

A NAME, NAMES, AND HALF A NAME

Fred Sanders

Kendall Soulen's *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity* distinguishes itself from recent theological publications in several ways. Before identifying the substantive contribution it makes to the field, I feel compelled to bear witness to Soulen's fine authorial style. This is an exceptionally well-written book. It seems to come from some parallel world where the genre of systematic theology belongs nearer the belles lettres, as Soulen is graciously out of step with the low guild standards of contemporary theological writing. In *The Divine Name(s)* he crafts a complex argument with many moving parts, which demands frequent internal summaries. But Soulen never gets lost in the layers of his own case, never trudges from one point to the next, never cuts-and-pastes to recycle his own key sentences, and never settles for conventional, expected, and overused illustrations. He introduces a fresh thesis, expounds it without obfuscation, and juxtaposes it with a surprising breadth of dialogue partners from biblical studies, historical theology, and recent dogmatics. Owing to his good literary ear, he can interject the occasional allusion to Shakespeare, Goethe, T. S. Eliot, and Lewis Carroll without jarring the theology reader. I am not trying to generate advertising copy to help promote the book, but writing of this caliber needs promoting in the guild: we need more books like this.

Matters of literary style aside, Soulen's book accomplishes something remarkable: it recommits Christian theology to take seriously the task of confessing the revealed name of God. The task, as Soulen sees it, is to reckon with that one revealed name of God (thus "The Divine Name" of the book's title) and also with the infinite set of ways we can refer to God (thus the parenthesized "(s)" of the title). Between that one name and

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those many names hovers the traditional terminology of the baptismal commission: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (thus "the Holy Trinity" of the title). What we have in this book is a theological project that suspends the three between the one and the many. Soulen treats each of these elements (the one, the three, and the many) in the specific way called for by its unique character.

The book does not exactly start with the one; it would be more accurate to say that it takes the one as the foundation for everything else it does. Soulen makes high claims for a general notion of God's name, saying that whenever we name God, even when we use the English word "God," "the name of God is something like an audible sacrament. In the name the bearer of the name is present" (3). But much as he praises the entire "infinite economy of trinitarian names" and delights in exploring the dynamics inherent in it, the energy of the book is focused on the Tetragrammaton. In a way that becomes increasingly clear as the exposition moves forward, the secret center of Soulen's project is the covenant name from Exod 3:15, printed in English as YHWH. Even in the parts of the book that range more widely from this Old Testament reference point, the linguistic token of the Tetragrammaton exerts a steady gravitational pull on the project. This name is a reality that cannot be set aside or glossed over, but Soulen documents the alarming variety of ways Christian theology has in fact set the name aside and tried to do its work without reckoning with the name of the LORD.

How could this have happened? The neglect of the name could be a matter of simple, unmotivated forgetfulness: in the shuffle and conceptual rearrangement of moving from old to new covenant, from Hebrew to Greek text, from Jew to Gentile predominance, the Tetragrammaton could have been accidentally dropped somewhere along the way. Indeed, Soulen shows repeatedly how subtle the presence of the Tetragrammaton is in the scriptures of the New Testament. Following the lead of the Septuagint, the four-lettered name came into the New Testament scriptures simply as *kyrios*, and even in the Old Testament in many English Bible versions its presence is noted by the word LORD set in all capitals. Yet the very subtlety of the Tetragrammaton's presence turns out to be a rich resource. Once we are alerted to it, the name makes itself felt behind and beneath a myriad of pious circumlocutions and indirect references. In a series of close readings Soulen makes his case for the abiding, but veiled, presence of the Tetragrammaton. Three examples will show his technique. First, Soulen finds in the poetic passage of Phil 2:5–11, in which Christ humbles himself and is given a "name above every name," an "oblique reference to the Tetragrammaton" that gestures toward the three Persons of the Trinity: "He identifies the first person as the one who gives the divine name, the second person as the one who receives it, and the third person who awakens its acknowledgment, in the second person to

the glory of the first" (12). Second, and at greater length, Soulen ponders the saying from Ps 118:26, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," and finds in it a similar threefold presupposition: the uniqueness of the name, the arrival of the one who makes it present for salvation, and the one who awakens blessing of it. Third, and at even greater length yielding greater rewards, Soulen traces in the Lord's Prayer a pattern of oblique reference to the Tetragrammaton. Jesus's own habitual ways of talking about God are formed, it turns out, by a commitment to make the name present without directly speaking it. The opening petitions of the Lord's Prayer frame the space where the Tetragrammaton could be spoken but pointedly is not: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come." Once the indirectness of the Tetragrammaton's presence is pointed out, the reader (this one at least) will begin finding both its indirectness and its presence pervasively in Scripture. We do not normally expect systematic theologians to be the ones to deliver arguments that change the way we read text after text of Scripture (have we no biblical studies scholars?), but that is what Soulen has done here. Much has been written about the methodology of theological interpretation of Scripture, but Soulen is actually carrying out that interpreting at a very high level.

Is the subtlety of these veiled allusions the reason Christian theology has paid insufficient attention to the revealed name of God? Have we just lapsed into reading habits that are not sensitive enough to register the artful obliqueness of the name's presence? No, Soulen finds our inveterate name-forgetfulness to be more motivated than that. He traces the root cause to supersessionism, or a linguistic outworking of replacement theology. Though he is gentle enough in his rebuke (he has been more forceful in past projects), the rebuke is decisive. Soulen's recentering of Christian theology's naming of God onto the abiding Tetragrammaton is an assertive project of recovery from supersessionism, a recovery accomplished by the sheer conceptual richness of retrieval of the Bible's own ways of speaking.

At the other extreme from the uniqueness of the revealed Tetragrammaton is an open set of divine namings that Soulen sometimes describes as "nouns in general," especially when they are arranged in triadic patterns. In what will likely be the most controversial argument of the book, Soulen claims that this unbounded set of conceptual paraphrases and cultural explorations deserves to be treated as a kind of divine naming that has equal status with the revealed name of God:

Christians, it seems, have seldom if ever invoked the persons of the Trinity by using language drawn exclusively from the Bible; instead, they have always supplemented it with ternaries, names, and concepts originating from the church's host culture. But the status of this language has not always been entirely clear. Must such language always occupy a place

inferior to that of biblically attested names, or can it possess an equal dignity? (15)

Soulen argues that it does possess that dignity. To make his case, he leans on the notion of translation between cultures and languages, locating the signal instance of this kind of naming at the multilingual event of Pentecost (this is one of the reasons Soulen appropriates this kind of naming to the work of the Holy Spirit and calls it a “pneumatological way” of naming God). Again, he poses the rhetorical question: “Does ‘the name of the Trinity’ include its translatability into multiple cultural contexts, enabling people of every age and nation to call upon the persons of the Trinity ‘in their own language’?” (18). And again he answers yes. This abundance of names really constitutes a way of naming, a way that extends the blessing of God’s unique presence to the ends of the earth, to every tribe and tongue. Soulen traces several examples of it in the Bible but admits that the real field of research lies elsewhere: “Rich as the Scriptures themselves are, it is to the life of the church that we must look for the fullest unfolding of the name of the Trinity in a pneumatological key” (248). Indeed, for two full pages Soulen lists and footnotes ternaries from the history of Christian thought: Rose, Flower, and Fragrance; Life, Light, and Joy; Lover, Beloved, Co-Beloved; Sat, Cit, and Ananda. The list is remarkable and gives the impression that there is no reason it should ever have to end.

The potential endlessness of these Spirit-inspired triads seems to make them rather unlike a name. But Soulen’s functional idea of what a name accomplishes, or at least what a name for God accomplishes, is itself a triad: a name provides uniqueness, presence, and blessing. The plethora of triads is patently weak on uniqueness but strong on blessing; it is an inclusive cornucopia of namings. By itself, this riot of signification would fail as a name. It needs to be tethered to the Tetragrammaton as an anchor of uniqueness, but similarly the Tetragrammaton needs to be extended into the infinite ternaries if it is to unfold itself as a name that is a blessing. Soulen is clear: the divine name and these many names (recall the book’s title) are “distinct, equally important, and interrelated” (22). The host of triads seems untamably loose, an invitation to free invention in theology, with no obvious rule beyond threeness. But Soulen expresses no desire to find a really new name for God among these triads. In new situations of proclamation and worship, “what Christians seek . . . is not a new revelation, nor even some new name, but a deepening, purification, and renewal of old names and patterns of naming, in order that they may more faithfully meet the needs of the day” (7). Soulen himself obeys these strictures as he explores triadic naming, and though we may worry about what other practitioners may come up with as they enter into the project, in Soulen’s hands the triads stay within the gravitational field of the Tetragrammaton and the task of recognizing God’s name is taken seriously. For myself, I am grateful for the discussion of these ternaries

(including significant exploration of the Dionysian style they evince) and learned a great deal from attending to the process of diverse cultures and languages naming God in these ways. But I remain unconvinced that this process deserves the high place Soulen assigns it: a name of God that is distinct, equally important, and interrelated with the other two. It seems like such a long way from the Tetragrammaton to these triads that the culture-affirming and language-relativizing work done by means of the triads hardly counts as a name. It is evidently something, and something I am grateful to have seen. But it is hard to count it as a name.

The Tetragrammaton is "the one," and the Pentecostal profusion of names from different languages and cultures is "the many." Suspended between them is "the three," the name of the Trinity given in the baptismal command of Matt 28: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Soulen calls this a triad of male kinship language, and veterans of the inclusive language wars of recent decades may be forgiven for thinking that this way of naming God is the main reason for the book. When I first saw Soulen's two-volume project listed in the Westminster/John Knox catalog, I assumed it would be yet another volume in that conversation. I assumed I would be skimming some rehashed arguments from the 1980s and then stockpiling it on the shelf alongside other books on that topic. I was wrong. Soulen really does something new and distinctive here. For one thing, writing a book this comprehensive and inquisitive just to solve the inclusive language debate would be something like swatting a fly with a sledgehammer. Soulen is simply far more serious about the divine name than partisans on either side of the argument have succeeded in being. By situating the baptismal name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit between the radical uniqueness of the Tetragrammaton, on the one hand, and the overflowing blessing of the infinite ternaries, on the other, Soulen has in fact changed the terms of the debate. As he says, "the conflict is less about the proper use and misuse of the language of 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' per se than it is about the status of this ternary within the total economy of trinitarian names"(19), and only Soulen has bothered to sketch out something of the shape of that "total economy." Remember that divine names have characteristics of uniqueness, presence, and blessing. One way of characterizing what has gone on in the inclusive language discussion so far is to say that conservatives attempted to make the name Father, Son, and Holy Spirit serve as the anchor of uniqueness, a role already occupied by the Tetragrammaton. When they argued that "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" simply is the name of God under the New Covenant, they were making this triad do the work of the revealed name and paid the unintentionally supersessionist price of eclipsing the Tetragrammaton. Progressives, on the other hand, tended to treat the "male kinship ternary" of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" as one of the many names evoked by one of the cultures that received the gospel, and they supplemented it with female

kinship triads, nongenerative threefold structures, or descriptions of three moments in the saving work of the one God. Using Soulen's categories, it becomes evident what errors were made on both sides of the earlier debates, as well as why the two sides regarded each other with a horror somewhat out of proportion to the actual disagreement.

If we follow Soulen's lead by letting the Tetragrammaton anchor the uniqueness of God's name and letting the infinite set of triads unfold the blessing of God's name (even with the caveat that the triads may not rise to the level of an actual name), we should be able to set the baptismal name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit free to do its own proper work. That work is to be the locus of God's presence among us. Soulen is eloquent on the way this name of the Trinity is centered on Christ and his proclamation. And at one point he explores the way "the language of Father, Son, and Spirit finds its primary home in the context of mutual address spoken within the context of already existing relations" (230). This acknowledgment of the interpersonal communion signaled by "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" suggests another way in which this name of the Trinity stands out from "the infinite economy of trinitarian names." It is the one name that indicates a depth of ingression into the eternal life of God, a life in which the one who becomes present to us as Immanuel is already antecedently present, even mutually present or copresent, in the life of God before it is revealed or shared. That is, this threefold name seems to play a special role in relating the economy of salvation to the immanent reality of the divine being. Soulen has announced that "implications for the understanding of the immanent Trinity" will be the final topic of the second volume of this large work (ix). For theologians who take seriously the task of confessing the name of God, that volume is eagerly anticipated. However Soulen ends up negotiating the correspondence between the economy of naming and the immanent name of God, he is sure to open up new ways of speaking, ways grounded in a fresh approach to the biblical text.

RESPONSE: A THRICE THREEFOLD TRINITY? OF COURSE

Kendall Soulen

I am deeply honored by the critical attention my colleagues have given my book *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity*, and I thank them all heartily at the outset. Had I had the benefit of their responses while I was still writing, I would have produced a better book. As it is, I am glad that I am working on a sequel, because it will give me an opportunity to show what I have learned from their insights, proddings, and pleas for clarification. In the meantime, it gives me great pleasure to continue the conversation in these pages.

FRED SANDERS

Fred Sanders offers a wonderful précis of my book in his appreciative response. His summary strikes me as utterly reliable even as it formulates my argument in terms that had not occurred to me, such as “the one, the three, and the many.” I myself tend to think of the patterns of naming I identify as three variations on “three,” but when one considers them in terms of their indispensable vocabulary, then “one, three, and many” is exactly right and very helpful.

I’m especially glad that Sanders liked the portions of the book devoted to the theological interpretation of Scripture. For me that has always been the heart and soul of the book. Its germ grew out of my own sense of excitement to discover the indirect presence of the divine name in Jesus’s speech and in the New Testament generally. The historical portions of

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the book (now part 1) developed on the side as I tried to puzzle out why the indirect presence of the divine name (so obvious to so many biblical scholars and now to me) was perceived as mere absence by the theological tradition. As Sanders rightly notes, the answer I found pointed partly to innocent “color blindness,” but partly to a more willful determination to relegate what one might call “the Jewish dimension” of Christian faith to the past. Still, my chief aim in this book was not to criticize replacement theology but to sketch a reading of the canon’s witness to the Trinity that would be answerable to dogmatic tradition but persuasive (if at all) chiefly by virtue of its accountability to the broad contours and fine details of the Bible.

Sanders’s chief question to me is a gentle query concerning the status of what I call the Pneumatological pattern of naming, which names the Persons of the Trinity using many different ternaries drawn from a host of contexts. Sanders declares himself unconvinced that the Pneumatological pattern is what I claim it to be—namely, equally important with the other two. “It is evidently something. . . . But it is hard to count it as a name.”

I’ll defend the Pneumatological pattern against Sander’s skepticism in just a moment, but first I want to say a word about how the Pneumatological pattern impressed itself on me in the first place. When I first began work on the book, I had exactly two-thirds of my present thesis. That is, I intended to argue that there were two (not three) “most appropriate” ways of naming the Trinity, one rooted in Jesus’s address to God as “Father” and one in his reverence for God’s name, the Tetragrammaton. This worked well enough for nearly a year, but at the cost of growing ill ease as I cast aside more and more evidence from Scripture and tradition as basically irrelevant to naming the Trinity. I felt Augustine, Dionysius, and Elizabeth Johnson all frowning at me in disapproval. One day it hit me with the force of a hammer: all this material I was passing over actually consisted of the many faces of yet a third “most appropriate” way of naming the Trinity. It was instantly obvious to me that this third pattern had an affinity with the Holy Spirit, and the other two patterns became the “theological” and “Christological” patterns at the same moment. I offer this story to make clear that I didn’t begin with the idea of a trinity of patterns and try to force the evidence into it. For me it was the other way around: the evidence pushed me to adopt the thesis of three patterns corresponding to the Persons of the Trinity, despite my own initial preconceptions.

Now let me address Sander’s doubts more directly. Speaking of the pneumatological pattern, Sander writes, “It is hard to count it as a name.” I think part of what pinches here is terminology. I grant that it is hard to think of the Pneumatological pattern as a *name*, for how is a potentially limitless set of triads a name? Moreover, I admit that I sometimes speak

of the three patterns as though they were discrete names, as for example in the titles of chapters 12, 13, and 14. For the most part, however, I do not speak of three *names* but rather of three *patterns* or *ways of naming* the Persons of the Trinity. This terminological distinction is important. It reflects the fact that all three patterns are inherently flexible combinations of Trinitarian “grammar” and a certain vocabulary, which together can take many forms. To be sure, the *Tetragrammaton* is a name, but the theological pattern of *naming* is not. It is something more complicated: it is a way of identifying all three Trinitarian Persons by illuminating their distinct relations to this one name (a task that New Testament writers accomplish in a surprising number of ways). Similarly, the Christological pattern of *naming* pivots around a set vocabulary (Father, Son, and Spirit), but the Scriptures deploy this vocabulary in a host of ways, of which the baptismal command in Matt 28:19 is only one instance (although of course a very important one).

Back to Sander’s difficulty. True, the Pneumatological pattern is not a *name*. But so far it is *exactly equal* to the other patterns. Like them, it is a pattern of *naming* the Persons of the Trinity, characterized by trinitarian grammar plus its own distinctive vocabulary.

I hope this helps, but I realize I may not yet have fully dispelled Sander’s worries. For the theological and Christological patterns have a *fixed* vocabulary: the one and the three. But this is just what the Pneumatological pattern lacks, being wedded to the many. So how is it a pattern of naming on par with the other two?

I confess that there is an oddity here, but I do not want to smooth it away. Rather, I want to suggest that the oddity exactly reflects a curious feature of the distinctive personhood of the Holy Spirit: he is the “nameless” Person of the Trinity who is known by many names. Many theologians have noted this. According to Thomas Aquinas, the Holy Spirit can be called Love and Gift, but strictly speaking lacks a proper name of his own. Thomas explains, “While there are two processions in God, one of these, the procession of love, has no proper name of its own . . . for which reason the person proceeding in that manner has not a proper name” (*ST* 1 q36). Many contemporary theologians have seconded Thomas. Norman Pittinger calls the Holy Spirit the “anonymous” Person of the Trinity, while Thomas Weinandy speaks of him as “unnamed”; Walter Kasper says that unlike the Father and the Son the Spirit is “faceless,” while Linda Woodhead prefers to say (as I would) that “the Holy Spirit does not show its face other than in the faces of those whom it inspires.”

My point, then, is that Sanders perceives something real about the Spirit-centered pattern of naming the Trinity, but we should count this “something” as evidence *for* and not *against* its coequality with the other patterns. That is, the pattern’s odd vocabulary—its lack thereof, or its plenitude thereof, depending on how one looks at it—is not a deficit. It is

a charism that reflects the pattern's special affinity with the Person and work of the Holy Spirit.

KAREN KILBY

In her generous remarks Karen Kilby identifies two strengths of my book and one weakness. To begin with the weakness, Kilby fears that I overthink my thesis, making it unfortunately elaborate and complex, even to the point of proposing a "second, hidden, inner doctrine of the Trinity which has all along been lurking within the more familiar doctrine."

I agree that my argument is complex, and I recognize that some readers will think it so out of proportion to its merits. Perhaps the best I can do in my defense is summarize my argument, explain why I gave it the form I did, and indicate why Kilby's fears of a "second, hidden" doctrine of the Trinity are unfounded.

The book's central claim is that Christians name the Persons of the Trinity in three distinct, equally important, and interrelated ways, each of which has an affinity with one Person of the Trinity in particular. My aim in part 1 is chiefly descriptive. I try to persuade the reader that the patterns of naming exist and illustrate how Christians of various ages have understood their relation. My story focuses in large part on the mixed fortunes of one pattern of naming in particular, the "theological" pattern centered in the Tetragrammaton, and on how its ups and downs relate to those of the other two.

While part 1 is intricate enough, part 2 is substantially more so. The reason for this is that my argument shifts from a chiefly descriptive to a chiefly normative vein. Now I argue that Christians name the Persons of the Trinity in three distinct, equally important, and interrelated ways *because this is the way the Trinity attests itself to us in and through our Sacred Scripture*. Making this case required that I converse constantly with the biblical text on the one hand and doctrinal tradition on the other, each formidably complex conversation partners in its own right. True, I could have made things simpler by minimizing my engagement with either the Bible or Trinitarian doctrine, but not, I think, without hobbling my investigation at the outset.

So, then, my argument unfolds as follow. In chapters 8 through 11, I ask how the Bible portrays God declaring God's own name. Note that I am not asking how we name God, but how God names himself, according to the Scriptures. I answer that God's name declaration in the Old Testament routinely takes an *implicitly* Trinitarian shape. God promises (i) to declare who God is (ii) by coming to deliver Israel from danger and (iii) by blessing it with fullness of life (chapters 8 and 9). I describe these three