

## BOOK REVIEW

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*Naming God: Addressing the Divine in Philosophy, Theology, and Scripture* by Janet Soskice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), ix + 256 pp.

When Janet Soskice's *Metaphor and Religious Language* appeared in 1985, I was beginning my doctoral program and there was only one Star Wars trilogy. *Metaphor* was nonetheless a blockbuster in the sense that the field of philosophical theology, bifurcated between continental thinkers and analytic philosophers, had to be remapped in its wake. Soskice published *The Kindness of God* over two decades later. This work contributed with equal vigor to systematic theology, bringing together mature insights on gender, the Trinity, theological anthropology, and eschatology. *Naming God* combines the trenchant philosophical insights of her now classic work on metaphor with the systematic rigor of *Kindness*.

The book recovers and explores the treatment of divine names in Scripture and in key thinkers such as Philo, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Franz Rosenzweig, Paul Ricoeur, and Jean-Louis Chrétien. Her aim is not to archive historical documents nor mount a general theory of naming. Her goal, rather, is to advance a thesis about the nexus of address and the divine names that was present in the earliest traditions of Judaism and Christianity and has largely been forgotten in the modern and contemporary world. In short, she argues naming God is not in the first instance the process of delineating attributes that can be attached or detached *in divinis* without recourse to the narrative pattern of Scripture itself. This narrative, starting with a key text in Exodus 3:14 (often rendered as "I am who am"), is always configured as a call that demands a meaningful and existential response. She is not thereby demoting the noetic content of the name to a mere performance. On the contrary, the unity of signifier and signified lies in the polarity of being and act in the hearkening of a prayerful respondent to God. Soskice's work is an exploration of these interstices in history and through contemporary modes of analysis.

At first glance, the generalizing of the priority of "the call" might lure some critics back to the anti-elitist universalism that Enlightenment thinkers like Locke and Hume enshrined as new values for determining the function of the names of God. Being addressed is a stance of openness that requires prayer; it is not a fabrication of the self-determining free will. The modern metaphysics of presence still may hold such an appeal but carries with it serious distortions of the biblical theology of naming. On the other hand, the switch from vision to audition (162-63) that is entailed in the biblical mode of address has its own anti-elitist edge, lending priority to the witness of the faithful St. Monica, for example, over that of her more lettered and eloquent son.



Quite surprisingly, the early chapter on Philo sets the stage for the analytic philosophy of naming that comes later. Instead of overdetermining Philo's noteworthy role in the mediation of Stoic and Middle Platonic philosophy, Soskice looks at this neglected contemporary of St. Paul as an Alexandrian Jewish biblical theologian. In other words, Philo still can be regarded as the inventor of the tradition of unaming God but not out of strictly philosophical motives. Philo knew from Plato's *Cratylus* and elsewhere that naming itself had to be problematized. He read the biblical account of creation not just to square its dogma with philosophical truths. "Philo's Moses is a seeker, the preeminent seeker of God" (51). The process of naming is a function of an experience of God as the one who creates out of nothing. Rather than offering a linchpin to the God of the philosophers or unreflective "ontotheology," Philo transcendentalizes the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in relationship to the gift of the name offered through God's revelation.

Soskice also shows how Gregory of Nyssa's apophaticism epitomizes the asymmetrical dynamics of call and response. Gregory reads Exodus 3, 20, and 33 through a Christocentric lens as forms of response to the divine call. For Soskice, Nyssa's God is a speaking and teaching God (116). Gregory of Nyssa discounts cheap, Eunomian knowledge that claims to know the divine essence (136). What at first glance can seem private and solitary is actually a communal, ecclesial journey (137). Her chapter ends with a robust defense of the metaphysics of participation in Gregory's thought, but her most novel contribution lies in the underscoring of what Robert P. Scharlemann once dubbed "acoluthetic reason." In Gregory one figures the name of the unnamable God who beckons one to be a follower. There are real epistemological consequences to this insight. The argument against Eunomius made it clear to him that there is never a point when these names add up to a circumscription of the divine essence. Consequently, "to see God's face is to be set upon the 'unending journey accomplished by following directly behind the Word'" (135). Soskice is not extracting Gregory from the conversation about the metaphysics of presence. On the contrary, his rightful place in that tradition trades on his attentiveness to the dynamics of the call.

Augustine, Soskice writes, makes a unique contribution in the history of the divine names since he "brings to the table" an "intense interest in language" (140). Augustine combines this fascination with a new recognition that God comes to those who seek and desire the Absolute not just as a "what" but as a "who" (148). The other focus of this impressive chapter is the meditation on "Being itself (*in idipsum*)."

The treatment of this point can be read as a debate with Jean-Luc Marion about the legacy of the Bishop of Hippo with regard to the question of being. Marion's aversion to solidifying Augustine's discourse on being as chapter in the history of Christian philosophy is a post-Derridean reaction to a debate that took place in France in the 1930s, a lengthy discussion that involved Jacques Maritain, Maurice Blondel, Étienne Gilson, and Gabriel Marcel. With this historical caveat, Soskice's rejection of Marion's aversion to metaphysics is still helpful. "Human words," she avers, "are tokens of the word through whom all things have their being" (157). With a nod to Rowan Williams's insights in *The Edge of Words*, Soskice demonstrates that the Augustinian path to Christian philosophy goes through a theologically inflected phenomenology of language. Through this subtle reading of the Bishop of Hippo, Soskice effectively counters Marion's post-metaphysical impulse while still advancing the discussion of the being of God into a new realm.

The present task of philosophical theology is re-examined in terms of the legacy of St. Thomas Aquinas. Soskice re-casts the entire Thomistic project as a form of spirituality, drawing generously upon Fáinche Ryan's *Formation in Holiness* as well as the work of David Burrell and Andrew Davison. With Burrell she claims that analogy is a semantic tool and not a post-Enlightenment epistemological strategy. What purchase, then, does Thomistic analogy so construed have on a modern philosophy of religion with its epistemological bias? Following the pattern established in her reading of Patristic texts, she argues that Thomas's metaphysics and his semantic sophistication come in second place to his reverence for the sacred naming found in and through Scripture. Karl Barth's critique of the *analogia entis* is thus not so much rejected as re-framed by Soskice. Barth was right to place Scripture higher than metaphysics but wrong not to ponder Thomas's reasons for returning to the problem of being in the light of the experience of creation as a gift from the Absolute that comes out of nothing. Creation *ex nihilo* underscores the radicality and freedom of God's unexacted love. Before such an awareness, Thomists are left with much more than seeds to plant in an analytic garden. Philosophical theology thus becomes more rational if it can concede the pre-existing spiritual act of being summoned to what is *not* of human making or naming.

*Naming God* explores facets of the divine names that historical studies on this topic have failed to elucidate because of their treatment of the problem as *either* biblical in a very narrow sense *or* as a branch of the post-Cartesian patterning of the discourse of being. Soskice breaks new ground by weaving fresh readings of the Scriptures together with a doxologically shaped philosophical theology. She explores and ultimately defends creation *ex nihilo* with remarkable perspicacity in this same manner.

If there is a shortcoming to this tour de force, it is the relative silence on the discourse of silence. Soskice is right to note that apophaticism can too quickly become severed from kataphaticism in the rationalist mode of the modern metaphysics of presence or even become an excuse for agnosticism (106). The act of God's speaking to humanity cannot be reduced to the specific locutions or to the conceptual content of those utterances without losing sight of the meaningfulness and unspeakable glory of being addressed by the divine. On the other hand, the fearsome act of attending to that presence is not circumscribed by linguistic expression. Soskice underscores with remarkable consistency the dialectical difference between human-human and divine-human exchange. She rightly abjures the facile recourse to mystery that engenders little more than obfuscation. Soskice demonstrates that entering into a mystery and pursuing rational reflection need not be seen as competing ends. Moreover, neither univocity nor equivocity is a legitimate option; the analogical "stretching" of God-talk is a different matter (104). But her openness to the darkness of embracing "incomprehensible things incomprehensibly" (Cusanus) still seems limited by her focus on the plasticity of linguistic expression.

*Naming God* offers little in terms of lists of divine names, but this omission is no shortcoming. Soskice is engaged less by the catalogue of names than by the coming into language of a divine denomination. The very act of naming God is not intelligible apart from calling and being called. If the language of being has become flat or passé in contemporary theological discourse, then *Naming God* is an irenic call to arms to reconsider the being and act present in this relationship to the transcendent. The presence of one who names and is named is not erased by the radical apophaticism just mentioned.

Negation in the realm of philosophical and theological anthropology is just as important as the apophysis of the name. This recognition of the negativity of the self is implicit in much of what Soskice writes about the human person as a “summoned self” but could have been made more explicit.

This slim volume invokes the relationship of creation and covenant if only by frequent redress to the recapitulation of the calling of creation into being out of nothing in the Psalms, Prophets, and throughout the New Testament (71-73, 216-23). The ecumenical potential of exploring this relationship in a deeper manner through the lens of the dynamics of summoning and address is great. *Naming God* sets the stage for the exploration of the naming of a people who have been elected by God in relationship to the prior grounding of that covenant in the relationship of all that exists to the almighty Creator, but this path *between* the positions of Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar is left for a future study.

These reservations are little more than quibbles. *Naming God* is required reading for anyone with an interest in the current state of philosophical theology. Moreover, it offers a new path to conceiving of the biblical hermeneutics of divine naming in its relationship to systematic theology. In sum, this work is an invitation to ponder the phenomenon of being addressed by God as a new starting point for philosophical theology. The adherents to the theological turn in recent phenomenology (and its inverse) as well as younger practitioners of analytic theology will be challenged, surprised, and enlightened. That astonishing fact by itself merits attention, for the work is original in a sense that Soskice has always proffered originality, namely, by attending at once to the depth and complexity of the Christian tradition and to the highest standards of critical, philosophical analysis of the same.

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