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Introduction

Generations of Christians knew and named God and Christ with many names – hundreds of them: Messiah, Emmanuel, Alpha, Omega, Eternal, All-Powerful, Lamb, Serpent, One, Goat, Lion, Word, Worm, Bridegroom. These names, all drawn from Scripture, were said, sung and chanted in plainsong and polyphony, woven into the worship of the faithful. Today, a remnant of what we might call this 'piety of the names' remains in the popular Advent hymn, 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel', where names come from the 'O Antiphons', each verse heralding the coming of Christ with one of the titles Christians took from the Old Testament: 'O come, Emmanuel! O come, Rod of Jesse! O Come, Dayspring from on High! O come, Key of David! Oh come, Adonai!'

It has long interested me that pre-modern theologians and spiritual writers seemed more concerned with how we name God than with how we might prove that God exists – not just in what names we use to speak of God, but in whether we can name God at all.[1] In this way titles first encountered in Scripture inspired theological and

[1] Although philosophers focus on Dionysius the Areopagite, Philo, Origen, Ambrose, Hilary of Poitiers, Albertus Magnus, Aquinas, Bonaventure and many others wrote on the names and the naming of God.

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philosophical reflection about what it might be to 'name God' – what I will call the 'divine names tradition'.

At some time in the sixteenth century this changed. Jean-Luc Marion sees in Descartes a significant alteration. He writes:

> In the period when Descartes wrote, to offer a definition of God (whatever its status) still amounted to taking a position on the theological terrain of the divine names. In effect, he (Descartes) began from a rationality not theologically assured by Christian revelation, but metaphysically founded on the humanity of 'men purely men' (*Discourse on Method* AT VI, 3). The problematic of the divine names – originally a theological issue – is transposed *here*, perhaps for the first time, into the strictly metaphysical domain.[2]

Descartes believed that human reason alone can prove the existence of God and that this should be conjoined with a proof of divine attributes of which we find some trace in ourselves – 'infinite, eternal, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent'.[3] This project, by which Descartes thought he was saying nothing different from the theologians, has effect on its terms. Here 'eternal' and 'immutable', denominations familiar to earlier generations of theologians as names of God and as anchored in the realm of the

[2] Jean-Luc Marion, 'The Essential Incoherence of Descartes' Definition of Divinity', in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amélie O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 297–338 at 297.

[3] René Descartes, 'Discourse on Method', in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 20–56 at 37. On this see Jean-Luc Marion, *On Descartes' Metaphysical Prism: The Constitution and the Limits of Onto-theo-logy in Cartesian Thought*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 206–9.

Bible, now come to stand as products of 'reason alone'. Seemingly we can define *what God is*, perhaps as one object amongst others, rather than say *who God is for us*.

Whatever credit or blame can be awarded to Descartes, at some time in the early modern period reflection on the divine names began to fade away, at least in philosophical theology, to be replaced by debates over the attributes or, as they became, the 'classical attributes of God' familiar to many from introductory courses in philosophy of religion.[4] These were defended or attacked as free-standing philosophical claims, removed from any anchorage in scripture or piety and, of course, from any reference to Christ – indeed, that was largely the objective in the Age of Reason. As such these attributes became hostages to debates as to whether the God of the philosophers could be the God of the Bible or the God of Jesus Christ, and much subsequent dispute over the doctrine of analogy and 'natural' theology, with patristic and medieval theologians and especially those who wrote of God as 'Being Itself', accused of paying scant heed to revelation and scripture and choosing instead the God of the philosophers. Nothing could be further from the truth.

My proposal is this: how might this picture look differently if we placed such titles as 'eternal', 'infinite' and even the much vilified 'Being Itself' in the wider family of divine names as did Patristic and medieval writers? To think about names, whether names of God or names more

[4] Marion believes Descartes should take the initial blame. 'For the very first time, Descartes transposes some of the divine names elaborated by medieval theology into the (primarily self-regulated) field of metaphysics of the modern era' ('Essential Incoherence', 328–9). Marion also thinks Descartes is at the origins of the 'perfect being' theology (320).

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generally, means thinking about naming since naming is a universal human practice. Names work for us, and they do more than define and describe. We use names to call to and to call upon, to summon, to invoke and to beseech, to attest to kinship, as words of blessing and address. The names of God are used to do all these things and perhaps above all, to pray and to praise.

In Scripture the faithful found many names for God: 'Creator', 'Shepherd', 'Rock', 'Bread of Heaven', 'the One Who Is'. The names had, for earlier theologians, different statuses. Especially important were those regarded as 'divine self-denominations' – names which, in Scripture, God gives to Godself. But all the scriptural 'names' were regarded as gifts – given in Torah, Prophets and Psalms – acting as way marks in God's unfolding relation to his people, Israel and subsequently, with the New Testament, to the Christian church. They were signs of God's love and care in particular moments but with lasting importance. This is not then a 'biblicism' which is detached from context and community, but a reflection on the ongoing relation of God to the people, Israel. Names embedded and evolved in this history occur in new ways in their New Testament application to Christ: Lamb, Redeemer, Lord, Messiah.

'Names', then, as I am using the term, is a much broader category than 'attributes'. We can quickly see that many in the long list of 'divine names' (Wisdom, Day Spring, Root of Jesse, Key of David) could not be thought of as 'attributes' of God in our modern sense. 'Attributes' suggest to us qualities a bearer possesses, such as having red hair or being six feet tall. It has hardened, that is to

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say, into something like specification. But how could 'day spring' or 'key of David' or 'Lamb' be attributes of God or of anyone? But all were names – names held to have been given in Scripture and means by which to call upon the Lord in prayer, praise and supplication. It is here that we may find the greatest affinity between Christian, Muslim and some Jewish practices of meditation on the names of God.

The plenitude of names and naming was coupled with a certain modesty about what we could claim to know or say about God unaided. The apophatic in theology is thus not an occult strategy but the foundation of positive biblical reflection.

Paradoxical as it may seem, it was embracing the doctrine of creation, and specifically *creatio ex nihilo*, which compelled early theologians to insist that God is, strictly speaking, unnameable and, at the same time, the doctrine which underwrites the intimacy of God to all that God has created – which is, of course, everything.

We will never be far in this volume from the doctrine of creation, or from Moses at the burning bush.

Chapter 2, 'Naming God at Sinai', sets the stage and expands upon the text integral to the divine names tradition, Exodus 3, where God addresses Moses from the burning bush.

Chapter 3 considers the first century CE Jewish exegete, Philo of Alexandra, who wrote extensively on the names and the naming of God and whose work was influential on emergent Christian literature. Here the problematic of 'naming God' is disclosed as pendant on the Jewish (and then Christian and Muslim) teaching of *creatio ex nihilo*.

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Chapter 4 Goes into the revolutionary importance of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* for the Christian doctrine of God in general, and for naming God specifically.

Chapter 5, 'Is "God" the name of God?', considers more general philosophical concerns about what names are and what names do.

Chapter 6 returns to theology with a discussion of Gregory of Nyssa and his meditations on the story of Moses in Exodus.

Chapter 7 expands this set of concerns with naming and innominability in the work of Augustine, not only a great theologian but a substantial philosopher of language. In particular we consider his understanding of God as 'Being Itself'.

Chapter 8 takes us to Aquinas, suggesting a reading of the early stages of the *Summa theologiae* not simply as proofs for the existence of God but as a meditation on the divine names, and discusses Thomas's predilection for 'the One Who Is', or 'Being' as the most appropriate name for God.

Chapter 9, 'Calling and Being Called', brings us to Christ, the Name of God.

Naming God calls us back to the practice of *theologia* where *theologia* is not so much knowledge about God as knowledge of God, through contemplation, prayer and, above all, praise.[5] A reappraisal of the divine names tradition such as I am attempting is not, then, simply correcting errant readings of past texts but a re-understanding of theology as itself a practice.[6] Naming God is indeed about

[5] See Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 164.

[6] A number of important books have traversed elements of this story of naming and misnaming, often with pastoral intentions. Here especially

knowing God but knowing too in the sense of 'being in relation to God', for what is vital to the believer is not to know a great deal about God but to be in loving relation to God. Here epistemology and metaphysics come together. To call upon the Name of the Lord, to pray, is to be in relation with the One through whom all things have their being. To call upon the Name of the Lord is to call upon our Creator and Redeemer. Calling upon the name of the Lord does not disappear in the New Testament. Instead, Jesus is given many of the names ascribed to YHWH in the Hebrew Bible – Redeemer, Lord, Word. Paul in Philippians, famously, identifies Jesus with the Holy Name (Phil. 2.9–11).

Christians continue to 'call upon the Name of the Lord' who made heaven and earth and in doing so bring themselves into relation with God, with scripture, with one another and finally with the whole created order.

The present book is not a survey or a catalogue but a charting of the way. All the theologians discussed here deserve longer account. On Pseudo-Dionysius and the Divine Names there is excellent extant research to which readers may refer. I have not dealt with theologians of the eastern church where the divine names tradition did not suffer the deterioration of the west. I have not the competence to consider the Islamic tradition of the Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God, although those aware of this tradition will find, I hope, helpful consonance. Each of the divine names touched upon deserves study in its own

I think of Elizabeth Johnson's ground-breaking feminist work, *She Who Is* and Kendall Soulen's, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity*. My own book, *The Kindness of God*, was a contribution to the contemporary strains of inherited exclusive language.

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right and welcome contemporary examples are appearing.[7] I hope, however, to provide a meeting place at the intersection of philosophy, theology, biblical studies and history on which others interested in naming God may continue to build.

[7] See, for instance, Brendan Thomas Sammon, *The God Who Is Beauty: Beauty as a Divine Name in Thomas Aquinas and Dionysius the Areopagite*. (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick Publications, 2013). I will discuss later Cardinal Walter Kasper's *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), a work endorsed and developed by Pope Francis in his own book, *The Name of God Is Mercy*. A valuable pastoral aid is Wilda C. Gafney, *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 2021), which includes an appendix of God's names and divine titles.

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