



Hallowed be Thy Name'

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The Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments requests that the Tetragrammaton YHWH used in worship not be written or spoken as 'Jahweh.' Repentance for Christian anti-Judaism and theological insights from Christian-Jewish dialogue demand the editing of Bible translations and hymns used in worship.

"Hallowed be Thy Name"

Fritz Voll

The Tetragrammaton YHWH is the sacred Hebrew name of God which was revealed to Moses together with its meaning, the "program" of Israel's special calling and relationship with God, which Christians should learn to respect (Exodus 3:14). Since Hebrew was written without vowels, the four consonants YHWH contain no clue to their original pronunciation. In ancient Israel the name was only spoken in the Temple, and only on certain occasions (e.g. on Yom Kippur). Today, observing Jews do not speak the name, instead, other names for God are substituted, e.g. Lord (Hebrew Adonai).

Most Christian Bible translations substitute the Tetragrammaton with LORD. However, in contemporary scholarship and in some Christian translations of the Bible (the Catholic Jerusalem Bible) the Tetragrammaton is often rendered "Yahweh" and in old translations even "Jehova." In some new translations the Tetragrammaton itself is used. All these renderings are offensive to many Jews. They hear Christians – often even in their presence in the Christian-Jewish dialogue – pronounce this special divine name, which they themselves would never dare to speak. Orthodox Jews would often write G-d in reverence to the divine name.

On June 29, 2008, the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments had issued a two-page letter to episcopal conferences around the world that was signed by Cardinal Francis Arinze, congregation prefect and Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith, secretary. It said in part: "By directive of the Holy Father, in accord with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, this congregation ... deems it convenient to communicate to the bishops' conferences ... as regards the translation and the pronunciation, in a liturgical setting, of the divine name signified in the sacred Tetragrammaton." The letter reminded the conferences of the congregation's 2001 document on liturgical translations, "Liturgiam Authenticam" which states that "the name of almighty God expressed by the Hebrew Tetragrammaton and rendered in Latin by the word "Dominus," is to be rendered into any given vernacular by a word equivalent in meaning." The letter continued, "Notwithstanding such a clear norm, in recent years the practice has crept in of pronouncing the God of Israel's proper name. "The practice of vocalizing it is met with both in the reading of biblical texts taken from the Lectionary as well as in prayers and hymns, and it occurs in diverse written and spoken forms," including Yahweh, Jahweh and Yehovah, Jehova.

In a letter to his fellow bishops of August 8, 2008, written by Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli of Paterson, N.J., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Divine Worship, he stated the new Vatican "directives on the use of "the name of God" in the sacred liturgy." He said that the new directives would have "some impact on the use of particular pieces of liturgical music in our country." Songs that use "Jahweh" will have to be edited.

One could only wish that the Protestant churches would follow the example and edit the Bible translations and hymns that use Jahveh or even Jehovah as renderings of the name of Israel's and only through Israel also the Church's God.

Hymns like "Guide me, O thou great Jehova" are still sung with great enthusiasm in thousands of churches. Editing such ancient, wonderful hymns, loved by millions of Christians throughout generations and often translated into many other languages, would, no doubt, cause a lot of anguish. But it would be one of the acts of repentance for centuries of Christian anti-Judaism and disrespect of our Jewish relatives, and it is certainly one of the "sacrifices" a new theological understanding of our relationship with Judaism demands.

When I use the word "sacrifice" I cannot help but think of the thousands of Jews who gave their lives in "Christian" countries for the sanctification of God's name while we Christians just prayed in the Jewish prayer of Jesus, "hallowed (sanctified) be your name." It is time to act on our prayers and new theological insights.