

‘You must name him Jesus’: being named as kenosis

Wilson Poon

‘You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you must name him Jesus.’

(Luke 1.31)

‘She will give birth to a son and you must name him Jesus ... she gave birth to a son; and he named him Jesus.’ (Matt. 1.21,25)

The fact that the Incarnate Lord was *named* may, at first sight, appear unremarkable. Rather, the focus of devotional and scholarly attention has been on the meaning of the name, hinted at in the Matthean account: ‘because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins’.

It was two paragraphs in what the author himself called ‘a very private, probably impossible’ book that made me think again. In the second part of *Real Presences*,¹ a remarkable meditation on language and transcendence, George Steiner reflects on the ‘enigmatic enormity’ that ‘inhabits’ an unremarkable ‘commonplace’ (53)²:

Anything can be said and, in consequence, written about *anything*. ... We can say any truth and any falsehood. We can affirm and negate in the same breath. We can construe material impossibility at will. (55)

Positively, Steiner would have us note, ‘above all else’, that ‘the unboundedness of discursive potentiality’ makes language ‘the generator and messenger of and out of tomorrow’. Humans ‘alone can construct and parse the grammar of hope. He can speak, he can write about the morning light on the day after his funeral. ... Above the minimal vegetative plane, our lives depend on our capacity to speak hope, to entrust to if-clauses and futures our active dreams of change, of progress, of

deliverance. To such dreams, the concept of resurrection ... is a natural grammatical augment'. (56-57)

However,³ 'the unarrested infinity of conceivable propositions and statements' also has its negative side; it 'entails the logic of nullity and of nihilism'. Specifically, 'in the city of words, equal legitimacy attaches to the conviction that the predication of God's existentiality lies at the very source of human speech and constitutes its final *dignitas*; and to the view of the logical positivists that such prediction has the same status as nonsense rhymes'. Thus, it is only inside 'closed speech systems' such as liturgies that 'grammatical postulates and demonstrations of God's existence' can have validity. 'Each blasphemy, in turn, re-affirms the open indeterminacy of language.' And so we get to the heart of the matter of names. 'Here,' says Steiner, 'resides the true sense in depth of the Judaic prohibition on the enunciation of the name or, more strictly speaking, of the Name of the Name, of God,' YHVH, the tetragrammaton:⁴

The blasphemer is not culpable unless he pronounces the Name itself.⁵

All Israelites have a share in the world to come ... And these are they that have no share in the world to come: he that says there is no resurrection of the dead ... Abba Saul says: Also he that pronounces the name with its proper letters.⁶

Only priests serving in the Temple were allowed the privilege of responsibility (responsibility, a word whose gracious overtones were brought out luminously by Steiner): 'After what manner was the blessing of the priests? ... in the Temple they pronounced the Name as it was written, but in the provinces by a substituted word'.⁷

Going back in time from the Mishna (from which the above quotations were taken), we find Josephus the priest (a contemporary of Jesus) abruptly curbing his readers' curiosity: 'And God declared to [Moses] His name, which had not previously come to men, and *about which it is not*

permissible to say anything'.⁸ Going back further in time, Kuhn tells us that 'there is already a careful avoidance of the divine name in Qoheleth (= Ecclesiastes) and Esther.'⁹ Summarising the evidence, the same author says this: 'To avoid misuse of this name, even before the Christian era it had come to discontinue its use altogether, in the spirit of the saying in [Mishna Aboth] 1.1: "Make a hedge about the Law."¹⁰

But what is the nature of the instinct in the Judaic psyche which compels such hedge building? Perhaps, as has often been suggested, it is the anxiety of misusing the dreadful power associated with the name of a god: Moses was supposed to have slain the Egyptian by uttering the tetragrammaton.¹¹ There is, of course, nothing uniquely Judaic about this taboo. But with the Jew, the deeply-felt need to hedge about the *mysterium tremendum* of the divine name may have a deeper, and uniquely Judaic, source. Perhaps, Steiner suggests, the Jewish psyche has an instinctive grasp of the precipice that is the 'unboundedness of discursive potentiality':

Here resides the true sense in depth of the Judaic prohibition on the enunciation of the name or, more strictly speaking, of the Name of the Name, of God. *Once spoken, this name passes into the contingent limitless of linguistic play*, be it rhetorical, metaphoric or deconstructive. In natural and unbounded discourse God has no demonstrable lodging. ...

Negative theology, this is to say the postulate of His non-being, is as legitimate in respect of word and proposition as in the dogma of His presence. (57, italics mine)

Hence the instinct to 'make a hedge about' the Name of the Name. The hedge, of course, has to be all-encompassing. The only protection against 'the contingent limitless of linguistic play' is prohibition: that of which we cannot speak, we shall for ever remain silent; and blasphemy is not the offspring of silence.

Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. (Phil. 2.6-8)

‘Becoming as human beings are.’ Human beings have names, names without hedges; names which, from the moment they are given, pass inevitably and irretrievably into ‘the contingent limitless of linguistic play’, and of which ‘anything can be said’. Grammatically, to be named is to become a nominative, about which *anything* can be predicated: a name can be ‘affirmed and negated in the same breath’, which is why words can bring life as well as kill.

‘You are to conceive in your womb and bear a son, and *you must name him* Jesus.’ Perhaps long before we reach that ‘humility unto the point of death’, we should pause and contemplate the kenotic enormity that is the nomination of the Incarnate Son of God, ‘when the eighth day came and the child was to be circumscised, they gave him the name Jesus’. (Luke 2.21) That name, once spoken by Mary and Joseph, ‘passes into the contingent limitless of linguistic play’; *anything* can be, and has been, predicated to the nominative, masculine, singular which is ‘Jesus’. Just as in the world of matter, where ‘foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head’, (Matt. 8.20) so it is in the world of ‘natural and unbounded discourse’, where the Son of man ‘has no demonstrable lodging’, save that one place where the predication was most charged with irony: ‘Pilate wrote out a notice and had it fixed to the cross; it ran: ‘Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews.’ ... in Hebrew, Latin and Greek’. (John 19:10, 20b)

The ambiguity here is of the essence. In the city of words, equal legitimacy attaches to the conviction of the crucified criminal who said, ‘Remember me when you come into your kingdom.’;

and to the view of those who jeered and shook their heads, and mocked, ‘He is the king of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him’. (Matt. 27.39-42) Such ambiguity is in the nature of the kenosis of nomination within the city of words. In fact, in taking up voluntary residence in this *polis*, the Incarnate Son of God automatically lays himself open to ‘the unarrested infinity of conceivable propositions and statements’. There is to be no hedge about the name of Jesus. Instead, staggeringly, we are told that ‘every human ... blasphemy will be forgiven ... and anyone who says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven’. (Matt. 12.31, 32). Thus, in the practice of authentically *Christian* ‘God-talk’ (theology) centred on the person of Jesus, the boundary between ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy’ can only be fuzzy at best. To have to live with such a fuzzy boundary is painful. But to seek to police the fuzzy boundary by censorship of whatever kind is to put back the hedge which God removed when the angel commanded Mary and Joseph to *name* their child.

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¹ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Faber and Faber 1989). The description of the book quoted at the beginning comes from George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (Pelican 1969), p. 1.

² All quotations from *Real Presences* are given by page numbers in brackets.

³ Quotations in this paragraph are all from p. 57 of *Real Presences*.

⁴ All Mishna quotations come from the translation of H. Danby (Oxford 1933).

⁵ Mishna *Sanhedrin* 7.5.

⁶ Mishna *Sanhedrin* 10.1.

⁷ Mishna *Sotah* 7.6.

⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 2.275; italics mine.

⁹ K. G. Kuhn, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, Tr. G. W. Bromiley (Eerdmans 1965), Vol. III, q.v. *theos*, section C2.

¹⁰ Kuhn, *loc. cit.*

¹¹ *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. XI, Funk and Wagnalls (New York and London 1905), q.v. Shem ha-Meforash.