Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 12/1

WHAT'S IN A NAME
REFLECTIONS ON GOD, GODS, AND THE DIVINE

R.J. Zwi WERBLOWSKY

Much, and some would say already too much, has been written on the relationship of philosophy, theology and religion. At the risk of repeating hackneyed commonplaces, let me begin by simply stating that there is a profound and almost necessary symbiotic relationship between philosophy and theology (their important internal differences notwithstanding) on the one hand, and Comparative Religion (to use a very inelegant and barbarian neologism which, however, considering the sorry state of the English language at the present time, will hardly bother anybody) on the other. Of course nobody in his right mind, and historians of religion least of all, would make the stupid mistake of identifying religion with theology, let alone philosophy. But at the present stage of our cultural evolution we cannot envisage, let alone communicate and discourse about, religion or god without that kind of disciplined thinking that also includes philosophy. The flight from reason to unreason—no matter in the name of which fashionable slogan and no matter how diligently practised—is also a betrayal of religion. From the vantage point of his eleventh century medievalism, St. Anselm, whose *fides* was *quaerens intellectum*, would have looked aghast at some of the manifestations of primitivism in the Dark Ages, by which term I mean, of course, the twentieth century. One of the contributions

---

This paper is part of an address delivered on December 30, 1983, at the God Conference of New ERA (Ecumenical Research Association) in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

of contemporary ecumenical activity to the history of religions seems to lie in the fact that the intense conversation between members of different cultural and religious traditions renders all parties to the dialogue more alert to the profit to be derived from the presence of spokesmen from a variety of backgrounds. It is a happy omen if philosophers and theologians, instead of being paralysed by the fear of "relativism," evince a readiness to be liberated from the incestuous atmosphere of in-group thinking. The Comparative Religionist (which is another neobarbarian shorthand term designating people whose professional avocation is the comparative study of religions) on his part very definitely needs the theologians and philosophers since they, among others, provide much of his raw-material, his bread-and-butter as it were. Without them he would have much less material to work on, much as a historian of art would be out of work if there were no painters and sculptors.

Now it is part of the human situation that every activity takes place in a historico-cultural context and not in a vacuum. For example, the fact that a conference on religion takes place in the Western hemisphere—intellectually and not merely geographically—already pre-empts the nature of its deliberations. And the same could, of course, be said of meetings held in Varanasi or Madras or Ise. I am reminded here of an ecumenical-type conference that took place in Japan several years ago at the initiative of leading Shinto circles. The conference had as its theme the ethical concerns which world religions shared, or should share, in our present perilous situation. In other words the organisers, rightly or wrongly, felt that it was safer to talk about the ethical implications of religious commitments rather than to skate on the thin ice of "god talk." In fact, the concept of god still seems to many to be a hot potato, to be hastily dropped or altogether avoided. Hence one feels all the more respect for those who have the courage to take the bull by the horns, as e.g. the recent Nanzan symposium on Shinto and Christianity.

When referring to discussions about god I do not, of course, have in mind the popular fads of some years ago when pseudo-theological journalism made easy money by substituting an

enviable public relations flare for intellectual seriousness, and producing books by the dozen on the "Death of God" and the like. The subject is too silly to deserve serious attention, except by sociologists whose job it is to study the history of cultural fads. The really fascinating aspect of this rather funny interlude was the infantile revolutionary pathos with which some self-ordained high-priests of secularity proclaimed the death-of-god with a fervour that exhibited all the symptoms of intense euphoria, and in a curious academico-theological liturgy that has been aptly described as the pop-style of a "happening."

Let us, at this stage, remind ourselves that parallel to the religious traditions of the world, there always have been concurrent traditions of criticisms of religious beliefs as well as of philosophical dogmatisms—in Graeco-Roman antiquity, in India, in China, in Western medieval thought. Curiously enough, instead of inevitably being anathematised, these were often welcomed by religious thinkers as aids to a purification of religious discourse and of religious self-understanding. Let me give one example. For the historian of religion, since he is interested in cultural facts rather than in metaphysical truth, magic is one of the more interesting phenomena on the wide spectrum of religion. He will note the essentially and genuinely magic dimensions of many religions (both so-called primitive ones and so-called *Hoch-regionen*), the anti-religious criticism of rationalists insisting on the mistaken equation that religion = magic, and the war against magic waged, in certain religions, by prophets and theologians bent purifying what they considered the pure gold of religion from what they onsidered the dross of superstition. It was not so much the atheists who denounced religion for its anthropological language, imagery, and conceptual apparatus. It was the theological philosophers who struggled with this problem to the point of denying to god all positive attributes, questioning the appropriateness of even such terms as "being" and "existence" (since these concepts too are derived from our human experience), seeking possible solutions in a *theologia negativa* or even in a mystical idiom in which Absolute Being is equated with Absolute Nothingness (or Emptiness) and god is the Great Nothing, or else

positing the irrelevance or at least inadequacy of philosophical language to religion. We find ourselves in familiar surroundings: the question of the relationship of language as a dubious and problematic signifier to that which it is supposed to signify. It seems that there is no way of escaping hermeneutics, though w must keep a watchful eye on the sophisticated pretentiousness with which hermeneutics, as also phenomenology, often serve as euphemisms or rather camouflage for cryptotheological exercises in religious apologetic. Whether Christologies ancient and modern, the somewhat weird mythology of the Unification Church or the Sū-kyō Mahikari, the no less weird theosophical symbolism of the Kabbalah, the staggering fundamentalism of certain types of Islam, the philosophical effusions of Hinduism which, incidentally, are not really that much different from the luxuriant and almost jungle-like growths of Hindu mythology—they all can now, with the assistance of hermeneutics, be presented as symbolic expressions of profoundest wisdom. Perhaps one day religious thinkers will wake up and revolt against the fashionable hermeneutical somersaults and other modern crypto-apologetics, much as they revolted in earlier times against magic, superstition, anthropomorphisms, or the social, political and psychological misuse of religion.

For the historian of religion the present situation exhibits three highly interesting features. The first is the increasing role of the concept of religion (in the singular) in religious and ecumenical discourse. The tendency has spread also to academic (though theologically inspired) discourse, as is well illustrated by W.C. Smith's thesis which asserts that the term religions in the plural is an unfortunate aberration of the Western scientific mind. But no matter how and why, a new sense of unity rather than division and confrontation seems to characterise much of the religious climate. Of course, even without agreeing on a prior definition of religion (an impossible assignment anyhow and hence not worth wasting time on) people have always had a vague idea concerning the phenomena they had in mind. Otherwise religious disputations would not have been possible; Jews, Christians, and Muslims would not have quarrelled; Christianity and paganism

would not have been at war; heretics would not have been extirpated; Muslim geographers and travellers would not have left us their valuable accounts of Manichaean, Indian, and other beliefs and practices; and the Chinese would not have filled libraries with discussions about *san-chiao*. Nevertheless most historians of religion continue to talk cheerfully about religions in the plural, meaning the variety of empirical religious configurations encountered in history, much as philologists talk about Urdu, Chinese, Swedish and Kwakiutl, etc., leaving the abstract entity "language" (as a system of interhuman communication, usually by means of sounds organised in certain patterns in accordance with certain laws) to linguistics. I am, of course, aware that I may be somewhat unfairly generalising from my own prejudices. There are, as already indicated, students of religion who contest the validity of the term religions (in the plural), claiming that the disjunctions implied by the plural are false, misleading, artificial, if not wicked Western academic inventions, and considering religion in the singular, in all its multifacetted variety, to be the legitimate object of study. I for one, whilst emphatically rejecting this view, defended so ably and learnedly by my friend and colleague Wilfred Cantwell Smith, do not wish to engage in fruitless polemic on this occasion, except for noting that Smith's position is an illustration of the contemporary mutation in our attitude to religions as well as of the programmatic and explicit confusion of theology and history of religions. (I am of course aware that shortage of space has made me lay myself open to the accusation that I have completely misrepresented Smith's position). But my point is that over against religions the category of religion (or some better and nobler term) is gaining ground. We even encounter with increasing frequency the incredible word "religionists," presumably signifying the adherents of specific historic religions. On the lowest and most stupid level this usage is also due to a vague, though sometimes also pretty explicit, feeling that "religionists" should close ranks against the children of darkness i.e., the threatening forces of atheism, secularism, materialism, mindless scientism etc. Of course in reality things are not all that simple. Some religious spokesmen glory very articulately in the material and/or secular

dimensions of religion. But there is also a new and urgent sense of a common and shared responsibility for whatever dimensions of spirituality attach to the human condition. If it is not a matter of defending God (I am alluding to the title of a thought-provoking paper by Professor Frederick Sontag "The Defence of God"), it is certainly a matter of defending for, and within, the reality of our lives whatever the cipher "god" stands for. The possibility that this cipher might acquire meaning only in the actual reality of religious life and not in rational discourse is part of the problem. As a very religious ancient pagan philosopher once put it: "God, if you talk about him without virtue, is merely a word" (Plotinus).

The second point that deserves attention could be described as the triumph of Christianity in the post-Christian West. By this phrase I mean that even in our allegedly less provincial, more global and more ecumenical era, most discourse on god and/or religion is conducted in essentially Christian terms (subsuming under this heading also Judaism and Islam). It is as if certain Christian notions and assumptions, and even the traditional Christian formulations of problems (theodicy, god and history, faith and science, religion versus modernity and secularism, creation, revelation, etc.) provided our universe of discourse. I shall return in a minute to some of these assumptions and problems. Take such an excellent book as Professor Leszek Kolakowski's recent *Religion* (O.U.P., 1982; also available as a Fontana paperback) which, its general title notwithstanding and in spite of the lavish sprinkling with quotations from Hindu and other texts, is essentially a sophisticated modern apologia of the Christian religion. This situation could be illustrated by ever so many other examples. Perhaps a case-study of the concept of history (immanent history, *Heilsgeschichte*, the notion of a "divine plan," the curious emphasis of even the most a-historical thinkers on the "historicity" of human existence, the implications for utopianism in all its forms up to Ernst Bloch) might be particularly profitable and instructive. Nevertheless I would prefer, at present, to concentrate on another aspect of the triumph of Christianity. I am referring here to the problem of god *versus* gods viz., the

disappearance, to all practical intents and purposes, of polytheism as a live religious option. The fact is that if people ("modern" people, that is) show any readiness to talk about god at all, they do so in the singular and, more often than not, in a way that implies Christian corollaries (god not merely as Absolute Reality or Ground of Being, but as creator, saviour, revealer, lord of the universe as well as of history, exerciser of providence, judge etc.). What in fact has happened to polytheism?

Before proceeding further it may be useful to remind ourselves that there are two types of monotheism which we might conveniently label monotheism by exclusion and monotheism by inclusion. The former type is exemplified by the Old Testament and the religions influenced by it. They have a horror of syncretism. There is among the many names of gods known to mankind only one that designates the one real god. It would be difficult to imagine a biblical account parallel to that given by Apuleius of the revelation of the goddess Isis. There the goddess, solemnly but cheerfully, enumerates a dozen different names of the *dea magna*. Her message is: "I am the Great Goddess, worshipped in many countries and by many nations under many different names, though of course my real name is Isis." One would be hard put to imagine YHWH announcing through a prophet: I am worshipped by many nations under different names—Ba'al, Kemosh, Tammuz, Zeus, Osiris, Shiva, etc.—though of course my real name is YHWH. Even St. Paul on the Aeropagus did not go that far. No, the universal god insists on his individual particularity as manifest in the particularity of his name. "Hear, O Israel, YHWH is our god, and He is One." And the eschatological vision of the Bible looks forward to the day when all names and idols will be destroyed and vanish, and all nations will recognise that "YHWH is one and his Name is one." The role of the saving name of Jesus need not be pointed out to Christians. And since I want to leave Amida out of the present discussion, I merely want to confess that I wondered whether I should not begin this essay with the exclamation BISMILLAH. Needless to say that I do not intend to argue that syncretisms and "inclusions" are absent from Old Testament

religious history. On the contrary. But in the present context I am interested in the manifest O.T. ideology rather than in the "underground" historical processes.

Monotheism by inclusion, on the other hand, is a very different, in fact syncretistic process. Gods there are many, but when unifying tendencies assert themselves, for whatever social and cultural reasons, the gods begin to merge, with either one name being the real one (as in Apuleius), or all names being equal since none is ultimate. The divine, whether personal or not, is so infinite and absolute that an infinite number of manifestations and hence an infinite number of names of the nameless are only to be expected. As soon as you move away from total mystical silence (known already to the ancient pagan philosophers, as Odo Casel has shown many decades ago in his dissertation *de philosophorum silentio mystico*) and from the concept of the Divine Nothing, to the sphere of speech and utterance, then names galore become inevitable. But their justification resides precisely in the assumed underlying unity—a unity which may itself be beyond the very possibility of word and name. Some people believe in a transcendent unity of religions. Others proclaim the transcendent unity of names.

Our age takes it for granted that polytheism is obsolete; that the only polytheism still possible is monistic sham-polytheism (I call it "sham" because in the multiplicity of its manifestations it is held to express an underlying unity); that the most acceptable and respectable form of polytheism is precisely that generated by a fundamentally atheist religion (Mahāyāna), and that to talk about god is to use the singular in either the exclusive or the inclusive version. There are several reasons that could be adduced in explanation of this development, but I shall not discuss them here. What matters for my present purpose is the monotheistic (both *monos* and *theos*) fact. Several years ago Raymond Panikkar wrote a fascinating book entitled *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. Since then I have been waiting for an enterprising Mahayanist to write a book entitled *The Unknown Buddha of Christianity*. Steps in this direction seem to have been taken by some medieval Manichees. Whether the recent publication of the Swiss Protestant theologian

Fritz Buri, *The Buddha-Christ as the True Lord of the Self*, can be inserted into the same tradition is still too early to judge.

You may have wondered why so far I have avoided any mention of the *yao-yorozu-no-kami*, the myriads of gods of Shintoism. In fact, "Shintoists" are the only people who unabashedly and without beating around the bush or retreating to an alleged unity underlying all plurality, still adhere to a religious vision that is essentially "polytheistic." And every one of the myriad kami has a personal name (or almost). Nevertheless I have saved the subject of Shinto or my discussion of the so-called "new" religions, since there too monotheism by exclusion appears to be on the rise and genuine polytheism seems to be declining. Salvation comes not from god-consciousness but from Krishna-consciousness. The many new religions in Japan all preach salvation in the name of a very specific *kami* who has vouchsafed the ultimate, eschatological revelation to the world through his chosen vessel. Depending on the experience of the founder or foundress, who usually is an incarnation of this deity, the name is Su-no-kami, or Tenri-ō-no-mikoto, or Tenshō-Kōtai-Jingū, or Miroku-ō-mi-kami, or Ushitora-no-konjin, or Tenchi-kane-no-kami, viz. Konkō-Daijin, and so on and so forth. When pushed to the wall the believers, like Apuleius, might explain that all gods are one. But more probably they would claim that the many traditional gods are subordinate powers (like gods demoted to angels in other traditions). In any case, the particular *kami* that became uniquely manifest in the Founder is the one true god and the one true name.

The subject of the name of god (as distinct from the concept "god") prompts me to a brief footnote to Professor Sontag's aforementioned paper "The Defence of God." The problem he raised may be relevant or even imperative in our age. But curiously enough it seemed to have held little interest for the biblical god (perhaps for good reasons, since he was thought to be omnipotent). It is true that occasionally Moses blackmails god by suggesting that by letting down Israel he might varnish his own reputation. But essentially his believes were to walk, and be victorious, in his name, "the name of the Lord," a name that should not be taken in vain. God seems to have been rather

indifferent in the matter of his own defence, but all the more emphatic and jealous in defence of his name. Paul Tillich noticed this interesting fact when he observed: "Of course God need not protect himself, but he does protect His name, and so seriously that he adds to this simple commandment a special threat. This is done because within the name that which bears the name is present."

But, and this is my reason for harking back to this theme, is not much theology an elaborate exercise in taking the name of god in vain? Perhaps some would respond by saying "what's in a name?", but biblical theology would reject this easy answer and refer us to Tillich. Yet this does not change the fact that in human language the name(s) of god(s) can be judged solely by its/their capacity to mediate and conveyed a shared awareness of the divine being, power and salvific presence. If the Zen-trainee is taught "to kill the Buddha" when encountering him on the way, is it because he has a different attitude to names, or to the ontology of that which is signified by the name?

Here, in fact, is the crunch. It is not the "existence" of god which interests anybody today, i.e. his status as an *ens*, but the meaningfulness, viz. meaninglessness of the concept. The historian of religion will confirm that the term and what it signified had enormous formative and transformative power over long periods. But today's situation is characterised by precisely the loss of its compelling power to mediate a basic experience of healing and salvation, of liberation and redemption, of communication and community, of an answer to solitude, alienation and insecurity. The "new religions" apart, monotheism appears to have become as meaningless as polytheism had become earlier, as if to provide belated confirmation of the ideas of Comte and Spencer.

Polytheistic discourse had become meaningless because, among other things, it was too anthropomorphic and, more decisively, it reflected a fragmented rather than unified view of the cosmos. Only a uniquely one god can be uniquely god, let alone transcendent. Nevertheless, also monotheistic discourse remains incurably, though perhaps more subtly, anthropomorphic. I am not speaking here of those critics, ancient and modern, the ancestors

and descendants of Feuerbach as it were, who thought to discredit god by reducing him to a projection of ourselves. These good people no doubt had the merit of being more frankly outspoken and less gullible than the superclever modern theologians for whom god (or Christ in lieu of god) is a name for our existential predicaments, viz. for our imagined answer to them. Buddhists are more consistent in that respect. Also theists are well aware that no matter how transcendent, how absolute, how "wholly other" that which they call god may be (even if they smuggle in some elements of immanence), our very act of speaking of him involves projections of our experience of ourselves as persons. One can, of course, make a virtue of this necessity. Yet the fact remains that also allegedly non- or anti-anthropomorphic theologies are stuck with a colossal residual anthropomorphism: the notion of person (real, *per analogiam*, or whatnot) which is supposed to distinguish the object of theistic faith from e.g. the Chinese *tao*. Theists by definition insist on *ho theos* (or on *theoi*) and valiantly resist the temptation of *to theion*. (I am using these terms as figures of speech; I am not suggesting that they reflect the actual usage in ancient Greek.) Needless to point out that this ultimate anthropomorphism depends, in its detailed elaboration, on the psychological and anthropological apparatus available to any particular culture. The Buddha's great discovery, the doctrine of *anatta* ("no-self," as distinct from unselfishness or giving up one's ego)—which, of course, does not deny that persons do exist as functional entities, viz. combinations of heaps of elements—with one fell swoop did away with the notion of person, let alone an absolute person, an immortal soul-substance, or a Kantian transcendental personality. The alleged entity called the soul or self is an optical illusion or reification. Hence it would be nonsensical first to postulate and then to project a higher viz. divine self or person. Mahāyāna mythology and iconography can be so uninhibitedly and outrageously concrete, precisely because underlying it all are the doctrines of *anatta* and *śūnyatā*. No human person—no divine person. There is no "self" to be projected onto a celestial screen: only pure transcendence immanently realised.

On the opposite side of the fence we have a thinker of the calibre of Martin Buber who, taking his stand foursquare on the biblical tradition, insisted not only on the reality (and, as C.G. Jung once observed, *wirklich ist was wirkt*) of god but also on our right and even duty to testify to this reality without fear or embarassment. At their first meeting in 1924, at the Congress of Religious Socialists in Germany, Buber attacked Tillich and his "abstract facade." "We are talking neither about Absolute Reality nor about Ultimate Concern, but about God." And Buber dared to speak thus, though he knew full well, as both a psychologist and a sociologist, that "there is no extatic mystic who does not [mis]interpret the experience of his ego as an experience of God," and although he was fully aware of the "human arbitrariness with which the mystic, having experienced his 'self', announces his experience of God."

At this point we are left with two questions at which I merely hint without going into any detail. Part of the "ultimate anthropomorphism" to which I referred earlier, that of personhood, also relates to the problem of history. The connecting link between the two is the notion of a "divine plan" (as distinct from history as the unfolding of an impersonal causality). This hidden, divine plan, which is providentially revealed to those worthy of such knowledge, or (even worse) to those called to play a decisive role in it when the right *kairos* or "fullness of time" has arrived, is what in Hellenistic-Jewish and subsequently early Christian literature was called the *mysterion* (or *mysteria*) of god, in Hebrew the *razey 'el*. According to some theological systems, human or other agencies can delay, hinder, sabotage or alternatively promote the realisation of this "plan." This notion is central in many new religious movements and this, incidentally, is also the reason why most of them, though contemporary, are so very unmodern. It is not my purpose here to examine what in this imagery is anthropomorphic, at times even childish, and what can be presented, with a little hermeneutical make-up and face-lifting, as profoundly symbolic.

The second question relates to the legitimacy of language, the woeful but inevitable inadequacy of which is generally recognised.

Bultmann—no matter what he really intended—surely has the merit of having launched us on the right road even where he was stunningly wrong. His disastrously misleading slogan of de-mythologisation really taught us the noble truth of re-mythologisation. Myth is not solely and exclusively bad and immature science. There are non-scientific modes of legitimate speech recognised even by others than nineteenth century German romantics and twentieth century structuralists. Bultmann's re-mythologisation program (if we may call it that) is an effort, whether successful or not is irrelevant here, to restitute to myth its legitimacy as a mode of discourse. But this still leaves wide open the question of the correctness of that which is being said, in whatever mode. Hence mythologisation (whether de- or re-), as in fact similar attempts at allegorisation, do not solve the theological controversies which often hinge on the question of which symbolic utterances are adequate, helpful, or "legitimate" according to criteria that have to be determined. To give but one, rather simplistic, example. For many centuries certain religions held the symbolic expression "Our Father" to be more adequate and legitimate than "Our Mother." (I need not make a show here of the kind of irrelevant though fashionable pseudo-scholarship which proves with the help of quotations from church fathers, medieval mystics and other sources which we all knew by heart already at nursery school that things are a little more complex). Perhaps some time in the future this symbolic idiom will change. I advisedly say some time in the future, because this type of change is generally brought about by gestation and growth rather than by shrill and strident rhetoric which, in spite of its name, is anything but "liberated." Not in the second half of 20th century America, but in the first half of 19th century (declining Tokugawa) Japan, a simple, wretched, poverty-stricken peasant woman became the bearer of a divine revelation, and the foundress of a new (neo-Shintoist) religion. The Shinto-type deity that chose this woman as its incarnation also announced its name: *oya-gami*, "God the Parent." The history of Tenri-kyō is not my subject here, but I wanted to illustrate how mythological and symbolic thinking and imagination are alive and well, spontaneously and unreflectedly,

and sometimes more convincingly because less vociferously. Of course the third and fourth generation of Tenri theologians are by now busy sorting it all out intellectually and in keeping with the demands made upon us and our thinking by our cultural situation. Religion may be suspicious, with good reason, of rationalist intellectualism. But it will agree with philosophy that without disciplined thinking there can be no integrity, let alone religious integrity. The foundress of Tenri-kyō was both human and divine, and hence the relation between these two aspects requires clarification. Reading the modern Tenri theologians one has the eerie feeling of rereading, in a somewhat different key, the early church fathers up to Chalcedon on the humanity and divinity of Christ. Plus que ca change, plus c'est la meme chose.