

Why give names to the nameless?

BY CHRIS HIGHLAND

Through decades of wrestling with issues of faith, it sometimes felt as if I was actually wrestling with God.

Like Jacob in the Genesis story, who took God to the mat and won (32), I was curious to know the identity of my opponent. What is the name of this Cosmic Contender? One of the strangest stories in the Bible presents this dramatic fight scene: “So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” The man asked him, “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he answered. Then the man said, “Your name will

no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.”

An odd story indeed. But what follows adds to the strangeness: “Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” In Sunday School, the lesson was always about Jacob in close combat with “an angel”—a messenger of God—, but the text is clear: “You have struggled with God...” and “I saw God face to face.” The name “Israel” comes from this weird fight, where a mere human “overpowers” the Heavenly Heavyweight and, though wounded, holds on tight to audaciously demand a blessing.

Names matter in the Bible,

and in all religious history. Moses insisted on asking the fiery voice on Sinai, “Who are you?” “I Exist” was the response. Simply “I.” (YHVH, translated as LORD). How do you tell people you are the obeying the commands of “I”? (Although, maybe that’s what happens in the religious hierarchy—someone says they heard “the voice” when it may be their own “I” speaking?). Is this what Jesus of Nazareth was doing when he made “I” statements such as “You have heard it said, but I say to you”? He claimed a high level of intimacy with God, whom he called Dad (“Abba”). Christian tradition essentially substitutes the name “Jesus” for anything “God.”

Beyond the Bible, I’ve been reading the “Tao of Lao” (Tao Te Ching) once again, something I first read in a college World Religions course. Reading this ancient text now,

I’m curious again about the names we choose for ... the Unnameable. Here are four verses from the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu that should clear this up (not really):

—“The Tao [Way] that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name.” (chapter 1)

—“It may be considered the mother of the universe. I do not know its name; I call it Tao. If I have to give it a name, I will call it Great.” (25)

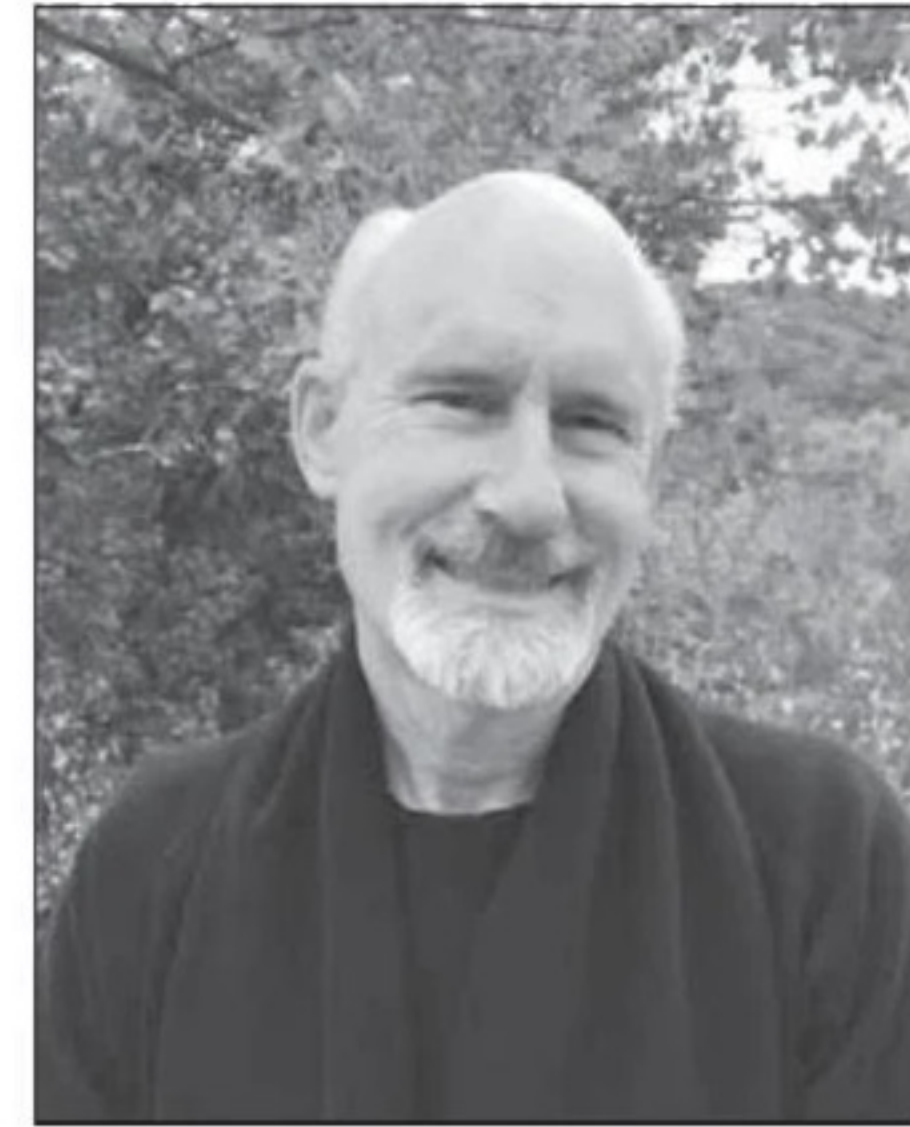
—“Tao is eternal and has no name ... Tao in the world may be compared to rivers and streams running into the sea.” (32)

—“Tao is hidden and nameless, yet it is Tao alone that skillfully provides for all and brings them to perfection.” (41)

I think the most telling line is: “I do not know its name; I call it Tao.” This seems to be what humans do. We don’t

know what to call something, so we come up with a name so we can get a handle on it (though it really has no handles, nothing to hold to). Though Jacob/Israel grasped an arm or a leg in that famous match up, what do we have to hold onto? How does one get a grip on the Great, Tao, LORD, Nature, the Universe?

Some readers may recall the passage in the Book of Acts where Paul is in Athens. He notices a altar dedicated “To a God Unknown.” The Romans had many known and named gods, so Paul is anxious to preach the name of his own deity. Rather rudely, he tells the crowd: “You are ignorant of the very thing you worship.” Instead of asking to learn about the other named divinities—“Tell me about Jupiter”—he is quick to preach the “name above all names” (see his letter to the Philippians). For Paul, and



the history of the Christian Church, no other name for the Unnameable “I” or “Tao” will do.

The long list of names for the nameless, including Almighty, Lord, Savior, God and even Jesus, are all attempts to give an exclusive name to the Nameless. That’s worth wrestling with.

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