

ON THE ISSUES OF THE STUDY OF DIVINE NAMES IN ISLAM, CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM

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ABSTRACT

This article conducts a comparative analysis from a linguistic perspective of the role and significance of divine names in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The sacred texts are examined for the semantic, linguistic, anthropological, and philosophical features of names, as well as their role in shaping religious identity and theological views. Based on the theories of philosophers such as Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Kripke, the relationships between the meaning and reference of names are analyzed. In Judaism, names are considered as signs expressing essence; in Christianity, they are understood in a metaphorical and transcendental sense; and in Islam, they are explored through the 99 names of Allah as a means of revealing divine attributes. The article demonstrates methodological problems through linguistic analysis of comparative issues in religious studies and highlights the potential for creating a common language for interreligious dialogue.

Keywords: Comparative religious studies, divine names, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, linguistics, theology, anthropology, semantics.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout almost all periods of world religious history, adherents of one faith have consistently shown interest in understanding other belief systems. This pursuit has served various purposes: some have engaged in it out of mere curiosity, others for scholarly reasons or due to specific cultural circumstances, while many have sought to promote interfaith relations and foster mutual understanding. This work has never been very successful on a large scale, since geographical changes and global events in history usually take the process in a more permanent direction. In recent decades, the modern process of interreligious dialogue has gained significant visibility and effectiveness, supported by a growing academic and social interest in the development of religious pluralism—a philosophical outlook that recognizes the existence of multiple independent origins of being or diverse foundations of knowledge. Despite notable achievements in the scholarly study of interreligious dialogue, a certain degree of mistrust and skepticism toward the beliefs and practices of other religions remains. The global events of September 11, 2001, and July 7, 2005, in London serve as vivid examples of this phenomenon, illustrating the shifts in public attitudes toward contemporary Islam. In general, people tend to be suspicious of what they do not understand—an attitude rooted in fear of the unknown—and this lack of education and comprehension often gives rise to misconceptions about religion. One common example is the false assumption that most Muslims are extremists or fundamentalists—a term referring to those who rigidly defend the original, pure form of religious doctrine and reject metaphorical or interpretive readings of sacred texts. The interaction and intersection of religious confessions are often perceived as

unsuccessful. One of the main reasons for this is the absence of a shared language that enables continued (or in some cases, initial) dialogue. The search for such a language does not necessarily imply a common spoken medium like English, French, or Arabic; rather, even within academic disciplines, little attention has been given to developing a linguistic framework for inter-confessional discourse.

In this context, “language” should be understood as a set of words and concepts—formal or informal—that allow mutual explanation and learning. This language need not be strictly religious or academic, but its terminology should be grounded in shared experience and accessible to the communities involved. Therefore, the study of communicative tools for interfaith dialogue constitutes an important area of modern research. Religious studies is a discipline that analyzes the theological, linguistic, and anthropological characteristics of various religions through the study of their sacred texts. Among the most intricate topics in this field is the study of divine names, which stand at the core of religious identity. Through divine names, the essence of God and the communication between humanity and divinity are expressed. Consequently, the comparative study of divine names in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam holds significant importance for both interfaith dialogue and academic inquiry.

In Judaism and Christianity, divine names have been extensively examined. The names of God in the Bible—Yahweh, Elohim, Adonai, Theos, and Kyrios—have been analyzed in numerous monographs, dictionaries, and commentaries¹.

In Islam, however, the study of the 99 Names of Allah (al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā) has primarily been addressed in theological treatises and Sufi interpretations rather than within a rigorous academic framework.

In Judaism, divine names often have explicit semantic meaning, such as “Isaiah,” meaning “God saves.” In Christianity, metaphorical titles like “Father” or “King” convey the transcendental nature of God. In Islam, the 99 Names of Allah describe divine attributes; however, the lack of sufficient academic research complicates comparative theological analysis.

Biblical studies provide a vast array of critical commentaries, dictionaries, and historical analyses. Gottlob Frege, in his essay “Über Sinn und Bedeutung” (1892), distinguished between the “sense” and “reference” of names². Bertrand Russell, in “On Denoting” (1905), argued that proper names cannot be reduced to mere descriptions—a perspective later termed the descriptivist theory of names³. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in “Philosophical Investigations” (1953), explored the difference between the everyday use of language and the meaning of names in religious texts⁴. Saul Kripke later proposed that names refer not through description but via historical “baptism” and linguistic context.

These theoretical approaches provide a strong methodological foundation for analyzing divine names. For example, in Judaism, the name Yahweh semantically denotes “existence” itself; in Christianity, the metaphor “Father” reflects divine transcendence through human experience;

¹ Frege, Gottlob: Über Sinn und Bedeutung. In: Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik, N. F., Bd. 100/1 (1892), S. 25-50.

² Frege, Gottlob: Über Sinn und Bedeutung. In: Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik, N. F., Bd. 100/1 (1892), S. 25-50.

³ Bertrand Russell. Mind, New Series, Vol. 14, No. 56. (Oct., 1905), pp. 479-493.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, The German text, with an English translation by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, revised 4th Jakub Mácha, Masaryk University, Faculty of Arts, Arna Nováka 1, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic, macha@phil.muni.cz edition by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

while in Islam, names such as Ar-Rahman (“The Most Merciful”) and Al-Hakim (“The All-Wise”) express God’s boundless compassion and wisdom. The Asma’ul Husna (99 Names of Allah) mentioned in the Qur’an and Hadith encapsulate divine attributes within the morphological and semantic structure of the Arabic language. For instance, Ar-Rahman and Ar-Rahim share the same root yet differ in semantic intensity. In Sufi tradition, the invocation of divine names (dhikr) represents a pragmatic and performative use of language—where the act of utterance transforms the spiritual state of the believer. All three Abrahamic faiths view divine names as symbols reflecting God’s attributes, though certain pragmatic distinctions exist:

- In Judaism, pronunciation is often restricted (linguistic taboo);
- In Islam, dhikr practices emphasize performative recitation;
- In Christianity, personal relational language prevails.

Another analytical perspective is the semiotic approach, which treats divine names as sign systems. Each name, within its religious context, generates a triadic relation of meaning, reference, and impact.

Linguistic studies demonstrate that divine names constitute a foundational element shaping the religious languages of the three monotheistic traditions. In Islam, they operate through morphological and semantic systems; in Christianity, through pragmatic and metaphorical polysemy; and in Judaism, through phonetic taboo and semiotic symbolism.

Thus, from a linguistic standpoint, divine names emerge as a universal phenomenon illuminating the semantic depth, pragmatic force, and semiotic complexity of religious language. It can be concluded that the comparative analysis of divine names across the three faiths reveals their interconnected semantic, theological, and anthropological dimensions: in Judaism, the name expresses essence; in Christianity, it conveys metaphorical meaning; and in Islam, it unveils divine attributes through descriptive qualities.

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