

# What Is the Import of the Abrahamic Avoidance of Naming God: A Platform for International Agreement?

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In the earliest Abrahamic scriptures, the writers made clear that God did not want to divulge a personal name he could be called. Despite all the differences among the Abrahamic traditions, one critical point all agree on is the decision that God's creatures may refer to him and pray to him but not to speak to the God who declares "I am that I am". It turns out that in the 20th century a Hassidic rebbe figured why that prohibition may be so critical to all cultural traditions of the Abrahamic collection of faiths. In addition, philosophy of language supports the rebbe's reasoning as does an analogical argument about knowledge inaccessible to simultaneous objectifying. All this sums to the grounds for building a platform for international cooperation with religious understanding as more worthy and less risky than the scheming and greed surrounding economic competition.

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The three Abrahamic monotheistic religions affect nearly all cultures around the world. While they share monotheism and common early scripture as authoritative, they differ on much as well. Still, they share more with one another than anyone of them shares with polytheistic faiths. Over the centuries alleged doctrinal errors and semantic distinctions separated the Abrahamic tradition leading to a host of over-lapping faith communities. However, a strand that has the potential to continue to unite these faith communities can be found in the work of Hassidic rebbe, Martin Buber. His recognized that the Abrahamic religions all recognize in early shared scripture a directive that their monotheistic god did not welcome named personal address of his being. Buber explains why this was not an act of authoritarianism, arrogance or concern for place in hierarchy above the humans he is said to have created. Buber reasons that God understood the objectifying impact of naming on human psychology. God recognized that naming objectifies what is named. This is a phenomenon well understood by contemporary humanities scholars of nearly every ilk. Consequently, his intent in avoiding naming is to avoid compromising the intimacy of the relationship between he and believers (Buber, 1971).

Consider the story from Genesis wherein God directs Adam and Eve, "*name* the animals" (Ravenscroft, 2018). Since naming is a practice of objectifying, the directive to name the animals sets humans apart from all other species and puts other animal life under human as objects named can be reflected about, controlled, and managed.

There is much to say about whether naming the animals was a *task* assigned or a *privilege* allowed (*The New American Bible*, 2010; Genesis 3:18, p. 36). If the former then like the directive not to eat the forbidden

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fruit, it is a challenge showing how humans can manage intellectualizing about God's creation. If naming was a privilege, then God was inviting humans to share a bit in creating the world. How so?

The richly textured languages of humankind from mathematics to all the varied linguistic forms of expression are most notable distinction between humans and other creatures constructed from eukaryotic cells.

Eukaryotic cells construct the individuating components of various life forms and they vary little from species to species. The manifestation of a human, language acquisition device is singularly remarkable. If God used evolution as his primary tool for creating much of life, the creation of human language stands alone as a disruptive intervention in life's unfolding. Such matters continue to prompt a broad range of discussion among natural theologians, philosophers, life scientists, and research methodologists (Meyer, 2021). But the purpose here is more limited. It is to distinguish between the cognitive practice of naming and why that practice becomes a disruption of intimacy when considered directive of the Abrahamic communities. If the Abrahamic communities can agree on this much then as will be seen ahead, there could be a platform for peaceful co-existence based upon the humanities respectful study of this important shared conviction. This of course would be in sharp contrast to the relentless quarrels between the Abrahamic faith in past millennia. For now, simply note, the Abrahamic religions are joined in the belief that there is a monotheistic God who directs believers to avoid assigning a name to God as he directs them to do to all other species of life. God placed all of life under the scope of human cogitation, all of life save that of God's own.

Thinking reflectively about the world outside one's mind requires extensive symbolic representation (Chomsky, 2018). Language packages the world by objectifying it. Other animals have limited representational and signaling skills but nothing comes close to approaching the intellectual mastery afforded humans through the use of their many potent language systems. From linguistic expressions and mathematical systems to Cobol, Python, and many computer languages developed since Charles Babbage analytic machine two hundred years, people have named, objectified, managed, and shared thoughts about the world. This shared, objectifying of things of the world made possible deliberate and re-arrangements of much that exists in the natural world. Such active re-construction of the world humans master rests on God's benefaction to humans of richly textured language skills. An old saw is that everything has a proper place in place and time. However, given human language, humans can plan and change the direction of time and place for much that exists.

The objectifying potency of language, like other famed benefactions of the Garden of Eden, has ups and downs. For example, the Garden had an abundance of nutritious fruits and were restricted only by the directive to leave alone the alone the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Surely an easy enough directive. Yet human, subjective inclination overrode subordination to God's explicit directive (Schroeder, 2001). When partaking of the forbidden fruit there was no mistake Adam and Eve knew the fruit was forbidden. So why did they disobey?

Simply put: They disobeyed because they wanted to. Their subjective inclination overrode their objective understanding. It is instructive to note that many animals such as dogs have limbic systems (the center of subjective, emotional processing) greater in proportion to the rest of their brains than do humans. Humans' cognitive capacities lean towards cognition rather than affect as seems the case with so many other animals (Hare & Woods, 2020, pp. 98-100). The drive of subjective feelings does not distinguish humans from many other animals as much as does their cognitive repertoire. This makes sense within the Abrahamic tradition to the extent that humans alone are said to be made in God's image. By granting humans the capacity and right to name, he is giving humans an ability to understand the natural world beyond the capacity of any other species.

Despite the gift of naming elements comprising the natural world, God denies humans the right to *name* the creator! Even Moses was told not a proper noun for God but rather a circumvention of a name, “I am that I am”. Throughout the pre-Christian testament, authors are careful not to use a proper noun to name God, to rigidly designate, objectify, or otherwise attempt to package an essence of the Creator. Biblical authors seemed to understand that assigning to God a name was akin to eating the forbidden fruit as it represented human audacity to overstep their bounds because...well, because they want to.

God is not to be mastered intellectually by the practice of naming. Job, Abraham, Saul, and Moses each addressed God directly but never called God by name. God is not to be objectified and packaged as something naming fashions Rebbe Buber explains. So too perhaps it is the ideal of lesser human to human relationships that should exhibit I/Thou-ness as well if people are to commune and not merely address one another. Biden and Putin address one another presumably using objectifying titles while imaging objectifying characteristics of one another. What might happen if they addressed one another directly in Buber’s I/thou fashion blocking all else from distracting from the engagement?

Buber explains that the highest of engagement with another is when the other becomes one’s “thou” suppressing all other thoughts and distractions in the world but one’s focus on the other. The paradigm of this engagement is when a human, addresses directly, the *Thou* of God. Consider the engagement of Adam and Eve after betraying their allegiance to God. Henceforth they became less open with him as his presence came to remind them of their own shame. Adam and Eve became cagey in conversation with God as opposed to addressing him as the Thou of earlier communion and such deceit is common in the origin’s tales of many other religions (Moffett, 2018). Deceit is a threat represented to humans in nearly all religious traditions but perhaps most especially in Abrahamic traditions. Communities emerge on grounds of trust and cooperation. Religions far before there was counsel in technical game theory recognize deceit separates and destroys.

Communion with God means addressing God fully and exclusively—no short cuts packaging God objectively. Buber believes God wants humans to engage other humans in that fashion too: face to face, mind to mind without distraction or objectification. Do not objectify one another by packaging them in an objectively assigned, rigid designation as when using proper nouns to address one another (Moffett, 2018, pp. 103-107). One-on-one engagement should be focused on openly showing each communicant recognizes in the other as the sole focus of thought.

In the Abrahamic tradition, the I/thou moment humans God’s creation of his most special species. It also draws reciprocal, analogical attention to extraordinary moments of I/THOU divine communion between a human and God.

Having said the above, is it hypocritical to write using the word “God” here?

Soren Kierkegaard created the strategy of using the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio in order that he could describe a knight of faith that he says is impossible to describe but only knowable to two knights of faith (Kierkegaard, 2006). Here Kierkegaard may be anticipating the critical charge from ancient Abrahamic text. The most meaningful communication whether between God and human or human and human is unfettered by objectification of either party.

Do Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms escape the charge of hypocrisy when he, like Buber, claims some things can only be known directly as shared, self-created phenomenon and never as something described at arm’s length?

It is unlikely there is such reasonable escape. Even among Christians Jesus is rarely addressed directly by name. Since Christians believe Christ is incarnate, God manifest as a human the commonality of human engagement described among the apostles and disciples themselves would lead one to expect a more casual engagement by Christ with the others. Yet again, despite the uncommon intimacy Christ represents in the Abrahamic tradition, he is often addressed directly or circumvented in address by being called master. Those who do address the Christ by proper name are typically non-believers such as Pontius Pilate. And, even when Jesus talks about matters of prayer ancient prohibitions of objectifying a named God seem to persist in Jesus' accounts.

The apostles asked Jesus, "How shall we pray?" In response, Jesus teaches them the "Our Father". This is very telling. The prayer does not objectify God with a personal name, rather the prayer *describes God as the father*. This simply describes God's way of being towards humans. "Father", a term with important, singular meaning is not a rigid designator much less a proper noun (Kripke, 1980). The Abrahamic God has many identifying functions but, none stand in as a name for God. *Father* is but a descriptor. It gestures towards the one so addressed. The first sentence of the prayer announces an intention to pray. It is not the prayer itself. The prayer begins with the second sentence "Give us this day..." a direct communication to the one who is the father of all and much else besides. Followers of Abrahamic religions believe in intimacy with the almighty. The prayer Jesus taught avoids any naming practice at all. It honors God's inexplicable role as master of all. In face-to-face fashion the petitioner calls to be recognized in God's sight.

The pronouns usually cited in the "Our Father" prayer are plural: "our", "us", and "we". These class-reference pronouns assemble followers into collectives that build communities through ritual and other bonding practices separating believers from non-believers and privileging believers subsequently to join in communion with one another and address the creator intimately, without objectification.

The Hebraic Bible dispenses with using rigid designations when addressing God presumably because they objectify God as an idea rather than a Thou believers can engage directly and intimately. Buber warns objectification of any kind interferes with open surrender to Thou (God). Buber insightfully adds that addressing other believers as *thou* makes possible truly open communion with individuals comprising for each one's cultural base. Those beyond the believer's circle of thou-ness are objectified in the language used to denote character, dissonant ambitions, and something to be figured out rather than address. If Buber is right, commitment to bond with the supernatural is not a corporate venture but as individuals privileged by the intimacy with God and to one another securing optimal cooperation among all involved—each in his or her own way. The community of faith in each of the Abrahamic religions creates grounds for cultural identity exceeding the resiliency of non-believing collections of self-interested economic agents.

Religious wars are often more vicious than ones prompted by greed and economic disparity. In religious wars what is up for grabs is not spoils to the victor but the very identity of each member of a religious culture to one another and the God each feels in communion with. In such communities' believers are comforted by the idea that each engagement with God and one another is privileged. In defeat they lose more than goods and opportunities. They lose identity. They are subject to objectification by the victors and eventually perhaps in their identity with one another.

Prayer across all cultures influenced by Abrahamic traditions is intended to be full and open communication with God, not as a herd but as many individuals in "I" to "Thou" communion with God. This is key to what is believed in the Abrahamic traditions to be successful prayer even when a group of petitioners are

voicing the same words in unison and even when members of Abrahamic cultures disagree on technical points of theology. Agreement on prayer along the lines Buber proposes has been in the spirit of the ancients since long ago creates an extraordinary different platform from which The Great Conversation of humankind can proceed (Wagner, 2006).

In moments of communal prayer in Abrahamic religions, not even God is seen as responding to a crowd as might a celebrity waving while passing by. Rather, God is believed to be acknowledging the essence of each petitioner as a *thou* and who is acknowledged in return as Thou. “Lead *me* not into temptation”, “Give *me* this day *my* daily bread”, and “Forgive *me* *my* trespasses”. To You (Lord) I ask these things. “I-Thou” and “I-thou” are the heart of communion with the Lord and with others of similar believer commitment. Translations of scriptures that miss this point may be a cause for sects of Abrahamic religions being so hostile to one another over time. If religion is portrayed as our engagement with God and only our agreed upon conventions determine the existence of communion, then such righteous privilege becomes a source of animosity among peoples who, based on scripture, have every reason to seek grounds for I/thou relationships with one another and to respect the private I/Thou each allegedly has with the transcendent.

The content of the “Our Father” is obviously central to Christianity. But surely the contents of the prayer should not be objected to by the other Abrahamic traditions. Arguments over historical myth and who said what and why should be shunted aside for a time to see to what extent respectful prayer practices can be a catalyst to more reflective general discussion among the Abrahamic cultures (Wagner, 1993).

In sum, shared commitment to a god who declares “I am that I am” may be cross-culturally meaningful among national cultures in the Abrahamic traditions. Peace may not produce the economic comradery Adam Smith once hoped for (Hanley, 2019), but, agreement on the I-Thou/I-thou of godly believers may provide a platform nudging competing nations away from relentless, self-interest and towards détente (Kahneman, Sibony, & Sunstein, 2021).

Centuries have made it clear that national self-interest is too fragile to secure lasting peace among economic competitors. Given the above, it seems advisable that the platform for international détente should attempt a platform larger than mere, economic benefit. There are many cultural factors that bring competing cultures together or set them apart. Attention to at least this aspect of shared religious consideration may be a more promising start to bring the mid-east together with Europe, Indonesia, South Korea, the Philippines, the countries of South America, much of Africa, and the West than has the endless economic rivalries and scheming of the past. Certainly, a platform drawing attention to the shared religious humanities of these cultures is worth a nudge. If peoples can come together in spirit, much more benefit should follow in a new age of The Great Conversation of humankind.

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