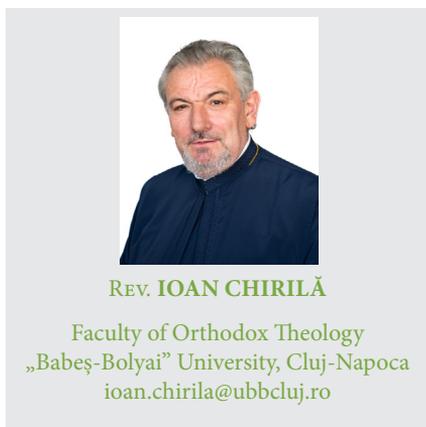


THE NAME OF GOD IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY – A MYSTICAL APPROACH

Abstract

This study explores God's names' meaning and role in Jewish and Christian traditions. In Judaism, the divine name, including the Tetragrammaton, is perceived as a mysterious and creative entity essential to understanding the Torah as a sacred language. The Tetragrammaton is seen as an expression of divine power, having a mystical nature that allows for a deep relationship with divinity. In Christianity, the name of God is seen as a personal and intimate revelation of divinity that transcends human knowledge and sensory experience. Christian thinkers such as Dionysius the Areopagite, Maxim the Confessor, and John of Damascus explore divine names to understand God's workings and as means of spiritual communication. The study emphasizes the importance of the calling of God's name in Eastern mysticism as an act of communion and transfiguration, pointing to the connection between the divine name and the essential presence of God in the lives of believers.



Keywords

Tetragrammaton, Divinity, Revelation, Mysticism, Transcendence

Introduction

The name is how we represent and know ourselves. Being closely linked to our representation, the way we name a thing, a being, or a person will determine the authenticity of the image we will have. The name preserves a reality that is proper to the thing, the person designated, and is related to them. In this sense, in direct reference to the third commandment of the Decalogue (Ex 20:7), whoever degrades the name of God will degrade his concept of God and will remove the very manifestation of God

within his being. This is why the Savior Christ in the Lord's Prayer teaches us to sanctify God's name (Mt 6:9) before the prayer petitions. God's name is sanctified because God is holy; otherwise, our knowledge will be untrue and vain.

More often than not, the name has fallen into a plane of banality in contemporary society. That is why we think it is time to return to the type of original acts. And when I say original acts, I consider the kind of counsel that does not determine or express the revelation but is the clear expression of revelation. The name must be received as a *nomen revelans*. Such a name is a relational reality; it is not something dry and individualized, but it is the expression of how and through which I transcend myself by intuiting and embodying the transcendent dimension of the Other. The name is the very dynamic presence of the Other. To speak its name is to speak oneself in its revelational structures. And when it is said, "You shall not take the name of the Lord God in the desert," it is not the desert as a geophysical state but the desert of our being. We need to make God a partaker in our fruitfulness and not in our dryness. And when it is a question of fruitfulness, perjury or vows lose their existence, banished by authentic martyrdom. To be fruitful means to be in God; those who abide in God bring forth much fruit.

Therefore, in this study, we propose to investigate the complexity and significance of the names of God as perceived in the Jewish and Christian traditions. These names are not merely appellations but are true theological mysteries that reflect different aspects of faith and spirituality within each religion. The study will explore how divine names capture the essence and presence of God, emphasizing the deep and dynamic connection between the Creator and his creation. In the Jewish tradition, God's names, such as the Tetragrammaton, are considered to have creative and mystical powers and have a central function in religious and mystical practice. In Christianity, on the other hand, divine names are perceived as manifestations of an intimate and personal relationship with God, offering believers access to the infinite and transcendent divinity.

The study's objectives include analyzing these names conceptually and theologically, investigating their role in religious practices, and identifying how they facilitate a deeper communion with God through the name. By comparing these perspectives, a more comprehensive understanding of the spiritual and theological significance of the names of God in the context of both religions is sought.

The name of God in Judaism

The divine noun is defined as *Shem hamephora*, having a content consisting of several meanings. The perfect participle *mephora* means both *made known, spoken or explained*. But, in this context, it also means *concealed or separated*. Over time, the center of gravity of the divine Name has shifted to the second meaning, meaning the Name that evades explanation is silenced. Even in Christian Apocrypha, the *Prayer of Manasseh*, God is said to have sealed the creature and sealed it with his almighty Name. At the same time, some passages mentioned in various mystical writings speak of this Name as a *creative agens*, emphasizing the magical conception of the Name. This is due to the coincidence between the word and Name. By becoming a word, the Name of God becomes a component of divine language, the verb by which God represents Himself, manifests Himself, and communicates Himself to His creation.

This mystical-magical structure of the Torah, seen as a string of divine Names, explains why each letter is important and why a Torah scroll in which a letter is wrong is not recognized in synagogal usage. As Gershom Scholem rightly observes, the Torah itself forms the Great Name of God. “The five books of the Torah represent the Name of the Holy One, praise be to Him!” (Scholem 1996, 39) The Law thus becomes a mystical unity whose primary goal is to express the might and omnipotence of God, which is concentrated in His Name. The presentation of the Torah as the Name of the Lord presupposes that God expresses his transcendent being, at least in that aspect of his being, which was revealed through the act of creation. All the sensory layers of the Torah as the language of the Name are but relativizations of the absolute, opening up to man-specific mystical perspectives.

The name considered, above all others, holy in itself, is the Tetragrammaton (Pașca-Tușa 2010, 16). Composed of four consonants, *Alef, Hei, Vav, and Yod*, it encapsulates the spirituality of the divine being. Its letters, with a numerical value of 22, appear as a symbolic combination of the fact that a single name can encompass the entire string of the alphabet. The consonant with which the Law given on Sinai, *Aleph*, begins is the element from which every articulated sound comes and the spiritual root of all the letters. The name of God is the embodiment of this Torah *Aleph*. Based on this interpretation, which goes beyond the mystical, the Tetragrammaton appears as a totality of the manifestation of divine power that man can control. This is because “the Holy One, praise be to Him, is in His Name and His Name is in Him, and His Name is His Torah” (Scholem 1996, 62). All the names given to God are organically linked

to the Tetragrammaton, so the Torah is ultimately centered and warped on these four consonants.

Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla, a 13th-14th century Spanish Kabbalist and disciple of Abulafia, dealing with the occult meanings of the divine names, states that “all His holy names mentioned in the Torah depend on the Name composed of four letters. [...] The four-letter Name is the stem of a tree. [...] All holy names are the branches and leaves that grow from the tree trunk, and each branch bears its fruit.” [our translation] (Cohn-Sherlok 2000, 137) As a guide in the ascent to God on the path of the sefirot, the divine names are like keys to man, used by him to decipher the divine mystery. Thus, we can say that the Tetragrammaton appears as “the cause of causes and the source of all sources. All things are enclosed, from the *keter* to the smallest mosquito.” [our translation] (Cohn-Sherlok 2000, 143) According to this theory, the divine Name has been transformed through permutations and combinations of letters. This metamorphosis has a double function: on the one hand, it gives the Torah the appearance of communicating a message from God, but on the other hand, it indicates a secret action of divine power, recognizable only through the woven garment of the holy Name. From this point of view, the quotation from Jer 20:24 is simple to interpret: if one pronounces the Name of God, aware that the whole Godhead is circumscribed in it, he is performing an act of creation, and because of the unity between God and his Name, he is a co-participant in the Primordial Word. To be sure, this conception has deepened and diversified, leading to the conclusion that each letter of the Tetragrammaton is a divine name; not just the letters of the Tetragrammaton, but each letter of the Torah has a self-existence as a divine name: “each letter must be pronounced in a single breath as if the spirit were coming out of the person [pronouncing it]. The result of this practice is to receive the influx of wisdom and the [power] of creation.” [our translation] (Idel 2019, 233) By conceiving of the Name not as a revelation of the Divine but as access to Him, in the sense of creative identity, Jewish mysticism receives esoteric and magical connotations.

We may conclude that Jewish mysticism conceives of the Torah as being built integrally on the Name of God, being at the same time a weaving of the multitude of names or epithets attributed to the Divine. Thus, the Torah is the living garment in which the Tetragrammaton is vividly woven like a milkweed, and the Name is the supreme expression that contains within itself, as in focus, the structure of the Abyss and the dynamics of the commandment. The divine Name vibrates in every letter of the Torah, every created thing becoming reality only as it contains, in some way, a part

of the Great Name. The mystical Jew is always aware that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are holy in themselves, condensing themselves into the Name of God. They are holy worlds and testimonies of the spiritual world. Linked as they are to the doctrine of the ten sephiroth, in the letters of the Holy Name dwells the presence of *the Shekinah*, which makes possible man's connection with the abyss of the Godhead. The biblical expression "the word of God" is translated as *Memra d'Adonai*, synthesizing the divine Name. In this meaning, *Memra* has the sense of *Shekinah*, i.e. God's presence dwells in his Name (Agus 1998, 82-5).

God's name is the essential name that is the source of all speech. Every other name correlates with some activity of His, but His essential Name has no standard meaning or concrete significance. Its lack of meaning shows precisely its position at the center of Being and Creation, of which it is the foundation. Without meaning, it gives meaning to all existence. In creation and Revelation, the divine Name is reflected in our language; its rays or sounds are communications and calls. In this sense, Gershom Scholem believes that the existence of any word and the fact of its utterance is due only to the Name of God, schematically contained in its metaphysical structures (Scholem 2000, 74).

Names in Christian thought

In Christianity, God reveals himself in a personal way to human persons. Or nothing is more personal, more intimate than the name. What God reveals is primarily his person and his existence. This is also totally infinite, transcendent, beyond all sensory experience. Dionysius the Areopagite uses a series of revolutionary terms and expressions in this sense, showing that the theology of the divine names is like knowledge by guesswork, a view through the narrow prism of created things. In this sense, Dumitru Stăniloae emphasized that "when we call the supernatural hiddenness God, life, essence, light, or reason, we understand nothing other than the powers that come to us..." [our translation] (Stăniloae 1996, 105)

Divinity is infinitely beyond all essence and knowledge. It is not what philosophy calls the Absolute in itself, nor is it some universal consciousness or primordial unity that stands behind diversity. Even if it can be called the Absolute Unity, Divinity goes beyond the unity-plurality relation. For this very reason, it is neither one nor many, containing within itself, in an undifferentiated state, the number principle, which is translated into human language and thought of only as the unity-plurality relation.

In an approach that goes beyond the bounds of apophaticism reduced to a mere negation, Dionysius the Areopagite affirms that God is above being and unity above unity. As supra-unitary unity, as unity above the mind, God encompasses within himself the nature above essence and undifferentiated, the principle of plurality that appears in the act of creation.

Referring to the names given to God in Holy Scripture, Dionysius the Areopagite says that these are various revelations of His work in the world, by no means expressing the divinity in its super-essence. This is because the divine being “is above all reason and all knowledge, and has its foundation beyond mind and essence, circumscribing, encompassing, embracing, anticipating all things, while it is wholly and all things incomprehensible, not being grasped either by the senses or by images or by thought, having no name or word, nor being able to be known” (St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite 1993, 29). Though possible because of the existence and dynamism of the divine works, all the Names of God do not encompass being; do not exhaust it. That is why blackness and silence are the states closest to God, and the absence of the Name constitutes the greatest wonder and mystery. And here, it is no longer a question either of linguistic convention or mystical speculation. For “about the divine super-essentiality, that is, the meaning of the super-existence of transcendent goodness, no one is permitted to extol it as reason, or power, or mind, or life, or being, but rather it surpasses every condition, movement, life, imagination, opinion, opinion, name, thought, being, state, dwelling, union, limit, limitlessness; any of all that exists” (St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite 1993, 30).

It is essential, however, following the structure of Dionysius’ discourse, to note that when Holy Scripture names God, the names ascribed refer to the whole divinity, not just to certain parts or aspects of it: “all the divine names in Scripture always glorify the divinity, not in a partial way, but wholly, completely, fully, entirely, and that they refer in an undecipherable, absolute, unreserved, unreserved, all-in-all way to the whole universality of the whole and total Godhead” [our translation] (St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite 1993, 42). Dionysius, however, distinguishes between differentiated and undifferentiated names, some referring to the whole divinity and others only to its hypostatic differentiations. Thus, “undifferentiated names refer to the whole divinity, as, for example, supra-good, supra-divine, supra-essential, supra-essential, supra-vital, supra-wise, and all abstractions expressing superiority. Among these are also names with a causal meaning, such as good, beautiful, existent, life-producing, and wise

[...]. On the other hand, differentiated names are supra-essential names and the connotations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which neither can be exchanged nor taken in common.” [our translation] (St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite 1993, 58) Thus, this „scholastic” differentiation has in view precisely the affirmation that the Godhead, in its transcendent unity, cannot be named. Identical with Itself, It is affirmation and negation, transcending the boundaries of apophaticism. Even dwelling in Its differentiated hypostases, It remains in an undifferentiated and transcendent unity.

Dionysius the Areopagite, when he speaks of names, does so, understanding them as the predicate of the Divinity, works in which one participates and shares “attributes of the divine generation, that which is above essence”. He affirms that the most proper name of God, seen from this perspective, is *Good* before being called existence, being, or life. Of course, even if one sees this as a Platonic influence, the approach is profoundly theological. For example, he states that “the good is the cause of the foundations and edges of heaven” (St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite 1993, 74), finding not only the foundation of creation but also the ontological principle of being. “If the good is above all that exists,” says Dionysius, “then its formless nature produces every form. In itself non-existent, it is an excess of existence; without life in itself, it is an excess of life; without mind, it is an excess of wisdom.” [our translation] (St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite 1993, 73) All other divine names have their root in this one, as the one who is the basis of all God’s relation to the world. Thus, the Good is called light, wisdom, being, existence, being above all these and containing them all in itself. Just as light “contains in itself, in a simple form, the ultimate and entire principle of light, being the transcendent prototype of light,” so also Good can be called spiritual light because “it is the ray that springs forth and pours forth radiance, illuminating from its fullness every supra-luminal mind.” (St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite 1993, 76)

All that is cognizable in God is this “life-giving outflow” of being, that is the divine things. To them, the whole of Scripture refers when it seems to attribute to God a proper name. Dionysius is very clear on this point, affirming that God is not identical with any of his attributes that neither circumscribes being nor the hypostases in which being subsists but is situated only “around being.” “The divine appointments desire to praise the manifestation of the pronoia; they do not promise to express the goodness above being and the being and life and wisdom of the supernatural Godhead, which is, above all, the goodness and Godhead and being and wisdom and life that abides steadfastly in the hidden, but the beneficent pronoia and cause of all goodness which,

manifesting itself, remains at the same time above all. [...] For there is not something else good and something else being and something else life and wisdom, nor are there many causes [...], but of one God are all the good things and the names of God praised by us.” [our translation] (St. Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite 1993, 194)

No matter how much we talk about Dionysius the Areopagite, we fail to exhaust the depth of his mystical thought and the height of the apophaticism he proposes in works such as *The Divine Names* or *Mystical Theology*. His way of theologizing is a conceptual synthesis of what Evagrius Ponticus said, namely, that everyone who prays is a theologian, and everyone who prays is a theologian. His discourse and its style can be found both in the patristic works that followed him and in most medieval and modern commentaries on them. Referring to the apophatic mode proposed by Dionysius, which did not exclude the possibility of affirmations and the Name, St. Maximus says: “He who wishes to know God affirmatively makes the word bodily, not being able to know God as a cause from any other than from what is seen and felt. And he who wishes to know Him negatively, through negations, makes the word spirit, knowing the supra-knowable One as the One who was, in the beginning, God and was at God, but not from anything that can be known.” [our translation] (St. Maxim the Confessor 1947, 182)

St. John of Damascus distinguishes between the name of the works of God and the Name of God. Even if the latter is understood as a synthesis of the former, it nonetheless has a reality because of its non-existence of a specific property of encompassing being. Its reality is experiential, to a greater extent than all the energies it contains. Nevertheless, John of Damascus carefully specifies the lack of gnoseological substance of the Proper Name of God: “Because the Godhead is incomprehensible, it will certainly be nameless. Therefore, in that we do not know its being, let us not seek the name of its being, for the name indicates things.” [our translation] (Evdokimov 1995, 36)

It is essential that the theology of St. John of Damascus developed during the iconoclastic struggles. Both he and Theodore the Studite make it clear in these struggles that the image is not identical in essence and substance with its model, its archetype. Being a likeness that mirrors the model, the image retains its natural difference from it. Described as “receptacles of divine energy,” icons make it possible for a man to communicate more intimately with God, bringing the reality and miracle of salvation up to date. In the same sense, with the same spiritual connotations, the Names of God are also seen as icons of his divine and supernatural revelation. Through the Incarnation,

the Son of God makes himself seen and thus offers the possibility of painting and honoring his material image. Through Revelation, God makes himself known to human beings, offering them the possibility of naming him, of approaching human nature through his name and lifting it out of the narrow space of a proper name, that is, of a history suspended in nothingness. Like the icon, the name of God differs in kind from the divine being in that it cannot express that which is by nature negated; nevertheless, the naming of the divine presupposes the reality of His existence and knowledge, moreover, of His living and experiencing, in a word, the miracle of salvation (Evdokimov 1995, 36).

Like Dionysius and Maximus, John of Damascus affirms that each name, as the fruit of the divine works, refers to the whole Godhead, Who is the unique source of all energies. Whether used in an affirmative or negative sense, the name of God encompasses the totality of names as attributes or personal attributes of being. Even if the attributes do not show what the being is in itself, in its essence, they constitute themselves as effects or reasons of the divine activity and life, not about the Self, but to the whole of creation, thus making possible every naming and at the same time every negation of naming. Following the apophaticism of the Holy Fathers, John of Damascus follows the gnoseological and mystical line already existing in the Church, his work directly influencing every theological and dogmatic approach of the Christian East. His work is, therefore, the first attempt at a clear and profound systematization of Christian doctrine after the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol.

Calling on the Name of God in Eastern Mysticism

According to the Holy Scripture, the Name carries within itself and reveals the person's mystery. When the angel reveals the Incarnation of the Son of God, he also tells Mary His Name (Lk 1:31), the Name of the Messiah being also a *nomen praesens*. Thus, praying the Name of God is not a mere speaking to God, but a participation in his speaking. This participation is achieved through the calling of His Name, for which there is no need for some specialized and formal knowledge, the calling being as simple as the human being: "To walk you must take a step; to swim you must jump into the water. The same is true with the calling of the Name. We begin by saying it, praising Him with love; we cling to Him. We represent Him. We don't think we are calling on the Name. We think only of Jesus Himself. We say his name slowly, slowly, quietly." [our translation] (Gillet 1950, 5-6) Thus, the essential element, whatever the form of

prayer, remains the Name. As *the Russian Pilgrim* states, this interior prayer, which finds its foundation in the Name of Jesus, summarizes the Gospels, including the principal mysteries of Christianity: The Trinity and the Incarnation. In the same way, even *the Shepherd of Herma* affirms that *the Name of the Son of God is great and boundless and sustains the whole universe*.

According to St. Diadochos of Photiki, the prayer of the heart boils down to two words: “Lord Jesus.” (Gouillard 2008, 52) But the other words, added later, constitute a general petition for God’s mercy, manifested in and through his name. God’s power and glory are present and at work in his Name, so to learn God’s Name deliberately and carefully is to bring oneself into his presence, open oneself to his energy, and offer oneself as a living instrument or sacrifice to him (Pașca-Tușa 2011, 67). The name of God cleanses the soul and keeps it from all remembrance and waste. “The thought of the Lord Jesus (by His Name) shakes out of the heart all the power of the enemy, overcomes it, and gradually uproots it. By descending the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ into the depths of the heart, the dragon that rules the depths of the heart is broken, and the soul is encircled.” [our translation] (Stăniloae 1992, 238) Quoting St. John Climacus, St. Gregory of Sinai testifies in the *Philocalia* that the Name of Jesus overcomes the enemies, there being no more powerful weapon in heaven and on earth than His Name.

The Name of God has a unique spiritual and eschatological value in Eastern mysticism. The ascent towards deification is ultimately characterized only by the remembrance of this Name, which encompasses the human mind in an immaterial and uncreated way. The human subject turns in on himself, and this encounter with himself in the space of the Name results in a boundless longing for God. The spiritual act of negation changes its structure, becoming a positive sense of the profound reality of the subject’s subject. But this reality is revealed only in the dimension of the Name of God (Stăniloae 1992, 271).

This whole conception is grounded in Holy Scripture (e.g., Jn 16:23; Acts 4:10-12; Phil 2:10; Rev 2:17). The name of God, being intimately connected with His Person, has a sacramental character, serving as an efficacious sign of His unseen presence and work. It is not, however, a magic talisman, but, through the calling of the Name, man cooperates with God, not in the sense of a creative identification, but in the sense of a graceful divinization. This synergy between the human Name, as a mirror of the human spirit, and the divine Name, as presence, work, and transfiguration, is realized through

the heart's prayer. The repetition of the Name signifies the interiorization of Jesus, the stepping out of the limits of the human, and the being's validation in the likeness of the Godhead. The Name of Jesus is the way that leads from fragmentation to unity, from dispersion and multiplicity to singularity. He is not a letter or combination of letters, nor an image, but a living presence so that the calling of the Name presupposes participation in the presence offered by him. "It is not enough to have a prayer: you must become prayer – prayer incarnate." [our translation] (Ware 1992, 48) or "The invocation of the divine Name builds us after the prototype of the One Whom we carry unseen within us from the making. His presence in us, through His Name, makes us *Theophorans* or *Christophors*, which is the meaning of our existence. The call of the Name expresses an unquenchable thirst and a sign of the time to come. The Name of Jesus can become a mystical key to the world, an instrument of the mystical offering of all things and all beings, the divine seal on this world..." [our translation] (Gorodetzky 1954, 17-18) The Name of God is a search, in the Holy Spirit, for His divine Person in this sigh of the age, in its becoming eschaton, so that, in Orthodox mystical language, *Lord Jesus Christ* means *Come, Jesus Christ!*

Conclusions

This study emphasizes God's name's profound and multidimensional significance in Jewish and Christian thought, with each tradition offering complementary perspectives on divinity. In Judaism, the divine name, especially the Tetragrammaton, is seen not simply as an identifier but as a sacralized entity with mystical and creative powers. The Tetragrammaton bridges God and creation, reflecting the transcendent and impenetrable nature of divinity and the limits of human expression in the face of this absolute reality. This vision emphasizes the importance of the correct practice of the name, which is a form of reverence and spiritual knowledge.

In contrast, in the Christian tradition, the name of God, particularly Jesus Christ, is perceived as a personal and accessible revelation of divinity. It opens the way to an intimate relationship with God, emphasizing God's personal and close character in believers' lives. By calling his name, the believer becomes part of a mystical communion characterized by divine care and grace.

Therefore, in Judaism and Christianity, the names of God play an essential role in forming spiritual identity and understanding of divinity. Whether it is reverence and sacramentality or accessibility and personalization, these concepts reveal how divine

names are channels through which believers connect with the divine mystery. Therefore, exploring these names is a theological analysis and a spiritual endeavor that invites reflection on one's relationship with God.

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