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*Wednesday September 17, 2014*

## **What's in a name, anyway?**

**By Jim Taylor**

**For his series of *Imager* science-fiction novels, author L.E. Modesitt Jr. invented a religion that had a god without a name. Because, as one of its creeds stated, “naming is a presumption.”**

**When we name something, we assume that we know it.**

**Modesitt explained, “We name everything, and so often when we name it... the name becomes the identity, and it is always a limited identity... One of the great sins in life is to accept that a name is all there is to that reality...”**

**So Joe Smith must be an ordinary kind of guy; Aeoliana Schlrmph must be unusual. And if you can neither spell nor pronounce someone's name – such as, say, Zbigniew Brzeziński – you view him with suspicion.**

**That's why I hesitate to use the name “God” in most conversations. As soon as I say “God,” my hearer knows exactly what I mean. Even if I don't.**

**I mean, it's obvious, isn't it? God is a proper name, therefore it must refer to the same person, no matter who uses it. Doesn't it?**

**No, it doesn't.**

## **Changing concepts**

**Years ago, a speaker asked a group of us to draw a picture of God. She wanted us to make concrete a bunch of concepts that we tended not to think about. Judging by the discussion that followed, most participants tried to visualize some kind of being who could shape the universe and read thoughts. A few drew an old man sitting on a cloud hurling thunderbolts at sinners below. One or two drew a female figure.**

**Clearly, we didn't all share the same picture of God. And in the**

**discussion that followed, it was clear that our ideas were changing. Very few still thought about God the same way they had when they were young.**

**The man next to me muttered sardonically, “A generation from now, they’ll be trying to worship a vague oblong blur.”**

**When I was growing up, taking the names of God or Jesus in vain – that is, as swear words – was taboo. Today, that’s the only safe way to use their names. At least, if you’re cussin’, everyone knows what you mean!**

**Many Jews will not write the word “God.” One of the commandments given to Moses says, “Thou shalt not make any image of me.” A name, Judaism says, is an image. So they insert a symbol instead of a letter; they write “G\*d,” or “G-d.”**

**In fact, though, a name itself tells us nothing about the one it represents. God is a term that I use for a reality that I’m sure exists, but that I cannot define. I just know that it is, and that it matters.**

**Occasionally, people will shrug off my musings about God, saying, “I don’t believe in God anymore.” I want to know what they mean by God. Chances are pretty good that I don’t believe in that kind of God anymore, either.**

**My friend Kim MacMillan commented, “I have a personal relationship with something that isn’t a person.”**

**Me too.**

**That doesn’t make me right and someone else wrong. Or vice versa. It means that none of us should assume we know what someone else means when they refer to God. Or Allah. Or Brahman. Or any other holy presence.**

**Better we should ask questions of each other. Perhaps both of us might learn something.**

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## **YOUR TURN**

**Last weeks’ column – on loving and being loved in return – wasn’t intended to be controversial. And so several of the responses simply affirmed its message.**

**Helen Arnott wrote, “Ah, Jim, this blurb is so sweet. I think you must be a romantic!”**

**Fran Martens quoted my line, “The circle of love goes around,” and**

suggested, “You have the beginning of a love song here...”

And Charles Hill, who usually has some trenchant psychological insights to supplement my thoughts, simply said, “Preach on!”

I should offer an apology, by the way. My column used only heterosexual pronouns: “He loves her, because she loves him...” Although it wasn’t intentional, that use ignores the possibility that love can cross gender lines, and perhaps even human lines. My dog loves me; I love my dog. I love my trees; unfortunately, I have no way of knowing if my trees love me, but I don’t want to exclude that possibility. It’s the reciprocity I wanted to emphasize, not any gender divisions.

Okay, back to the responses to the column.

Isabel Gibson noted a difficulty in that issue of reciprocity: “I have some friends who can’t let me reciprocate in social situations. They won’t let me help out at their place, but insist on helping at mine. I struggle with that imbalance. Knowing that it’s not my problem/insecurity helps a bit, but not enough. Somewhere in all that giving, we have to be willing to receive as well -- whether it’s love, help, or anything else.”

Fran Ota looked at a different problem: “Jim, all this is true - and yet -- how do we love our ‘enemies’, those who persecute others, those who are ‘other’? Loving or treating one’s neighbour the way you would \*like\* to be treated is not reciprocal. It invites reciprocity, but that may not be given.

“Is it possible to love someone who does not love you back? Yes -- the example which leaps to mind is Johannes Brahms, who was in love with Clara Schumann, the wife of his best friend Robert Schumann, all his adult life. Brahms never married. And last but not least, we are loved by God, whether or not we love in return.”

I’m not sure what the connection was, but James Russell wrote, “Did I tell you that you absolutely **MUST** see the movie ‘Calvary’? I just caught it. The reviews don’t seem to me to capture the real essence of the film. It’s wonderfully acted and has a great script and is a sort of deeply Christian story (and also, perhaps because of that, not a very religious film at all).

“Of course, it does start with a modern Irish Catholic priest being told in the confessional, ‘I was raped by a priest and I’m going to kill a priest in revenge. Not a bad one. You.’”

**I suppose that's a form of reciprocity...**

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

**Oh, heavens to Betsy, this coming Sunday's lectionary readings call for Psalm 105 again! Leading off with the same six verses – for the fourth time! And it is so easy to read the biblical text as a triumphal adulation of an almighty being who is always on our side and who will squish our opponents like cockroaches underfoot.**

**So I'm going to do something different, thinking back to the days when I took Scouts and Cubs camping.**

- 37 It was quite a hike.  
    Roots reached out to trip us; thorn bushes clutched at our clothes.  
    But we didn't lose anyone.
- 38 We rejoiced to reach our destination;  
    night was near; we began to fear we were lost.
- 39 But tents covered us from the chill;  
    a campfire kept us warm.
- 40 We barbecued chicken on its coals.
- 41 A spring spouted from the hillside;  
    its clear water filled our cups and overflowed down the valley.
- 42 Through the darkness, our leader watched over us;  
    through the night, he patrolled the campsite to ward off our fears.
- 43 In a new day, we bounced from our tents with bright eyes and deep breaths,  
    inhaling the glory of the morning.
- 44 The woods and meadows were made for us;  
    we played hide and seek among the tree trunks.
- 45 Glory to God who gave us such an experience.

**For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the Revised Common Lectionary, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publishing, [info@woodlake.com](mailto:info@woodlake.com).**

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YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrp@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

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