

# Modern Catholic Views on the Use of the Tetragrammaton

From: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/dominus.html>

## 1. Letter to the Bishops Conferences on The Name of God

On June 29, 2008, Cardinal Francis Arinze, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, wrote to the presidents of all conferences of bishops, prohibiting use of the term Yahweh in the liturgy, particularly in hymns and Psalm translations.

\* \* \* \* \*

CONGREGATIO DE CULTU DIVINO  
ET DISCIPLINA SACRAMENTORUM

Prot. no. 213/08/L

Your Eminence / Your Excellency,

By directive of the Holy Father, in accord with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, this Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments deems it convenient to communicate to the bishops' conferences the following as regards the translation and the pronunciation, in a liturgical setting, of the divine Name signified in the sacred *tetragrammaton*, along with a number of directives.

### I. Exposition

1. The words of Sacred Scripture contained in the Old and New Testament express truth which transcends the limits imposed by time and place. They are the Word of God expressed in human words. By means of these words of life, the Holy Spirit introduces the faithful to knowledge of the truth, whole and entire; and thus the Word Christ comes to dwell in the faithful in all its richness (cf. Jn 14:26; 16:12-15.) In order that the Word of God, written in the sacred texts, may be conserved and transmitted in an integral and faithful manner, every modern translation of the books of the Bible aims at being a faithful and accurate transposition of the original texts. Such a literary effort requires that the original text be translated with maximum integrity and accuracy, without omissions or additions with regard to the contents and without introducing explanatory glosses or paraphrases which do not belong to the sacred text itself.

As regards the sacred name of God himself, translators must use the greatest faithfulness and respect. In particular, as the Instruction *Liturgiam authenticam* (n. 41) states:

In accordance with immemorial tradition, which indeed is already evident in the above-mentioned Septuagint version, 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.

[Iuxta traditionem ab immemorabili receptam, immo in (...) versione “LXX virorum” iam perspicuam, nomen Dei omnipotentis, sacro tetragrammate hebraice expressum, latine vocabulo “Dominus” in quavis lingua populari vocabulo quodam eiusdem significationis reddatur.]

Notwithstanding such a clear norm, in recent years the practice has crept in of pronouncing the God of Israel's proper name, known as the holy or divine tetragrammaton, written with four consonants of the Hebrew alphabet in form יהוה, YHWH. 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. It occurs in diverse written and spoken forms, for example, Yahweh, Yahwè, Jahweh, Jahwe, Jave, Yehovah, etc. It is therefore our intention, with the present letter, to set out some essential facts which lie behind the above-mentioned norm and to establish some directives to be observed in this matter.

2. The venerable biblical tradition of Sacred Scripture, known as the Old Testament, displays a series of divine appellations, among which is the sacred name of God revealed in the tetragrammaton YHWH יהוה. As an expression of the infinite greatness and majesty of God, it was held to be unpronounceable and hence was replaced during the reading of Sacred Scripture by means of the use of an alternate name: Adonai, which means “Lord.”

The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the so-called Septuagint, dating back to the last centuries prior to the Christian era, had regularly rendered the Hebrew tetragrammaton with the Greek word Kyrios, which means “Lord.” Since the text of the Septuagint constituted the Bible of the first generation of Greek-speaking Christians, in which language all the books of the New Testament were also written, these Christians, too, from the beginning never pronounced the divine tetragrammaton. Something similar happened likewise for Latin-speaking Christians, whose literature began to emerge from the second century, as first the *Vetus Latina* and, later, the *Vulgate* of St. Jerome attest. In these translations, too, the tetragrammaton was regularly replaced with the Latin word *Dominus*, corresponding both to the Hebrew *Adonai* and to the Greek *Kyrios*. The same holds for the recent *Neo-Vulgate* which the Church employs in the liturgy.

This fact has had important implications for New Testament Christology itself. When in fact St. Paul, with regard to the crucifixion, writes that “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name” (Phil 2:9), he does not mean any name other than “Lord,” for he continues by saying, “and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil 2:11; cf. Is 42:8: “I am the Lord; that is my name.”) The attribution of this title to the risen Christ corresponds exactly to the proclamation of his divinity. The title in fact becomes interchangeable between the God of Israel and the Messiah of the Christian faith, even though it is not in fact one of the titles used for the Messiah of Israel. In the strictly theological sense, this title is found, for example, already in the first canonical Gospel (cf. Mt 1:20: “The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.”) One sees it as a rule in Old Testament citations in the New Testament (cf. Acts 2:20): “The sun shall be turned into darkness. . . before the day of the Lord comes” (Joel 3:4); 1 Peter 1:25: “The word of the Lord abides for ever” (Is 40:8). However, in the properly Christological sense, apart from the text cited of Philippians 2:9-11, one can remember Romans 10:9 (“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”), 1 Corinthians 2:8 (“they would not have crucified the Lord of glory”), 1 Corinthians 12:3 (“No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit”) and the frequent formula concerning the Christian who lives “in the Lord” (Rom 16:2; 1 Cor 7:22, 1 Thes 3:8; etc).

3. Avoiding pronouncing the tetragrammaton of the name of God on the part of the Church has therefore its own rationale. Apart from a motive of a purely philological order, there is also that of

remaining faithful to the Church's tradition, from the beginning, that the sacred tetragrammaton was never pronounced in the Christian context nor translated into any of the languages into which the Bible was translated.

## II. Directives

In light of what has just been expounded, the following directives are to be observed:

1. In liturgical celebrations, in songs and prayers the name of God in the form of the tetragrammaton YHWH is neither to be used or pronounced.
2. For the translation of the biblical text in modern languages, intended for the liturgical usage of the Church, what is already prescribed by n. 41 of the Instruction *Liturgiam authenticam* is to be followed; that is, the divine tetragrammaton is to be rendered by the equivalent of Adonai/Kyrios; “Lord,” Signore, Seigneur, Herr, Señor, etc.
3. In translating, in the liturgical context, texts in which are present, one after the other, either the Hebrew term Adonai or the tetragrammaton YHWH, Adonai is to be translated “Lord” and the word “God” is to be used for the tetragrammaton YHWH, similar to what happens in the Greek translation of the Septuagint and in the Latin translation of the Vulgate.

From the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 29 June 2008.

Francis Cardinal Arinze  
Prefect

Albert Malcolm Ranjith  
Archbishop Secretary

## 2. Pope Benedict XVI on the Divine Name

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (translation of *Einführung in das Christentum*, 1968; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004) pp. 126-28.

Since Yahweh, as we have seen, is explained as the “God of our fathers,” the Yahweh-faith automatically absorbs the whole context of the faith of Israel’s fathers, though this context at the same time acquires a new coherence and a new look. But what is the specifically new element expressed by [p. 127] the name “Yahweh?” The answers to this question are numerous; the precise meaning of the formulas in Exodus 3 can no longer be ascertained with certainty. Nevertheless, two aspects emerge clearly. We have already established that to our way of thinking the mere fact that God bears a name, and thereby appears as a kind of individual, is a scandal. But if we look more closely at the text we are considering the question arises: Is it, properly speaking, really a name? This question may at first seem nonsensical, for it is indisputable that Israel knew the word Yahweh as a name for God. Yet a careful reading shows that the thorn bush scene expounds this name in such a way that as a name it seems to be absolutely cancelled out; in any case it moves out of the series of appellations of divinities to which it at first seems to belong. Let us listen once again carefully. Moses says: “The children of Israel, to whom you send me, will ask, ‘Who is the God who sends you? What is he called?’ What shall I then say to them?” We are next told that God replied: “I AM WHO I AM.” The words could also be translated, “I am what I am.” This really

looks like a rebuff; it seems much more like a refusal to give a name than the announcement of a name. In the whole scene there is a sense of displeasure at such importunity: I am just who I am. The idea that here no name is really given and that the question is rejected acquires additional probability when a comparison is made with the two passages that could be adduced as the best parallels to our text: Judges 13:18 and Genesis 32:30. In Judges 13:18 a certain Manoah asks the God who meets him for his name. The answer he is given is: "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is a secret?" (Another possible translation is, "seeing it is wonderful.") A name is not given. In Genesis 32:30, it is Jacob who, after his nocturnal struggle with the stranger, asks his name and receives only the discouraging answer, "Why is it that you ask my name?" [p. 128] Both passages are linguistically and in general construction very closely related to our text, so that it is hardly disputable that there is also an affinity in the thought. Here again we have the gesture of repulse. The God with whom Moses deals in the burning bush cannot give his name in the same way as the gods round about, who are individual gods alongside other similar gods and therefore need a name. The God of the burning bush will not put himself on a level with them.

In the gesture of rebuff we have come upon here there is a hint of a God who is entirely different from "the gods." The explanation of the name Yahweh by the little word "am" thus serves as a kind of negative theology. It cancels out the significance of the name as a name; it effects a sort of withdrawal from the only too well known, which the name seems to be, into the unknown, the hidden. It dissolves the name into mystery, so that the familiarity and unfamiliarity of God, concealment and revelation, are indicated simultaneously. The name, a sign of acquaintance, becomes the cipher for the perpetually unknown and unnamed quality of God. Contrary to the view that God can here be grasped, so to speak, the persistence of an infinite distance is in this way made quite clear. To this extent it was in the last analysis a legitimate development that led people in Israel more and more to avoid pronouncing this name, to use some sort of periphrasis, so that in the Greek Bible it no longer occurs at all but is simply replaced by the word "Lord." This development shows in many ways a more accurate understanding of the mystery of the burning bush than multifarious learned philological explanations do.

### **3. Vatican Directive on Discontinuing the use of Yahweh**

Compiled by  
Sophy Morley  
Diocesan Pastoral & Liturgy Coordinator  
Diocese of Sale  
PO Box 103  
Newborough, Victoria, 3825  
Australia  
P (03)51261063  
F (03)51264399  
M 041359007  
E [smorlell@sale.catholic.org.au](mailto:smorlell@sale.catholic.org.au)  
W [www.sale.catholic.org.au](http://www.sale.catholic.org.au)

The directive to stop the use of "Yahweh" will mean some changes to some of the hymns currently used by Australian Catholic parishes. This directive affects the following hymns:

*Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah* (Together in Song / Australian Hymn Book)  
*I Lift Up My Soul* by Tim Manion (Glory and Praise 1)  
*In Praise of His Name* (Glory and Praise 1)  
*Like a Seal* by Carey Landry (Glory and Praise 1)  
*Micah's Theme* by Anne Kelly (Catholic Worship Book/Gather Australia)  
*Sing a New Song* by Dan Schutte  
*Strong and Constant* by Frank Andersen (As One Voice 1 Eagle's Wings)  
*The Lord is King* by Rory Cooney  
*You Are Near* by Dan Schutte (Glory & Praise 1/As One Voice 1)  
*Yahweh Is the God of My Salvation* by Gregory Norbet/Neston Priory (Glory & Praise 3)  
*Yahweh the Faithful One* by Dan Schutte (Glory & Praise)

Many of these songs were first published by the St Louis Jesuits in their *Glory and Praise* collections. OCP Publications (Oregon Catholic Press) now publishes and administers the copyrights for these titles. They may be included in various collections of OCP's liturgical music e.g. *Spirit and Song, Breaking Bread, Today's Missal*.

**In Australia, Gather Australia**. (Melbourne) has *Micah's Theme, Sing a New Song, Yahweh and You Are Near*.

Catholic Worship Book has *Micah's Theme*.

**As One Voice** (Sydney) has *Yahweh Is the God of My Salvation, Yahweh Is the God of My Salvation* and *Yahweh Is the God of My Salvation*.

Glory and Praise has most of the above hymns.

Eagle's Wings has *Strong and Constant*.

OCP is providing information on the legal adaptation of the texts of the hymns so that they conform to the new directive. In some cases the changes will also affect the music accompaniment. They advise: "**In many of the songs, only a simple substitution of text was required. For those songs in which rhythmic or notational changes are necessary, this guide will provide easy solutions for accompaniments.**"

Go to <https://www.ocp.org/en-us/blog/entry/worship/directive-2008> for notes and music about each hymn that has been adapted. OCP also has print music downloads of the amended hymns.

## Hymn Text Changes

### **Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer**<sup>1</sup> (TIS 569) *Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah* (AHB)

Guide me, O thou great Redeemer,  
pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak but thou art mighty;  
hold me with thy powerful hand:  
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven  
Feed me now and evermore,  
Feed me now and evermore.

### **God Of My Salvation.**<sup>2</sup> (GP3/AOV1) *Yahweh is the God of My Salvation*

Lord, you are the God of my salvation.  
I trust in you and have no fear.  
I sing of the joy that your love gives to me  
And I draw deeply from the springs of your salvation.

### **I Lift Up My Soul (Psalm 25)**<sup>3</sup> (GP1)

Refrain: To you, Lord, I lift up my soul, O my God.

1. O Lord, show your ways to me.  
Teach me your paths  
and keep me in the ways of your truth,  
for you are the God that saves me.

### **In Praise of His Name**<sup>4</sup> (GP1)

Refrain: Bless the Lord, O my soul;  
Bless the Lord, praise His name!  
Bless the Lord, O my soul;  
Let all creation praise His name!

1. Let all creation rise and give praise to our God,  
Creator of heaven and earth, He made us, we belong to Him!

### **Like A Seal**<sup>5</sup> (AOV1 /GP1)

Refrain: Set me like a seal on your heart,  
like a seal on your arm.  
Set me like a seal on your heart.  
How right it is to love you.

1. For love is stronger than death, stronger even than hell.  
The flash of it is a flash of fire, a flame of the Lord himself.

<sup>1</sup> Text: William Williams (1717- 1791) Tune: ONYM RHONDD, John Hughes (1873-1932)

<sup>2</sup> Text: Based on Isaiah 12:2-3. Text and music: Gregory Norbet, OSB, ©1972. 1980, 2008, The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont, Inc. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

<sup>3</sup> Text: Based on Psalm 25:1,4-5,8-9,6-7. Text and music Tim Manion © 1976,2008, OCP. All rights reserved.

<sup>4</sup> Text: Based on Psalms 100 and 148; Roc O'Connor SJ. Music: Roc O'Connor, SJ. © 1976, 2006, Robert F. O'Connor, SJ and OCP. All rights reserved.

<sup>5</sup> Text: Based on Song of Songs 8; Carey Landry. b. 1944. Music: Carey Landry. ©1977, 2008. OCP. All rights reserved.

**Micah's Theme** <sup>6</sup> (CWB/GA)

Refrain: Hear then what God asks of you:  
To live justly, to love tenderly,  
and to walk humbly with your God.

**Sing A New Song** <sup>1</sup> (AOV1/GA/G/GP)

Sing a new song unto the Lord,  
Let your song be sung from mountains high.  
Sing a new song unto the Lord, singing alleluia!

1. Shout with gladness! Dance for joy!  
O come before the Lord  
And play for God with glad tambourines  
and let your trumpet sound.

**Strong and Constant** <sup>8</sup> (AOV1 / EW)

1. I will be God who walks with you.  
You will be always within My hand.  
Take your heart and give it all to Me.  
Strong and constant is My love!  
Strong and constant is My love!

**The Faithful One** <sup>9</sup> (GP1) *Yahweh, the Faithful One*

God's mighty love will last forever,  
From age to age till the end of time.  
Steadfast is our loving God,  
Forever the faithful One.

**You Are Near** <sup>10</sup> (GA/GP1/AOV1)

Refrain: Lord, I know you are near,  
Standing always at my side  
You guard me from the foe  
and you lead me in ways everlasting.

<sup>6</sup>Text: Micah 6; Anne Kelly. Tune: Anne Kelly © 1994, Anne Kelly.

<sup>7</sup>Text: Based on Psalm 98:1, 4-6. Daniel Schutte Tune: Daniel Schutte ©1972, 1974, 1979, 2008, OCP. All rights reserved

<sup>8</sup>Text & Music: Frank Andersen msc. © Chevalier Bookshop, Kensington, NSW.

<sup>9</sup>Text: Based on Genesis 12:1-2; 13:14-17; 15:1-6; Dan Schutte. Music: Dan Schutte.© 1970, 1974, 2008. Daniel L. Schutte. Published by OCP. All rights reserved.

<sup>10</sup>Text: Based on Psalm 139, Daniel Schutte. Tune: Daniel Schutte © 1971,2008, Daniel L. Schutte. OCP Publications