

# Word and Fire Instead of Sound and Smoke. Why an Abstract "God" Is not to be Believed

By Jochen Teuffel

"Who is God in China, *Shén* or *Shàngdì*?" So asked the British Orientalist S.C. Malan 1855 in his tract of the same name. Behind this was a heated debate among Protestant missionaries and Orientalists in the 19th century when it came to translating the Bible into Chinese. Since no agreement could be reached, the standard Protestant Bible, the *Chinese Union Version* (CUV) of 1919, was printed in both a *Shàngdì* and a *Shén* edition.

"Pagan god" or "pantheism" – the mutual accusations pick up on inadequacies of both Chinese translation attempts: *Shàngdì* ("Above Sovereign") is a name to which the emperors of the Ming and the Qing dynasty (1368-1644/1644-1911) offered sacrifices every year in the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, in order to assure themselves of heaven's approval anew each time. From a Christian point of view, the objection is obvious: isn't *Shàngdì* invoking a pagan god? The generic name *Shén* ("spirit being"), on the other hand, escapes this captiousness. However, *Shén* is not to be delimited theologically. A revered ancestral soul can also have a beneficial effect as *Shén* for those born later. Thus, there is no physical difference between "God" and "man", which in turn leads to the accusation of pantheism.

## The name: YHWH ...

Chinese names – besides *Shàngdì* and *Shén*, there is also *Tianzhu* ("Lord of Heaven") on the Catholic side – cannot express what is understood by "God" in Western culture. Monotheism brings three metaphysical statements to the concept of the absolute One: One is the unconditional origin of everything; he is in addition the timeless Being-itself; and he is the self-conceived idea of the Good. Such a "Trinity" does not owe itself to the biblical testimony, but has been attributed to Christianity by the influence of Greek philosophy. Since univalent definitions of origin and being are unthinkable in the context of the Chinese worldview, the Western, metaphysical concept of God cannot be translated into Chinese. No wonder that Jesuit attempts to assert monotheism in China – such as Matteo Ricci's *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* – were declared absurd by Confucian and Buddhist scholars of the 17th and 18th centuries.

While Chinese language lacks a clear concept of God, Western thought seems unaffected by this. Goethe's Faust, for example, in the first part of the tragedy of the same name, counters Gretchen's captious question about religion with the proclamation of a God-essential namelessness: "Then call it what you will: / Good fortune! Heart! Love! or God! / I have no name for it! / Feeling is all; / the name is sound and smoke, / beclouding Heaven's glow." It was the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) who resolutely contradicted such anonymity in his *Star of Redemption*: "Contrary to what unbelief unceasingly maintains with empty and prideful obstinacy, the name is not sound and smoke, but word and fire. It is a matter of invoking the Name, it is this that must be confessed: I believe It."

Word and fire instead of sound and smoke: Franz Rosenzweig had the biblical testimony behind him with his contradiction. "Name" is a key biblical word, but not in the context of "God's name". Translations of the Bible speak almost exclusively of the "name of the LORD". This refers to the four Hebrew letters that cannot be pronounced for lack of vowels – the so-called tetragram YHWH.

In Europe, the tetragram is often featured on baroque high altars, for good reason: According

to the biblical testimony, Moses hears YHWH's name called at Sinai: "YHWH [is] YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6). He introduces himself by name as "YHWH". For him, "God" is merely a predicate noun. Biblically, the proper name YHWH precedes the generic name "God". "YHWH is God" is what the Bible says, and not vice versa.

However, the very first sentence of the Bible seems to contradict what has been said so far: "In the beginning God (*Elohim*) created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). Here "God" is used as a subject, but as a substitute for YHWH. This is a so-called antonomasia ("instead of the name"), a rhetorical trope in which a generic name, a title or an epithet substitutes the proper name. The generic name *Elohim* is so closely connected to YHWH that it can also take its place, but without replacing it. This is the case in Christian tradition with "Jesus Christ", when the title "Christ" ("Anointed One") is used instead of the proper name "Jesus".

Why the generic name "God" is repeatedly used in the Old Testament – even in direct address – instead of the proper name YHWH can be seen not least in the second of the Ten Commandments: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain." (Ex 20:7) When using the proper name YHWH, one can arbitrarily claim its bearer for oneself or – much worse – one can attach things and values to this name that profane it.

The danger of a name being usurped is also the reason why in our culture we do not usually address our parents by their first names, but as "mother" or "father". One's own respect for the name is reflected in its avoidance.

The fact that "God" cannot be considered a name, but only a representation of a name – i.e. in the sense of an antonomasia – has largely been forgotten in Christianity, in contrast to Judaism. The reason for this is a translational reversal of the name relationship. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, the tetragram YHWH could neither be translated nor transcribed. It was replaced by the title *Kyrios* ("Lord"), while *Elohim* was rendered as *Ho Theós* ("the God").

Now, the Greek concept of God had already been thought through monotheistically since the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes. In the course of a Hellenisation of the biblical message, "God" was understood as the origin of all being or as the "first unmoved mover". In any case, in Greek – as later in Latin – "God" could no longer be referred to the proper name YHWH. "God" took the place of YHWH. Jewish concealment gave rise to Christian forgetfulness of the name. The self-claim of the first commandment "I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex 20:2) could no longer be heard. Once YHWH had been theologically emptied, the question of whether and by what name "God" could be properly called was considered instead.

Though postmetaphysical thinking – following the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas – is called for, yet we are still stuck with the supposedly universal term "God". Even those who work through the history of religions or biblical studies on gods or concepts of God eventually come back to "God". Its alleged superiority allows the metaphysical concept of "God" to be unquestioningly projected into canonical writings of the Bible.

### **... that moves history**

But why is the tetragram YHWH to be regarded as a shibboleth, as an identification or key word of the Christian faith? Why is a specific name and not a general concept of God

required? In order to follow the name-binding of faith, it is necessary to understand what names mean – and not only designate. In contrast to the generic name, the proper name addresses identity, but without defining it. The name does not have an abstract, general and thus timeless quality, but rather takes on the events themselves. What someone has experienced and done in particular is attached to his or her name. In the proper name, the event is condensed and preserved over time. Only those who have their own name have their own life story. Without a specific name, events either disappear into oblivion or into the repeatability of a cause-and-effect relationship governed by natural law. What is not attributed a name is irretrievably lost in the nameless past. Nameless things decompose with time and therefore have no basis in eternity. If, on the other hand, an event has a name, it can be remembered. The reality of the name makes life with its experiences addressable.

Proper names testify to one's own life; they are eminently ethical and at the same time eschatological. Jesus Sirach knows how to emphasise their significance:

"Whatever comes from earth returns to earth,  
so the ungodly go from curse to destruction.  
The breath of humans is in their bodies,  
but a virtuous name will never be blotted out.  
Have regard for your name, since it will outlive you  
longer than a thousand hoards of gold.  
The days of a good life are numbered,  
but a good name lasts forever." (Sir 41:10-13 NRSV)

What names say grows with them, namely their reputation. Unlike generic names, proper names cannot be defined, yet they gain in importance over time. After all that has happened to a name, it has become another, yet still remains the same. With good reason, the poem by the late Israeli poet Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky (1914-1984) "Each of us has a name (*Lechol Ish Yesh Shem*)" is recited in Israel every year on *Yom HaShoah*, the Holocaust Remembrance Day. It states:

"Each of us has a name  
given by our stature and our smile  
and given by what we wear [...]

Each of us has a name  
given by our sins  
and given by our longing

Each of us has a name  
given by our enemies  
and given by our love

Each of us has a name  
given by our celebrations  
and given by our work."

Nameless stories can also be told – someone somewhere and sometime experiences something with someone ... However, the identity of the person mentioned in this way disintegrates with the end of the story. Anonymous identifications cannot be communicated beyond the respective context. Without proper names, events cannot be permanently linked in a temporal sequence. This would make historiography impossible. While natural sciences as well as

metaphysics are based on generic names, history is moved by proper names, and proper names move history.

### **The promise of the name**

What promises people the future is neither something generally thought of nor nature, but the name that the credible story bears. Thus YHWH is approached with confidence in the Psalms prayer: "You are my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake you will lead me and guide me" (Ps 31:3). According to the biblical testimony, the name encompasses all that YHWH has done for the salvation of the nations in his people Israel and through his Son Jesus Christ. Baptism "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" takes one's own name into the Trinitarian salvation history and allows one to believe in YHWH's faithfulness to action.

How hopeless, on the other hand, faith becomes when it focuses on a metaphysical concept of God instead of the name. This anonymous concept of God cannot incorporate temporal actions. Otherwise it would be deprived of its absoluteness. One may speak of divine words and deeds, but if the "God"-essence is to be considered, these living words and deeds must be disregarded. A "God" who in the purest sense is thought through as inactive, however, is devoid of any history. What timeless qualities of being are attributed to him cannot actually become trustworthy and close to human beings. Who can really believe a self-conceived "God"?

With good reason, the late Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz (1928-2019) linked his plea for a biblically based memory of suffering (*memoria passionis*) with a rejection of a metaphysical concept of God. If, in the end, human beings were to unite in thought with the unconditional One, countless stories of suffering would have to be disposed of in nameless indifference. Those who refuse to accept the compassionless credo "everything will be all right – in oblivion" do not find their hope in the concept of God, but apocalyptically in the name "that is above every name" (Phil 2:9). Thus the memory of suffering leads into the liturgical memory of names, which takes into prayer the mystery of salvation of Jesus Christ before YHWH: Name to Name rather than Dust to Dust. Should God-thinking (or God-not-thinking) have the last word among us humans, anonymous grave fields in cemeteries would be the foretaste of eternity.