

Review

The Names of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: A Basis for Interfaith Dialogue. By MÁIRE BYRNE. New York: Continuum. 2011. Pp. 192. \$39.95. ISBN: 9781441153562

Naming the divine is not for the faint of heart. All names for the divine are necessarily metaphorical, a fact that points us to the troublingly metaphorical nature of all language (Derrida, 1982). In language we build metaphors with metaphors, and, as poststructuralism has made clear, the relationship between the word or sign and the thing connoted or signified is a slippery and complicated one. The language with which we describe the divine, then, is made all the more slippery by the ultimately unknowable nature of the divine itself.

The traditions upon which Byrne chooses to focus her investigation of divine names are perhaps particularly intriguing where this issue is concerned. The Hebrew Bible guards the pronouncing of the divine name — one must say it appropriately, presumably in worship, and not in “wrongful use” (Exod 20:7, NRSV). Jewish tradition has gone further to avoid saying the divine name entirely. At the same time, scholars come to no firm conclusions about what the four letters of the Hebrew divine name originally meant and what it said about the deity. On both the practice and the theory sides of the religion, then, the Hebrew divine name is a kind of compelling and mysterious absence. Islam seems to go a different direction with the same problem. In Muslim tradition, there is at once one name for God, Allah, and also ninety-nine names. This list of Allah’s attributes points to the infinite and uncapturable divine essence, which cannot be expressed in one or even ten names.

Byrne’s book underlines the fact that to name God is to arrive at the limits of human language. She seeks in this book to compare that border across three traditions, and thus, as the subtitle indicates, to work toward interfaith dialogue among the three. The author comments more than once in the book’s first chapters that her aim is to establish a common language that might be used in such dialogue. In this case, the dialogue is among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, specifically concerning the names of and thus the concepts of God in each. The book begins with a chapter on the methodology of comparative theology, followed by a chapter on the method used for focusing on names and on names of God. The following three chapters focus on divine designations in each of the three religions, respectively. In these chapters Byrne focuses on divine designations in the scriptures of each religion, although she treats Islam as something of a special case in this regard, as we shall see.

As a New Testament scholar with an interest in both Judaism and Islam, I was interested to see what the book might say about God in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, and I was curious to see what I might learn about Qur’anic concepts of God. I was less interested, at the outset, in a discussion of methodology, although some of that is to be expected. Byrne does give an interesting definition of comparative theology, quoting the *Journal of Comparative Theology* to the effect that it is “the practice of rethinking some aspect or aspects of one’s own faith tradition through the study of some aspect or aspects of another faith tradition” (3). That definition seems to me wisely conservative, in that it admits to being rooted in and focused on one tradition, while looking at illuminating evidence from other traditions.

I am not convinced that this is exactly the method used in this book, however. After her methodological ground rules are established, Byrne’s book reads more like encyclopedia entries on the names of the divine in each of the three religions, one religion’s entry following the other, with little relationship drawn among them along the way. While her analysis of divine

names in Hebrew scripture lives up to the promised method, Byrne becomes somewhat defensive in her approach to the Christian text. As she points out, the New Testament, focused as it is on Jesus, is much less interested in naming God than is either Hebrew or Muslim scripture. In the gospels, Jesus himself names God “father” — something of a problem for feminist theologians since it implies that God is male. Byrne, however, rejects the problem. “Simply stated,” she avers, “it does not matter whether we ... refer to our image of God as ‘he,’ ‘she,’ or even ‘it,’ once we understand the limits of our human language” (52). First of all, it seems to matter a great deal whether we call God “he,” “she,” or “it,” precisely because as human beings we cannot consistently keep in mind the limits of human language. If what we call God did not matter, what would be the purpose of a book on the names of God? Secondly, there really is no need for Byrne to take this stand in defense of “father” as an appropriate name for God; her argument here lies outside the stated purposes of the book.

But Byrne here betrays an unstated traditional Christian perspective that plagues this volume. Also included in the chapter on the God of the New Testament is an explanation of the trinity. Such an explanation seems appropriate only until one remembers that the trinity developed as a doctrine long after the New Testament was written. The three-part formula “father, son, and holy spirit” is mentioned occasionally in the Christian scripture, but it is never in any way a focus. Byrne’s emphasizing it here is a reflection of her own sense that the trinity is important, as it is indeed in Christian doctrine but not in the Christian scripture she purports to be analyzing.

A similar weakness in consistency with her own methods appears in the framing of the chapter on names of God in Muslim scripture. Rather than actually sifting the Qur’an and/or hadith for names of God, analogous to the method applied to Jewish and Christian traditions, Byrne accepts the ninety-nine names of God that a later layer of Muslim tradition lays out. The list was compiled from some in the Qur’an and some from other sources in Muslim tradition, and is in itself a framed, conscious presentation of God. Neither the list nor Byrne herself gives the reader any context to help us better understand how the names are used. The chapter instead simply goes through all the names, grouping them into categories — making this a substantially different kind of examination than that done in the chapters on Christian and Jewish traditions.

A final chapter looks at the conclusions or comparisons that might be drawn. This is a helpful discussion and brings on the one hand the common emphasis or assumption of God as creator to the fore and, on the other, looks at the differences in nuance between them. Byrne’s traditional bent, however, leads me to my final criticism of the book and perhaps the most significant problem I have with it. Amid a discussion of different presentations of God’s power, Byrne concludes that the power of God as creator is not emphasized in Christian scripture, because “Christians tend to view God as a Father or a kindly, forgiving deity.” This sentence is first of all highly debatable — certainly, the Christians who blamed 9/11 as well as the AIDS epidemic on homosexuality and legalized abortion were thinking of God as a not particularly forgiving deity. But, again, how “Christians tend to view God” is not her subject, since we are not equipped by the book to compare it with how Muslims or Jews tend to view God. The evidence at hand was stated to be the scripture of each tradition, not the common beliefs of the practitioners, and those are indeed two very different sets of evidence. Furthermore, the idea that the *New Testament* God is kind and forgiving as opposed to the God of the Hebrew Bible — this idea is an old, a corrupt, and an ill-informed one. The reader has only to open the book of Revelation to see a God wielding ultimate power for the people’s vindication and for divinely desired vengeance. Those who might discount Revelation I refer to the Gospel according to Matthew, where the unrighteous are repeatedly and with great relish tossed into outer darkness, to endure weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Byrne states in her introductory chapters that she is in search of the beginnings of a common language in which to compare Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Her effort to do is laudable. But the task of finding a common language is somewhat more difficult than Byrne understands

it to be. Those in search of a common language often unconsciously fall back on their own native tongue. Byrne, in her apparently unconscious defensive stance in favor of Christian doctrine, speaks a distinctly Christian language, not one common to the three traditions. This may be in fact inevitable; we are none of us able to step completely away from the tradition that formed us. But a more critical consciousness of the author's own faith tradition and its influence on her work, and a more dedicated application of the author's own methodological ground rules are surely called for in the always delicate operations of comparative religion.

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