names they ascribed to God were the raw material of what became Trinitarian orthodoxy. If the early Christians were right about Jesus, they had glimpsed more than Rabbi Akiba had done in his celestial vision. Akiba, however, would have lumped them in with "The Other Guy."

But what does this mean for those of us who are Christians, knowing that Muslim friends name God differently than we do? The passage that I keep coming back to is the story of Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, the ancestor of Muhammad. Like Moses, like Isaiah, like John the Seer, she claps eyes on the LORD. But unlike them, she creates a name for God out of her own experience. And even though Hagar and her descendants are not made part of Israel, Israel canonizes her naming of God, her theology. The key question for us today is whether those of us who understand ourselves as, ethnically or spiritually, children of Sarah ought to listen to how God has been named by the children of Hagar and agree that they too have seen God.⁶⁸

Notes

1. The "-im" ending is typically a plural suffix in Hebrew, but it is widely agreed that in the Hebrew Bible, when Elohim refers to the God of Israel, the plural ending does not indicate plurality in God, even if it may reflect polytheistic antecedents and was subsequently exploited by Christian interpreters for Trinitarian ends.

2. See William VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, 5 vols. (hereafter, *NIDOTTE*) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1997), 1:257–58, 275. Adonai is sometimes used in construct forms such as "Lord of all the earth" (Josh. 3:13; Ps. 97:5; Mic. 4:13) or "Lord of lords" (Deut. 10:17; Ps. 136:3).

3. *NIDOTTE* 4:1295–1300. YHWH, in some places, is more briefly Yah. Clifford Hubert Dourousseau, "Yah: A Name of God," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2014): 21–26.

4. Koog-Pyoung Hong, "The Euphemism for the Ineffable Name of God and its Early Evidence in Chronicles," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 37, no. 4 (2013): 473–84.

5. Sometimes the Tetragrammaton was vocalized as Elohim or even Hashem (literally, "The Name").

6. See R. Laird Harris, "The Pronunciation of the Tetragram," *Presbyterion* 7, no. 1–2 (1981): 173–75; and George Howard, "The Tetragram and the New Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96, no. 1 (1977): 63–76.

7. It is unwise to press the philological details of the correspondence between the name YHWH and the phrase *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh*. Harris, "The Pronunciation of the Tetragram," 178–79. For an overview of interpretations of the phrase's meaning, see, e.g., Charles R. Gianotti, "The Meaning of the Divine Name YHWH," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142, no. 565 (1985): 41–46; and Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 64.

8. Hebrew imperfect verbs can be translated in the present tense but are more frequently rendered in the future.

9. Amitai Adler, "What's in a Name? Reflections upon Divine Names and the Attraction of God to Israel," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2009): 265–68.

10. On being the covenant God of Israel: "This name. . . identifies God as that ultimate mystery who is free to be whoever and whatever God chooses to be. . . . Even deeper than the mystery of absolute freedom is the mystery in which such freedom binds itself . . . in faithfulness to a particular community to which it has made promises that it now undertakes to fulfill." J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 34. On fulfilling the vows made to Israel's ancestors, see Gianotti, "The Meaning of the Divine Name YHWH," 44–48; and J. Gerald Janzen, "What's in a Name? Yahweh in Exodus 3 and the Wider Biblical Context," *Interpretation* 33, no. 3 (1979): 233–34.

11. For example, in Exodus 6:6–8, God declares Godself to be Yahweh and then promises to free Israel from Egypt, to take them as God's covenant people, and to give them the promised land, three times in those verses repeating "I am YHWH." Gianotti, "The Meaning of the Divine Name YHWH," 46; Janzen, *Exodus*, 53; Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1974), 115; and Hamilton, *Exodus*, 101.

12. This idea is expressed elsewhere in the Old Testament as well: Genesis 16:13; Deuteronomy 4:12; Psalms 97:2.

13. See also Numbers 12:8; Deuteronomy 34:10; cf. Genesis 32:30 (Jacob); Exodus 24:9–11 (Aaron and the seventy-two elders); Isaiah 6:1–5 (Isaiah). Hamilton, *Exodus*, 569.

14. While the punctuation of the NRSV implies that 33:19 and 34:6–7 are simply statements subsequent to the divine name, it is more satisfactory to see them as expositions of what it means for God to be YHWH, especially given the repetition of the verb *vayiqra*, "to call" or "to call out," both before the bare statement of the name of the Lord in 34:5 and before the more expansive repetition of the name of the Lord in combination with the description a "God merciful and gracious" in 34:6.

15. See Childs, *Exodus*, 596.

16. The joint affirmation that God will forgive iniquity and yet punish the guilty appears across the Old Testament (Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15). Childs, *Exodus*, 612.

17. Numbers 24:15–16; Deuteronomy 32:8; Psalms 7:19, 47:2, 92:2; Genesis 14:19–20.

18. Walter R. Wifall, “El Shaddai or El of the Fields,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92, no. 1 (1980): 24; *NIDOTTE* 1:400–401; W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 147; and R. N. Whybray, “Genesis,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 50. ‘Elyon was perhaps also epithet for ‘El; Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004), 72; and Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1998), 317.

19. Whybray, “Genesis,” 50; and Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 317.

20. Childs, *Exodus*, 110; and Hamilton, *Exodus*, 99. Many argue that the term means “mountain,” while others associate it with *saddai*, “open field.” Wifall, “El Shaddai,” 24–32.

21. 1 Samuel 15:2; 17:45; 2 Samuel 6:2; 1 Kings 19:14; 2 Kings 19:31; Psalms 46:7, 11; Isaiah 6:3, 5; and James 5:4. *Yahweh Tzebaoth* is translated *kurios sabaōth* or *kurios tōn dynameōn* in the LXX; see *NIDOTTE* 4:1297–1298.

22. Harriet Lutzky, “Shadday as a Goddess Epithet,” *Vetus Testamentum* 48, no. 1 (1998): 15–36; and Christopher B. Hays, “‘Can a Woman Forget Her Nursing Child?’ Divine Breastfeeding and the God of Israel,” in *Divine Doppelgängers: YHWH’s Ancient Look-Alikes*, ed. Collin Cornell (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), 202–14.

23. See, for example, Isaiah 42:14, 49:14–15, and 66:12–13; see also, in the New Testament, Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34, although drawing on language about God in Psalms 36:7, 57:1, 63:7, 91:4.

24. Jared C. Hood, “I Appeared as El Shaddai: Intertextual Interplay in Exodus 6:3,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 76, no. 1 (2014): 176–79.

25. In spite of Old Testament orthodoxy, archaeology indicates that popular Israelite practice may have represented Asherah at times as a consort of YHWH. William G. Dever, “Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillat ‘Arjūd,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 255 (1984): 21–37.

26. Interestingly, v. 14 refers to the place as a well, *bə‘er*, not a spring. The distinction here is not incidental. Rather, the text engages in a telling wordplay, for the word for *spring*, *‘ayin*, also means *eye*; likewise, the place name, Shur, is a homophone for the verb *shur*, which means “to see, gaze on.” Towner, *Genesis*, 161.

27. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1972), 193–94; cf. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, Mercer Library of Biblical Studies (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 186–87.

28. For example, in Exodus 4:24, the Masoretic Text (the traditional Hebrew text) says that YHWH appeared in front of Moses and tried to kill him, but the LXX changes it to the *aggelos kuriou* (Gunkel, *Genesis*, 186), probably to avoid the idea that Moses and Zipporah saw God directly.

29. Rad, *Genesis*, 193.

30. *Rō'iy* is an odd phrase, but seems to be composed of the divine epithet El in combination with something like the participle of *rā'ah* (to see) and a first-person singular suffix, hence: "The God Seeing Me." It is easier to see the grammar underlying the related etymology of "Beer-lahai-roi" (Gen. 16:14), "The Well of the Living One Who Sees Me."

31. James Chukwuma Okoye, "Sarah and Hagar: Genesis 16 and 21," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32, no. 2 (2007): 168–69.

32. I am grateful to Dr. Carly Crouch for this insight.

33. For an overview of the way the Spirit of God is construed in the Old Testament and intertestamental Judaism, see Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 905–15.

34. P. R. Davies, "Daniel," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 567; John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 741; and *NIDOTTE* 3:346.

35. Genesis 21:33. Compare Jeremiah 10:10; Isaiah 26:4. See *NIDOTTE* 3:346.

36. Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *Bible Background Commentary*, 741.

37. The term is clearly Messianic in, for example, Luke 4:41; John 1:49.

38. See discussion in Darrell L. Bock, "Son of Man," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2013), 894–900.

39. Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 2:347, 3:1058–81. It was also an appellative for pagan deities; see, for example, Exodus 14:4, 15:26; Leviticus 11:44, 19:3–4; Deuteronomy 5:6–9; Hosea 13:4; Isaiah 43:3, 51:15; Psalms 81[80]:10. Note that the Hebrew Masoretic text and the Septuagint differ in their approaches to numbering the Psalms. Both systems are in use today. Hence, the text mentioned here is cited according to both systems.

40. 2:10, 8:31, 8:38, 9:9, 9:12, 9:31, and so on.

41. Exodus 16:25, 20:10, 31:13; Leviticus 19:3, 19:30; Deuteronomy 5:14; Ezekiel 20:12–13. R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 148.

42. Daniel Johansson, "Kyrios in the Gospel of Mark," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33:1 (2010): 112. For other places where Jesus is called LORD in ways that identify him with YHWH, see Acts 8:16; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Romans 1:3–4, 10:9–13.

43. Johansson, "Kyrios," 119.

44. The Jewish temple leadership knew that Pilate would not be bothered by any of Jesus's alleged theological heterodoxy, but if Pilate were to believe Jesus to be a claimant to the throne of David, then Caesar's governor in Judea would be forced to take swift action.

45. The phrase "The Blessed One" is a circumlocution for the name of God, reflecting the first century practice of not naming God directly. Harris, "The Pronunciation of the Tetragram," 174; and R. Kendall Soulen, "Jesus and the Divine Name," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 65, no. 1–2 (2015): 50–53.

46. The term *Power* serves as a circumlocution for the divine name. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 610, 13.

47. On the background of the “I am” sayings, see Grant Macaskill, “Name Christology, Divine Aseity, and the I Am Sayings in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 12, no. 2 (2018): 223–30. Ironically, this phrase is slightly circumlocutious; Jesus engages in a bit of the reverential name avoidance appropriate to the divine name even as he applies it to himself. Soulen, “Jesus and the Divine Name,” 55–56. The Gospel of John uses the phrase “I am” in similar ways: John 4:25–26, 6:20, 8:24, 6:28, 6:58, 13:19, 18:14; see further Soulen, “Jesus and the Divine Name,” 53–55.

48. Argued in detail in C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 31–49.

49. Macaskill, “Name Christology,” 231.

50. See, for example, Diogenes Laertius, *Vit.* 7.134–38; and C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (London: SPCK, 1968), 280.

51. Although these terms are used in various parts of the New Testament (see, for example, Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6), they are especially pervasive in Matthew and Luke, most poignantly in the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2).

52. Fifteen times; see, for example, Jeremiah 3:4, 19; Isaiah 63:16, 64:8; see *NIDOTTE* 4:1299.

53. In the Old Testament, LORD and God are often used as synonyms and even in pairs, as in, for example, the construction *’elohi YHWH* (“the Lord my God”), as in Psalms 7:2, 7:4 in the Masoretic Text, 30:3; René Kieffer, “John,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 998.

54. For details, see Brandon D. Smith, “The Identification of Jesus with YHWH in the Book of Revelation: A Brief Sketch,” *Criswell Theological Review* 14, no. 1 (2016): 75–78; David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1997), 94–97; and G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 209–15.

55. “I am” language occurs in Revelations 1:8, 1:17, 2:23, 21:6, 22:16, where it “is used to make divine predications of the speaker.” Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 100–101. See also Macaskill, “Name Christology,” 226–28.

56. For an overview of key issues, see Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 238.

57. G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 163.

58. This causes one to think of another name for God, *’El Qannah*, the Jealous God; Exodus 34:14; cf. Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 4:24, 5:9, 6:15.

59. Cf. Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1983), 94; and O’Brien, *Philippians*, 251.

60. As also affirmed in Philemon 2:10–11.

61. The triadic combination of Father, Son, and Spirit is found in 1 Corinthians 6:11, 12:4–6; 2 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 4:6; 1 Peter 1:2. Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 21–28: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 632.

62. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the*

Gospel According to Saint Matthew, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 3:685–86.

63. In John 10:30, 37–38, Jesus had said “I and the Father are one.”

64. John goes on to claim that the Father had given Jesus his name (John 17:11–12, 26). Soulen, “Jesus and the Divine Name,” 53–54.

65. Probably the most adequate translation of *paraklētos* is “advocate,” with a legal nuance, insofar as John 15:26 and 16:7–11 use the term, in relationship to testimony and judgment (cf. Mark 13:11; Luke 12:11–12). Gerhard Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 813–14; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester: Intervarsity, 1991), 499; and Gary M. Burge, *John*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 395–96. John 16:7, in complementary fashion, says that Jesus will send the Spirit (16:7). First Peter 1:11 accordingly calls the Holy Spirit, “The Spirit of Christ.”

66. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed., Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 261; and Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 505.

67. Burge, *John*, 398–99.

68. During the closing plenary of 2021 Building Bridges Seminar, a participant asked whether I would genuinely maintain that Hagar is the only person in the Bible to have named God—pointing out that the Psalmists give names to God. I replied that, of course, the Scripture is constantly predicating names for God—making up names for God. Enscripturation almost by its nature entails applying names to God. However, in the *narration* of Scriptural events, Hagar is unique as a person insofar as she is described as creating a name for God. Hagar does something that Moses does not do, that Isaiah does not do, that John the Seer does not do. So within the narrative world represented by the Bible, she is unique.

Calling God by His Names

The Subject and Object of “Naming God” in the Qur’an

Maria Massi Dakake

*To God belong the most beautiful names, so call Him by them. Q. 7:180
Call upon God, or call upon the Compassionate. Whichever you call upon, to
Him belong the most beautiful Names. Q. 17:110*

God possesses the “most beautiful names” (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*), the Qur’an tells us more than once. All of these beautiful names, for Muslims, come from the Qur’an—that is, from God’s own speech. They are the names He has given Himself. By revealing them in the Qur’an (and in other revelations), He has “spoken” His own names to human beings that they might speak those names back to Him. He not only allows and encourages human beings to call Him by His name, but in the Qur’an He offers multiple names by which human beings might “name” God and supplicate Him. The theme of the 2021 Building Bridges Seminar was “Naming God.” God is the object in this phrase, but from a Qur’anic perspective, He is also the subject. God is both the named and the one who names. In the biblical book of Genesis, God allows Adam to give names to God’s various other creations (Gen. 2:19, 3:20). In the Qur’an, Adam is given no such power of naming at all; rather, it is God who teaches Adam all of “the names.”¹ From the Qur’anic perspective, since God reserves the power of naming exclusively for Himself in the Qur’an, and He alone authorizes the names that His creatures may use to call upon Him, there could hardly be a vainer act on the part of human beings than to either assign God’s Name to other things (essentially the sin of “associationism” or *shirk*) or to seek to call upon God by names of one’s own devising. We might even ask to what extent there is a difference between these two.

In the Qur'an, such false naming is implicitly compared to idolatry—that is, worshipping objects of one's own manufacture. Like idolatry, calling God by names of one's own devising is not discussed primarily as an act of heresy on the part of human beings but as an act of futility. The emphasis is not so much on such acts as an affront to God—who, the Qur'an assures us, suffers no harm as a result of human actions—but as acts without even any fleeting efficacy for human beings that might slightly offset the eternal harm it will cause them. When the Qur'an condemns false worship, it frequently derides it as the worship of “mere names that you have named,” and “[names] for which God has sent down no authority.”² Since God both *names* and *teaches* the names of all things He has brought into being, to worship “names that you have named,” is to worship nothing at all. This may not be “idol worship” in the crassest sense—that is, it may not involve material idols—but it is, at the very least, “idle worship”—useless, vain, and empty.

God is one, the Qur'an affirms without reservation, but His names are multiple—and to deepen the apparent paradox, among the many names for God in the Qur'an is the name “the One” (al-Wāḥid/al-Aḥad). The Qur'an refers both to God's Name (singular) and to God's Names (plural). For example, all Qur'anic verses (but one) begin “in the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful” (with “name” in the singular, followed by three specific names). Elsewhere, human beings are enjoined to remember and mention the “Name of God” (singular) in prayer or when slaughtering animals. But as seen in the Qur'anic passages I quoted at the outset, God's names are also mentioned in the plural, and He is referred to by many names in the Qur'an. Even so, the Qur'an offers no definitive list of names for God. There are multiple *ṣaḥīḥ* hadiths in which the Prophet Muhammad asserts that God has ninety-nine names, “100 minus one,” and that a great reward will come to those who enumerate (*aḥṣā*) or memorize (*ḥafīẓa*) all of them.³ Even in the collections of hadith, however, we find no single definitive list of such names. There are two hadiths in the canonical collection of Ibn Majah, for example, that give largely overlapping, but not identical, lists of the ninety-nine names of God; and a quick perusal of such lists in other traditional Muslim sources makes it clear that there is no single, official list of Divine Names. Indeed, the hadiths just cited, indicating the virtue and reward to be had for knowing all of the ninety-nine names of God seems to have spurred Muslims to examine the Qur'an themselves for precisely this purpose. The fact that the various lists are not identical makes it clear that God's self-naming cannot be definitively circumscribed or delimited by human effort. Even the additional clarification in the hadith that God's names are “100 minus one” seems superfluous, unless it is suggesting that there is another name

for God that remains a mystery and transcends the boundaries of human knowing—perhaps a name that God keeps to Himself.⁴

In this chapter I present an overview of the various ways in which God is “named” in the Qur’an, and the relationship of the Qur’anic naming of God to the lists of Divine Names given in the hadith and devotional literature. Then I explore what the purpose of God’s many names in the Qur’an might be, what it might mean for human beings to “name God”—that is, to make use of His names, and what the Qur’an intends human beings to do with these names.

Of course, the most frequently mentioned name for God in the Qur’an is Allah, which is sometimes considered an elision of the Arabic “*al-ilāh*,” meaning “the God,” but is most commonly understood in Islamic tradition as a proper name for God. This name, which is etymologically related to other Semitic words for God, such as “El,” is always listed first among the ninety-nine names. It differs from other Qur’anic “Divine Names,” however, in that it is the only exclusively “proper” name of God. That is, it names Him without “describing” Him as the other names do. “Allah” is both one of God’s multiple names and the name that transcends the multiplicity of His names and encompasses it. Metaphorically, the relationship of the name “Allah” to the other names of God is like the relationship of the singular white light to the multiple refractions of this light that one sees as it passes through a prism. As the prism allows one to see the variations of color seamlessly encompassed by the white light, the multiple names of God allow the human being to discern various aspects of God’s essence encompassed, without division, in the name “Allah.” As important as the name “Allah” is to the Islamic tradition, it does not seem to have originated with the Qur’an, as both the Qur’an itself and the broader Islamic tradition suggest that this name was already known to the Arabs of Muhammad’s time and city. It may have been used to name the overarching creator deity with whom the pagan Arabs “associated” other false gods, for which they are described as “associaters” (*mushrikūn*).⁵ In the very first verses of the Qur’an that Muhammad receives, he is told to recite “in the Name of your Lord who created,” a description that Muhammad would likely have understood as a reference to “Allah.”

The only other name used repeatedly in the Qur’anic context as a proper name for God is al-Raḥmān (the Compassionate). Although it is descriptive, it is used as a stand-alone name for God over forty times in the Qur’an. This name is mentioned in the opening quote in which people are enjoined to “call upon God (Allah) or call upon the Compassionate (al-Raḥmān),” indicating that on a functional level the names could be considered interchangeable. Besides its use in the Qur’an itself, there is some evidence that the name

al-Raḥmān was used as a proper name of God by the earliest Muslims. In the *sīra* (biographical literature about the Prophet), there are accounts of the pagan Meccans objecting to the Prophet's new religion because it referred to God by the name al-Raḥmān, a name they did not recognize.⁶ Reports that the Arabs took exception to references to God as "compassionate" might be intended to offer some off-handed insight into the pre-Islamic Arab conception of God. However, the fact that they objected to this name in particular suggests both that it was frequently invoked by Muhammad and his followers as a proper "name" (rather than just a description) for God and that, unlike "Allah," it was foreign to the Arabs at that time. This does not necessarily mean it was unknown but perhaps that it was known specifically as a foreign name for God (given Jewish and Christian use of cognate terms and descriptions for God).

The other names for God in the Qur'an, as identified by Muslims, are descriptive. Most are words that take either a typical Arabic adjectival form—for example, al-Raḥīm (the Merciful), al-'Azīz (the Mighty), or al-Baṣīr (the Seeing)—or an active participle form—for example, al-Khāliq (the Creator), al-Wārith (the Inheritor), al-Nāfi' (the Benefactor). Still other names are impersonal concepts, such as al-Ḥaqq (the Reality), al-Salām (Peace), or al-Nūr (Light). A few of the names typically found in lists of the ninety-nine names, such as al-Bāsiṭ (the Open-handed), or al-Mumīt (the Bringer of Death), are not found in the Qur'an in those precise forms but rather are active participles derived from verbs describing actions of God in the Qur'an. The most common descriptive name of God in the Qur'an is, by far, al-Raḥīm (the Merciful), which is etymologically related to al-Raḥmān, and appears with it as a pair in the opening invocation of each Qur'anic *sūra* but one. It is also found in over one hundred other Qur'anic verses, usually paired with al-Raḥmān or with one of two other frequently mentioned names in the Qur'an: al-Ghaḥūr (the Forgiving), and al-'Azīz (the Mighty).

Some well-recognized "names" of God (although not found as commonly in lists) are actually Qur'anic phrases that describe God. Many of them use the common term "Lord" (*Rabb*), which appears by itself in lists of Divine Names, including the one from Ibn Majah's hadith collection, and is used as a reference for God nearly one thousand times in the Qur'an. It is used in phrases that express God's universal majesty: He is "Lord of the Worlds" (*Rabb al-'ālamīn*), "Lord of the Heavens and the Earth" (*Rabb al-samāwāti wa'l-arḍ*), "Lord of the Throne" (*Rabb al-'arsh*), and "Lord of East and West" (*Rabb al-mashriq wa'l-maghrib*).⁷ But at the same time the term is personal and relational: God is, in various places, "my Lord," "your Lord," or "their Lord." In some Meccan verses, the term *Rabb* is used in phrases

meant to indicate God's specific relation to the people and city of Mecca: He is "Lord of this House" (the Ka'ba; Q. 106:3) and "Lord of this City" (Mecca; Q. 27:91); and addressing the Meccans in one case, the "Lord of your fathers" (Q. 44:8). In the Qur'anic Mosaic narratives, the converted sorcerers at Pharaoh's court proclaim their faith in the "Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Moses and Aaron"—indicating both God's universal lordship and the special relation with the prophets, Moses and Aaron. Other phrases describing God are also sometimes considered to be among His names, for example: *Dhu'l-Jalāli wa'l-Ikrām* (Possessor of Majesty and Bounty), *Arḥam al-rāḥimīn* (Most Merciful of the merciful), or *Mālik al-mulk* (Possessor of Sovereignty). There is a hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad overhears a man invoking God by the series of descriptions that constitute Sūra 112 of the Qur'an (Sūrat al-Ikhlās), invoking God as: "Allah, the One, the Eternally Sufficient unto Himself (al-Ṣamad), Who begets not nor was begotten, and none is like unto Him." Upon hearing this, the Prophet declared that the man has called God by "His greatest Name."

These various individual "names" of God in the Qur'an occasionally occur in clusters but more often occur in pairs. Angelika Neuwirth, among others, has theorized that such pairings of Divine Names play a function in the literary structure of some Qur'anic *sūras*, where they seem to effect a kind of closure to a particular verse or set of verses—marking thematic shifts in some Qur'anic *sūras*. Taking their cues from the Qur'an, however, Muslims themselves were primarily concerned with identifying and learning the Divine Names within the Qur'an as the proper means to call upon God in their prayers and supplications, or as ways of understanding something about their God who transcends all "likenesses." In Islamic theology, these Divine Names (*asmā'*) are discussed primarily as God's attributes or qualities (*ṣifāt*)—terms by which He has not only named but described Himself, and thus as terms by which He could be at least partially known, if never comprehended. Muslims recognized that the various names of God present God not just in multiple but in dialectical ways: as both merciful and just, forgiving and judging, transcendent and immanent, near and far, first and last, outward and inward.⁸ Just as they recognized a spiritually edifying dialectic in the tone of the Qur'anic verses themselves—those that inspire fear repeatedly juxtaposed and balanced with those that inspire hope—so too did they understand the names of God as divided into names of Beauty and Majesty. The names of Beauty were those that presented God as merciful, forgiving, solicitous, and protective of His creatures, and near; while the names of Majesty communicated God's overwhelming power, inescapable judgment, and transcendence. Just as a spiritually healthy tension between

the verses of “fear” and “hope” worked to keep the believer metaphorically moving forward along the “straight path,” the repeated juxtaposition of Divine Names of Majesty and Beauty, sometimes combined in a single verse, could be said to nourish the believer’s proper understanding of God. Qur’an 6:165, for example, describes God as both “Swift in retribution” (*Sarī‘ al-‘iqāb*) and “Forgiving and Merciful” (*Ghafūr, Raḥīm*).

On that note, I would like to turn now to a consideration of what the purpose of the Qur’an’s multiple names of God is for its listeners and readers, what precisely should they *do* with these names of God? As I noted, Islamic scholastic theology treated these names primarily as God’s qualities and attributes (*ṣifāt*). The Qur’an itself does not use the term *ṣifāt* in connection with God’s names or attributes, but it repeatedly condemns those who falsely “describe” God, using the verb “*waṣafa*,” from the same root. Naturally, then, Islamic theologians would understand the descriptive names God uses for Himself in the Qur’an as attributes (*ṣifāt*) that are properly ascribed to God. Yet, I think it is significant that the Qur’an refers to these as “names” rather than as “attributes.” A name is, of course, a means by which some particular being can be identified and distinguished from others. In some cases, a name might be descriptive, communicating some knowledge about the named, but not usually in a comprehensive manner. Knowing someone’s name may be only the beginning getting to know them, for example. Finally, a name is the means by which someone might be called or summoned; in this sense, it can be a means of power over them. All of these meanings and purposes of a “name” can in one way or another be limiting: to distinguish something is to say that it is this and not that; similarly, to know the descriptive name of a thing is to some extent to be able to define it, and so delimit and circumscribe it. To know the name of a being by which that being might be summoned suggests the possibility of having power over it. Clearly, the Qur’an is not suggesting that human beings have the ability to “name” God in ways that would delimit or grant them power over Him.

The Divine Names given in the Qur’an evade any such limitations by sheer virtue of their quantitative multiplicity as well as their multiple modalities. As I have already noted, these names together effect a kind of dialectic understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent; present and responsive, on the one hand, but beyond all human knowledge on the other; the Lord of all the worlds, but also the Lord of the sacred house in Mecca. Some of the names are names of agency and embody actions, while others are impersonal qualities: Truth, Justice, and Light. Taken together, these Qur’anic names for God remind the Qur’an’s listeners and readers that God is everywhere and nowhere that they can define or specify. He is all of the

qualities and attributes reflected in His Qur'anic names, and yet He eludes the limits of their definition and lies beyond them. The very multiplicity of the names, chiming repetitively and in diverse forms and combinations throughout the Qur'an, is a constant aural reminder that human knowledge of God can never encompass Him. Perhaps most importantly, above all of these names there is the one, transcendent, and ineffable name that offers no description or definition: the name Allah, which can be said to embody all of God's names.

As important as these Qur'anically given names for God became in Islamic theology as a collective means of "knowing" God, the very idea that the names signified qualities by which God could be known (if not rigidly defined) engendered extensive debates: about the relationship of the "names" themselves to the qualities they semantically signified; about the relationship of these various qualities to God's singular essence; about how their eternity (insofar as they are identical with God's essence) could be squared with their relationality to human beings and their temporalization in speech and language; and about what it could mean for a limited human mind to grasp something of God's nature through these names. By "naming God" with various descriptive names, the Qur'an does implicitly suggest these names as keys to understanding something qualitatively and positively about God, but it does not say so explicitly. Various hadith traditions encourage Muslim believers to "count" or "memorize" God's names—verbs that might be taken to suggest quantitative finitude or that the names are something that one might "collect" or compass in knowledge. Yet the Qur'an itself doesn't focus on the possibility or the importance of knowing *all* of God's names, or on the names as a means to certain knowledge about God, but rather on the importance of using these names—*any* of them—as means to call upon God, to praise Him, to worship Him, and to remember Him. In calling upon God by the names He has given to human beings, the Qur'an assures believers that they can know that God is "near" and that He "responds," even if a palpable sense of His nearness or an apprehension of His response eludes them.

In the Qur'an, God's names are not so much a means to "summon" God, to demand things of Him, or to fully comprehend His nature but to be certain of His presence. The multiplicity of God's names may superficially seem to mimic the multiplicity of gods and names that were objects of worship in pre-Islamic Arab religion, or other forms of polytheism. Perhaps there is even some psychological purpose in this—the indulgence of a people used to calling upon many "names" in their ritual life. But more fundamentally, it is an ironic inversion of this pre-Islamic practice: the multiplicity and interchangeability of the Divine Names fall back upon His Oneness—the

names revealed to human beings are many, but the Named is one. The names are but so many doors that grant access to His singular presence. Just as the multiplicity of the names captures the psychological proclivity toward polytheism and redirects it toward the One, the repeated, almost meditative invocation of Divine Names in the Qur'an is the Qur'anic antidote to idolatry. The conceit of the idol is that it can be a specific and material locus of a divine presence that can be compassed by human knowledge and even human sight and touch, fixed in place and immobile. The Divine Names, by contrast, are multiple and diverse, immaterial—made manifest only by the dynamic and relational act of speech (either God's speech in revealing His names, or human speech in uttering them). The Qur'an describes places of worship—mosques, synagogues, and churches—not as homes for idols or even as homes for God but rather as sacred places made sacred because God's Name is mentioned in them. Meat is not consecrated by offering it upon or before stone idols but simply by uttering God's Name over it. God is not in a place or a temple, a sacred rock, or a carved idol; rather, He is wherever His names—any of them—are spoken and remembered.

Notes

1. Qur'an 2:31. Literally, the Qur'anic verse says that God taught Adam "the names—all of them." Muslim exegetes debate what this refers to. Some say that it was only the names of the angels, or the names of Adam's future progeny. Some even considered it as a metaphor for the knowledge of all languages that humans would speak. Some, however, have understood it as a knowledge of the names (and potentially the realities) of all created things.

2. See Qur'an 7:70, 12:39, or 53:19 (the latter with specific reference to the names of the three female deities worshipped by the Quraysh, according to the Qur'an and Islamic tradition).

3. See, for example, Bukhari, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, h. 2736; or Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, h. 2677.

4. Indeed, some hadiths reference the idea of "the greatest name of God" (*ism Allāh al-a'ẓam*)—suggesting a name to which only some (and in Sunni hadith, only the Prophet) have access. It is said to be a powerful name, such that whatever is asked of God through this name is certainly granted. Various Muslim esoteric traditions invoke this concept or discuss what this name might be or those who might be said to know it. However, the broader spiritual effect of the concept (at least for those who do not actually know it!) seems to be to deepen the mystery of God's Name and to balance the confidence of believers able to call upon a responsive God by His Name, with a reminder of their human limitations in either knowing His names, or controlling His response to them.

5. See Qur'an 6:136, where the Quraysh are accused of dedicating a share of crops and cattle as offerings to God and a share to the "partners" they associate with Him; or Qur'an 29:61: "Were you [Muhammad] to ask them [the Quraysh], 'Who created the heavens and

the earth and made the sun and the moon subservient?" They would surely say, 'Allah.' How, then, are they perverted?"

6. For example, in drawing up the Treaty of Hudaibiya between the Prophet Muhammad and the Quraysh, the Qurayshi representative refused to allow treaty to be written in the name of "*Allāh, al-Rahmān al-Rahīm*," saying "We are not familiar with this, so write instead, 'In the name of *Allāh*.'" See Ibn Hisham, *a-Sira al-Nabawiyya*, 4 vols., ed. M. al-Saqā, I. al-Abyārī, and A. H. Shalabī (Qumm: Matba'at al-Mustafawi, 1936), 3:331–32.

7. Rabb al-'ālamīn is used nearly forty times in the Qur'an, including: 1:2, 5:28, and 7:54. Rabb al-samāwāti wa'l-arḍ is also found over a dozen times in the Qur'an, including 13:16, 19:65, 23:86. Rabb al-'arsh is found in Qur'an 21:22. He is also Lord of the Mighty Throne (Rabb al-'arsh al-'azīm); see Qur'an 23:86 and 27:26. Rabb al-mashriq wa'l-maghrib is found in Qur'an 26:68, or in Qur'an 55:17, "Lord of the two easts and the two wests" (*Rabb al-mashriqayni wa Rabb al-maghribayn*).

8. For a more extensive discussion of the theological significance and elaboration of the Divine Names and qualities in Muslim tradition, see Yousef Casewit's chapter 7 in this volume.

Part Four

Reflection

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Conversations in Cyberspace

A Sampler from the Virtual Circle

Lucinda Mosher

“To nobody’s surprise, because we’ve all been to the Building Bridges Seminar previously, we spent a lot of time posing theological questions to the other,” one participant asserted. “When it came to God’s Names, we dealt with matters of translation and meaning, and the relation of one Name to another,” one participant noted. “We had less time together than would normally have been the case,” another observed. “That was frustrating. Yet our time together was also very rich. So much about the seminar is about the building of friendships. It is a really special conversation that has stretched out over nearly twenty years!”

The Building Bridges Seminar has long been described as an exercise in development of a “virtuous circle”—in this case, an exercise in “listening to each other listening to God” through which participants “become better able to listen to each other.” In 2021 the challenge was to be a circle that was both virtuous and virtual! Invitations were limited to scholars who had participated in one or more of the previous convenings. Those who had accepted were situated around the globe and would be joining the online discussion from Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, France, Germany, Ghana, Kenya, Qatar, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States, and more. All met together online via Zoom for three and a half hours on day 1 to hear and discuss a series of formal presentations. Dialogical close reading of texts ensued on days 2, 3, and 4—participants having been assigned to one of three predetermined small groups, each with its own daily, two-and-a-half-hour Zoom call. This meant—as moderator Dan Madigan put it when opening the summary plenary on Friday (another two-and-a-half-hour Zoom session)—that for most of the week, participants “had been in their separate universes.” Friday’s plenary provided an opportunity to hear how things had gone. Six reporters (a Muslim and a Christian

from each group) took unique approaches to digesting what had emerged during many hours of dialogical close reading of verses from the Bible and the Qur'an, excerpts from Christian and Muslim theological writings, and examples of devotional literature.

This chapter offers the reader an opportunity to overhear Building Bridges Seminar conversations about naming God. It draws heavily upon the six summary reports, supplementing them with excerpts from the opening plenary discussions and the midweek small-group study sessions. As one reporter noted, each day of small-group work may have focused on a particular sort of material (scriptural, theological, devotional), but conversations were free-ranging. That will be apparent in what follows. This cyberspace sampler is organized according to the three categories of literature engaged through dialogical close reading, but also, according to topics around which engagement was lively and insightful. As is the custom of the Building Bridges Seminar, the Chatham House Rule obtains: participants are quoted or paraphrased without attribution.

Close Reading of Scripture on Naming God

“God” versus “God’s Names”

“I am fascinated by the use of the verb *to be* in Exodus 3:14,” said a Muslim scholar. “God *is*; God *will be*. God’s Name is a promise! God’s Name is not just a label. It is a dialogical narrative in history.”

What is the relation between God and God’s Names? What *are* the relations between God and God’s Names in eternity? In various ways, each group wrestled with such questions. One scholar noted that both traditions draw on a range of theories of naming. There is agreement, she stressed, that “the identity between God and God’s Names is radically different from the relationship of any ‘thing’ to its names.” There also are clear differences between the traditions. For example, she explained:

In the Christian depiction of the revelation of God, at least some of God’s Names are not just given by God to God. They are used of God by God and are used to address God by God. This is the eternal conversation of the Trinity. In Christian scripture, we see some of the Names of God—including Father, Son, and Spirit (but not only those)—are used to talk about God and to tell us *who God is* (in the classic view of revelation). The Names are also used *by* God to talk *to* God. The Names allow us to eavesdrop, as it were, upon the divine conversation and to offer a divine

conversation as the pattern or the place within which prayer and worship might be able to take place.

Hagar's Naming of God

During the week, noted a Muslim reporter, two paradoxes had arisen. The first paradox “is that ‘naming’ takes place *in* time, with actions *in* time. But God is *beyond* time.” The second paradox is that “naming” is both local/relational and universal/abstract. “We pondered the question of how something very particular becomes universal,” he explained. For one of the Christians, the question of the local versus the universal is thought-provoking, in that, in the book of Genesis, Hagar’s personal, local experience of being seen by God turns into a more universal statement about God in Exodus.

In fact, the Genesis account of Hagar and her experience of God—and the many questions this narrative provoked—was galvanizing, said one group’s Christian reporter. Especially intriguing had been the conversation between Hagar and the angel: Hagar’s way of naming God, she said, “caught our attention because it came out of her affliction. It was interesting to us that, in this passage, the Divine is named ‘God Who Sees.’ More often, it is ‘God-Who-Hears.’” The Christian texts brought out the tradition of God as creator, she noted. “God is the One who reveals self through creation.”

Indeed, in Genesis, Hagar appears to devise a name for God, with the scriptural text apparently expressing no disapproval of her doing so. This was surprising to some of the Muslims in the circle. They suggested, in Islamic tradition, there is a tendency to think that human beings should limit themselves to calling on God only using the Names by which God has named Godself. Some of the Christians responded that the Christian tradition appears, on the whole, to be less cautious than the Islamic tradition in this matter.

In effect, one participant observed, the passage from Rumi’s *Mathnawi*—the point of which is that our calling upon God is actually a response *from* God—was an apt counterbalance for the Christian scriptural text about Hagar. (He called the two items “bookends.”) “Hagar realized that her calling out to God had been seen. When we realize that God has seen us, we have (ipso facto) seen God!”

Relationality

A Christian noted that the notion of *takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh* (being molded by the [moral] qualities of God) had featured in his group’s discussions several times, as well as *ta’alluh* (conforming to God). “These are tantalizing

notions,” he remarked as he asked Muslims in the circle to offer further clarification. One replied that the notion that God relates to humanity through humanity’s relationship to God is, in a sense, *ta’alluh*. He then referred to a hadith the seminar had studied, explaining:

In it, the Prophet says to Aisha, “There is this one name of God.” She says, “Tell it to me.” He says, “It’s not for you!” She asks multiple times. She calls upon God. The Prophet says she used “that name” but doesn’t tell her which it is! What does it mean? It is such a grave matter, yet he is so playful! What does it mean? Maybe the highest name is not a “name” but a condition of relationality. And when you call upon God in that way, you’ve got the Name.

Another Muslim celebrated Aisha’s determination to call upon God even if she doesn’t know the right name:

I like her confidence in saying to God, “I call upon you by all of the Names I know—and by all of the Names I don’t know!” She’s getting around the limitation. She’s determined that God will hear her. She has a confidence that, even if she doesn’t know the right name, and even if that name is not for her, as a human being with her own love and desire for God, God will hear her! In the same way that Hagar becomes confident that God has heard her, has seen her, she has been seen. She is not forgotten!

Relationship is specified through narrative elements, one of the Christian scholars declared, pointing to the biblical story of Moses as evidence. He noted how frequently the seminar had teetered between affirmation and denial of the “efficacious relationality” between personal experience and affirmation of God’s identity. “This sort of back and forth is right there in the Exodus narrative we studied,” he reminded the group. “In Exodus 33, God tells Moses: ‘you cannot see my face and live.’ Interestingly, this is seven verses after we read that Moses spoke face-to-face with God! And Moses goes on to see God again!” Fundamental to both traditions, he sensed, is “movement between denying that we can see God, that we can know God, that we can understand God; then affirming that we can, of course—because God wants that; and nothing is impossible with God.”

In the Exodus narrative, God tells Moses to take off his sandals because he is on holy ground; Moses is told not to come any closer; and then God’s

Name is revealed. These elements, a Christian explained, establish that the human/Divine relationship is not a symmetrical one:

It is fully reciprocal. It is a kind of asymmetry in which God's initiative is always prior. Our naming of God seems to depend on acknowledging this asymmetry. The Aisha hadith makes that very clear; because she wants to know (out of theological curiosity—which is the best kind of curiosity), “Could I please know the best name of God?” The Prophet says, “No! That's not for you! That's not for theological curiosity!” She tells him that she has done the ablutions and two cycles of prayer, so she gets into the right relation to God. It is the right attitude in which she approaches calling on God's Names. And then she does so in the fullest possible sense in which one could do it. But I think the point is not that she mentions all of the Names; therefore, she must have mentioned the right one. Rather, the point is that she does so with the right attitude—an attitude that acknowledges this asymmetry. And that seems to be the point of all the “naming” stories in our traditions.

Another Muslim concurred, noting that the asymmetry between God and humanity is absolute. “We are God's creatures. Therefore, God's omnipotence and our knowledge can never be measured on the same scale—a point made at all times by the Divine Names. Our dignity resides with the fact that we are the free gifts of God—and not on the same scale, but just the gratuitous creatures of God's promise and love.”

Close Reading of Theological Writings on Naming God

God's Names “are privileged theological spaces where our relationship to God can be thought and lived,” a Muslim asserted. They are reminders that human relationship to God is absolutely asymmetrical: God can give totally; humanity cannot. “God is the ultimate Giver,” he explained. The Divine relationship within the world is continuous and uninterrupted. “God is continually in us and for us. God is continually active in the world.”

In fact, one group approached the Names of God as a gift, specifically: “God's generous kenosis of self-limiting, which is nevertheless a pattern of self-sharing. Such self-limiting is not a closing-down; it is an outpouring, a sending out, a spreading.” A gift has a purpose, this reporter continued. “To understand the gift, we need to think about what it is for and how it can draw us closer to God. This does not mean we are restricted to a functional

approach to understanding of God's Names. It does not close down ontologically prior questions of God's Divine Names, as it were, apart from creation. But in fact it opens up onto them."

Call and Response

One group gave considerable attention to the complex dynamics of call and response. To understand what human beings are doing when they call upon God's Name requires understanding of "what God is doing, before and within and underneath," noted one of the Christians—particularly "the radical priority of the divine initiative." For example, she explained, Augustine describes the Holy Spirit "as the wind which fills our sail in our journey to God." However, "we still need to tilt that sail to catch that wind—to do some work, patiently perhaps, putting in the oars. It is God who works first; and always God is working; but we have to work with that."

In Islam, explained a Muslim scholar, we find the notion of the "Highest" or "Greatest" Name of God—about which many interpretations are offered. He clarified:

Some say that what it is will depend on your emotional or physical status. The highest Name of God (for you) relates to your status, your condition. In the biblical account, Hagar was in a situation where she wanted to have that confidence that God Almighty is going to help her. What we learn in Rumi's *Mathnawi* is that both grief and happiness—in fact, all conditions and phases of life—are related to Names of Almighty God.

On Sharing in God's Names

What does it mean to be getting to know the Names of God? What is involved on the human side? A Christian scholar thoroughly enjoyed the answer provided by al-Ghazālī in *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, wherein the point seemed to be that getting to know the Name of God is only possible through sharing: "So it is a form of participatory knowledge, which develops in stages." In the first stage knowledge of God comes only by hearsay—through what others share with us by means of witness and instruction. In the second stage knowledge of God becomes an intellectual certainty. However, this is insufficient "because this presence of God through sharing transforms our heart in such a way that it awakens a desire for God. And a desire for God to be illuminated already includes the reality of God. It is a desire that is triggered by the lack of God's reality. It is a desire that already participates in the reality of God." In the third stage human beings

become companions of the heavenly host of angels, thus sharing proximity to God. Hence, this observer concluded, “the naming of God is woven into the texture of a structured process of getting to know God. Intellectual knowing of God is but the first stage. Getting to know God must go through our affections. That seems to be the most important form of transformation.”

From a Reformation-theological point of view, a Christian explained, “in Christ, God speaks as pure promise, as pure Gospel. And what is the content of that Gospel? Godself—in relation to those to whom God promises. Therefore, there is a form of continuity. It has a narrational shape; it is the dynamics of history that are held together by the narrative of God’s promise.”

God’s Names as Boundaries for the Visible

“The Divine Names define states of spiritual life,” a Muslim explained as he took note of a hierarchical relation between the God’s Names, a sense in which they are boundaries for the visible. “This hierarchy reflects an intimacy with the creator that is present in the use of the Divine Names in rituals of the faithful. That kind of hierarchy emerges in considering the possibility of knowing God’s essence.” In al-Ghazālī, he observed, “we read of the possibility of knowing the essence of God through the heart.” Thomas Aquinas says something similar: “however, this knowing can only be partial now; it can only be complete in the hereafter.”

In reflecting upon the relation of the Divine Names to human comportment, a Christian scholar asserted that the point is not to imitate God but rather to conform to God. His Muslim colleague asked for clarification of the difference between imitation and conformity and the reason for emphasizing it.

The Christian replied, saying that “medieval theologian Thomas à Kempis suggested that Christians could emulate the life of Christ in terms of the works of mercy, in terms of healing, in terms of looking after the poor, and so on.” Reformation theology said, to the contrary, that none of this could be done unless enabled by God’s grace. To be conformed to Christ is to experience a radical change through which one’s human heart becomes consonant with the Divine love—and then, also, with the other Divine attributes. “It is something that God must give. This action must come from God. We respond to it. Continued practice will make us able to do these things; but our heart has to be changed. It’s a question of the formation of a person. A good person will do good works; good works will never make a good person.”

To the Muslim scholar, this sounded very much like al-Ghazālī’s notion of “shares” in the meanings of God’s Names. “It strikes me as al-Ghazālī’s first share, in which you have to rid your heart of worldly detachments. You have

to repel vice in order to make room for virtue. You don't actively acquire the virtue; you actively work on eliminating the vice. You work on renouncing the world in your heart, so that your heart will then, by God's grace, become attached to God."

"I see that as his second share," countered the Christian scholar. "Ghazālī's first share, I think, is a rational proof; it is *alam* in a proper argument. The second share? That's the transformation of the heart. Rational doubts are taken away; but now comes the bigger thing: is your heart also transformed?"

"Well," the Muslim explained,

typically, al-Ghazālī speaks of "demonstrative unveiling." That's the ineluctable certitude one gets from philosophical, rational thinking. "Unveiling" is the certainty of the heart that one experiences through direct witnessing or disclosure. Typically, al-Ghazālī combines the philosophical and the mystical. He says that to truly know your powerlessness, you actually begin to grasp Divine omnipotence. The first share is to *know* that one is a servant characterized by a particular deficiency or imperfection. It's a recognition of vice or weakness. The second share is true attraction to the divine side. So the first is not a rational-demonstrative sort of engagement with God's Names, technically speaking. It's a bit of a combined, hybrid form of knowledge. So, to use your term: "I conform to God when I know that I am powerless; I do not conform to God when I affirm my power as an independent reality. Once I know I'm powerless, then through my servanthood I can communicate God's love." This is a core concept in the Islamic tradition, too: God loves to be known; so God creates the world and is to be known as the driving force behind creation.

From a Reformation-theological perspective, the Christian responded,

the law demonstrates to you that you can't fulfill the law. However, it also says that you are totally dependent on God's grace in being enabled to fulfill the law. Now you do so not because it's commanded. Rather, you do so out of *desire* and love. I think that is very close to al-Ghazālī's second share, in which you have this longing to possess these attributes. It is inconceivable that a heart be filled with high regard for (and being illuminated by) such an attribute without a longing for this attribute following upon it. That kind of "being filled" is the fulfillment of my desire—not my achieving of it—and is at the root of all thankfulness to God for whatever I am and what I do.

His Muslim colleague seemed to concur.

God's Names, Power, and Gender

The beauty of God's Names was a recurring theme. Beauty may be defined as the good that claims us by its attractiveness. Hence, God's beautiful Names are powerful. Likewise, one group noted, the power of beautiful devotion—music included—is emotional and visceral. They saw this in the relation of God's voice and Names in expressions of lament and complaint. Excerpts from Rumi's *Mathnawi* and the biblical books of Jeremiah and Isaiah had provided important evidence of ways in which God's Name is present in and to the experience of grief.

One of the women noted the heavily masculine nature of the language for God in certain texts under study. "Some Christians say that the overemphasis on maleness can be idolatrous," she said. Indeed, said another participant, "the Names of God are names of power—of strength, of lordliness, of domination. That opens the possibility of serious misuse." Exploiting these Names of God for human rather than Divine purposes; the question of gender, particularly in the naming of God; masculinity and the question of power: these are concerns the Seminar has not yet fully explored. For the moment, the question of gender and power issues sparked a discussion of the relationship between Divine and human names.

"I find it oppressive when people introduce the notion of God as Father through analogy of the human father," said another of the Christians. "Christians call God 'Father' because Jesus did so! Calling God Father points out that there is a sense of fatherhood at which all fathers fail."

"The Name of God also tells us who we are," one Christian asserted; but this is complicated by the fact that both complexity and differentiation are at play. "Naming God does not have a reciprocal quality," she cautioned: "To call God 'Father' is not to say that all fathers are God. To say that God is a rock is not to say that rocks are God." It is important to keep this asymmetry in mind, she stressed. Sometimes, a person who assumes this power, who speaks God's words or Names, assumes identification with God. However, she explained, tradition also says that "the uniqueness of God's identity displaces and relativizes all human claims to power. So there is a sense in which the uniqueness of the Divine Name can function to undercut abuses in the Name of God. Not that abuses don't happen! But in the Names of God there are resources—both theological and devotional—precisely to undercut abuses and misuses of power."

One scholar called attention to Amina Wadud and other Muslim feminists who have said that the tawhidic paradigm rules out the very possibility that anyone might assimilate their authority to God's authority. The uniqueness of God rules out anyone else claiming power.¹

Discussion of power and gender turned eventually to the Divine Name “Almighty.” As one Christian explained, “To talk about God as ‘Almighty’ is not about pushing people around. Rather, it is about God as being the one who is never left without a possibility. God is never stopped, cornered, overwhelmed.” One scholar underscored the importance of differentiating between dominion and domination: “We are thinking about lordship. What does ‘lordship’ look like? Dominion is different from domination. Learning to hear or tell that is quite difficult.” Relatedly, another scholar emphasized the need to distinguish between “power over” and “power to do something”—between power as domination and power as competence. “Our texts place a very strong emphasis on the second one,” he noted. “And we should not forget that the greatest power we humans have over each other is the power of attraction. That is extremely powerful—and it is that with which most of our texts play: God has an enormous attraction, even in our deepest and saddest points of grief; God relates to us in our relating to God.

Plenitude versus Uniqueness in Naming God

In naming God, one Christian observed, we encounter tension between plenitude and uniqueness—tension between the wealth of the Divine Names and the uniqueness of God’s proper name. On the one hand, he observed, “it seems that the wealth of the Divine Names points to the superabundance of God—God as pure plenitude.” Evidence is present in the writings of the Christians Dionysius and John of Damascus as well as in that of Muslim scholars Ghazālī and Tilimsānī. “All make this point,” he declared: “this superabundance is important.” Acknowledgment of God as pure plenitude, this scholar suggested, leads in turn to acknowledgment that “everything that exists in creation has its archetype in the perfections of God.”

On the other hand, because God is “the one who is beyond being,” characteristics of being cannot apply to God in the way they apply to creatures. He clarified:

If God’s proper name is He-Who-Is, then the uniqueness must be defined in such a way that everything-that-is participates in God; but God participates in nothing! This “participation in nothing” is pointed out by using a proper Name of God, thereby establishing a categorical ontological difference between the source of all Being and all being that has been—because in some way it participates in that source. If God is “Being Itself” in this way . . . then we cannot understand God under any classification concept. God may not be spoken of in such a way that God suffers from the restrictions or delineations of our definitions, and God is absolute Presence!

How is God present to us? How is everything else present to God? If God is that unique kind of being, is God just a being that can be named? These questions, it was agreed, await further consideration.

The Naming of God in Devotional Texts

How does our ability to interact with Names of God change as we move from scriptural to devotional mode? What challenges appear when we engage with devotional texts or actually participate in devotions? As the discussion of devotional literature got under way, a Christian reported that a member of his group had stressed how important it is to consider the way God is worshipped. How do people experience and talk about God? When one colleague pointed to John Mbiti's list of African Names of God, calling it "fascinating," another brought up the African woman's perspective, exemplified by Ghanaian oral theologian Afua Kuma (1908–1987), who named God in her context.

On Knowing God's Names

One can call upon God's Names only if one knows them, another participant pointed out. "You can't remember something unless you have learned it," she asserted. If we are to be able to recall God's Names in certain situations, or to be able to use them in talking to others, they need to be part of our makeup, and that, she stressed, "is one of the results of the practice of repetition." Facilitation of such practice is the role of devotional literature.

"Repetition!" one scholar declared. "Music makes the Names vibrate!" Music, vibration, can step in and play a unique role when reason is about to say something. "In Sufism," said another participant, "reason withdraws to make room for emotion and the experience of the heart. Qur'anic recitation raises the question not only of the presence of God in us but also how we are present to God. Music or practices like *dhikr* help us to set ourselves on the path of completion."

Among the items for study were several Christian hymns. As one group looked carefully at the stanzas of each, a recurring question was: Who is the subject and who is the object? One Christian clarified: "Often hymns start with a strong human subject. However, throughout hymnody, there is a subject change, where God becomes the subject, gifting God's presence to humans, enveloping humans in God's presence." A change occurs, he asserted: "the human—who had been a subject and agent of an activity—now becomes the recipient of a gift."

Among the Christian hymns under study, none commanded more attention in small-group sessions than "St. Patrick's Breastplate." One Muslim

called its first stanza “extraordinary.” Several Muslims had highlighted its reference to “the strong Name of the Trinity” and its repetition of “I bind unto myself.” Its imagery of putting on the armor of God is indeed robust and visceral, a Christian confirmed.

It was one thing to study hymns as written items; quite something else to listen to them—which many participants did. “The addition of singing was both tender and powerful—sometimes simultaneously,” said one of the Muslims. “It caused me to reflect again on the misuse of power.”

Close reading of examples of *dhikr* caused one participant to assert that “the repetition in Islamic devotional texts and practice is something we Christians admire. It seems not to be a practice of owning something by repeating it. Rather, it seems to be a practice of being disowned, of being abandoned as a subject of the one who repeats, of being drawn into a reality in which our calling on God is part of God’s relationship to us.”

The seminar’s discussion of hymnody revealed a variety of attitudes toward music. “Human beings talk most of the time,” asserted a Christian. “Talking is one thing; but being embraced by the reality of God in music is quite different.” For example, he said, for Lutherans, it is through music that the Names of God make the most sense. “It’s not just that everything has a voice (as Paul says in 1 Corinthians),” he stressed, “but also, everything has a sound.” Theologically speaking, hymn-singing is the vehicle for engagement as an embodied being. Through hymn-singing, humans join in the praise of creation.

Pastoral Implications

Studying the naming of God in devotional texts raised questions about the pastoral implications of such literature. One group enjoyed a deep discussion of a story from Rumi’s *Mathnawi* in which a person crying out to God was mocked by the Devil. “The Devil had been saying, ‘Well, where is the response?’” their reporter explained. “Then we came to a beautiful line about grief being greater than the empire of the world—that grief is, in a sense, a messenger of God.” The story is beautiful; but how could it be put to use pastorally? As one Muslim explained, “while I find that story very poignant, I’m not likely to say to someone, ‘I’m sorry for your loss; but don’t worry! Rumi has this fantastic story that teaches that grief is actually a good thing!’ Doing that has a way of shutting down the authenticity of that person’s experience. The effect would be the opposite of our intent.” People who offer consolation or pastoral care must give careful thought to when it would be appropriate to recount such a story. This group’s recommendation was that we “develop a literacy, a knowledge, a familiarity with these stories, so that

we can recollect them.” It is similar with the Divine Names, he pointed out. “The Names are always out there; we can build up our familiarity with them. Then, when these moments arrive, we are no longer in a discovery process; rather, we are involved in a remembrance, a recollection—which we can connect back to the idea of *dhikr*.”

Virtues of a Virtual Circle

In Christian-Muslim relationship, a Muslim scholar noted, the dialogue between our monotheistic foundations is one of continuity and discontinuity. The Divine Names are places of shared meaning, places of exchange, places between integration and modification. “In our discussions, we became keenly aware of the connections between theory and practice,” one of the Christians observed:

We thought about how we learn, how we understand, how we use the Names of God. At each of those turns, we found ourselves looking at the way that theology draws on scripture, of course; but also, how theology draws *upon* philosophy, and *from* the experience of praying. In reverse, we also became aware that what we say in theology has direct implications for how we are going to read the text, for what we say in philosophy, and what we do in our spiritual practice, particularly around the Names.

Whether one has in mind the Tetragrammaton or “the strong Name of the Trinity” or Names found in the Qur’an, it is one thing to discuss “What do these Names mean?” It is quite another—and far more interesting, said one Muslim—to consider “What work do these Names do? And how do we actually use them?” A refrain during his group’s conversations was that “theological exploration is limited. It serves as guidelines or boundaries for the believer.” An experiential understanding of the Names is equally important.

God’s Names must not be considered independently from the narrative of God’s revelation, one Christian insisted. In fact, he explained, “the Names communicate in an important way the story of God’s revelation of who he is and how he relates to us.” Furthermore, he argued strongly, God’s Names should not be taken literally:

The Names are pointers; they are icons that convey something from God, but not the fullness of God. The Names are another way to affirm the truth of God. None of the individual Names communicates the reality of God completely. However, the multiple Names, taken together, completely communicate the reality of God: that God is incomprehensible

mystery. We have, through history, perceived something of God, but not the fullness.

“The most enriching aspect of our discussion,” one scholar insisted, “was when our own individual stories or issues or questions were brought to the fore by reading these texts, by looking at particular Names. This was true whenever people tried to share a bit about their past and how a passage we were studying related to it. It was also true when raising thornier questions.” The experience of collegial close reading of texts was most profound, said one Muslim, when his group had the opportunity to hear how colleagues reconstructed or recollected those texts, and how those passages led individuals to reflect on their own life narrative.

And, of course, questions lingered. As one scholar put it, the texts chosen for study during this convening had been “remarkable in content.” He felt he had learned much from them; but, he said, “I also have the sad impression that I have not understood enough of the wealth of these texts nor of fullness of the thoughts expressed by my colleagues.” Thinking of the entirety of this week of discussion of naming God, rather than of any particular text, one Christian wondered how confident the Islamic and Christian traditions (and the traditions within them) are that the difference between *essence* and *attribute* in God can be known and understood. “Distinctions and relationships between concepts such as *essence* and *attribute* are drawn by philosophy from observation of the world,” she noted. “Since God is *other*, how do we properly guard the radical difference between how such ideas work with regard to God and how they work in all other cases?”

The logistical issues that had enabled a virtual circle may have felt strangely complex. Yet throughout the week the conversation in cyberspace had been as rich as ever. That should not have been a surprise since the participants in the nineteenth convening of the Building Bridges Seminar had arrived online with a strong connection to each other already in place. “We thank God for the friendship that we share, and the respect that had grown among us, and the community that has been created,” said Daniel Madigan as he adjourned the virtuous circle; “and we look forward to the work we can do together in the future.”

Note

1. One scholar noted that a similar point emerged when the Building Bridges Seminar discussed slaves and masters during convenings in 2017, 2018, and 2019. See Lucinda Mosher and David Marshall, eds., *Power: Divine and Human: Christian and Muslim*

Perspectives (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019); Lucinda Mosher, ed., *A World of Inequalities: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021); and Lucinda Mosher, ed., *Freedom: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021).

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About the Editor

Lucinda Mosher is the director of the Master of Arts in Interreligious Studies and an affiliate of the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace. Concurrently, she is senior editor of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, founding president of NeighborFaith Consultancy, and rapporteur of the Building Bridges Seminar. The author of six books, in addition to numerous chapters and journal articles, she is the editor or coeditor of nearly twenty titles—among them *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies* (2022) and nine Building Bridges Seminar volumes.