

Vatican Directives on the Use of the Name of God

My question to Fr Just: You told us some months ago that the Vatican had ordered that we not speak the name Yahweh, out of respect for our Jewish brothers and sisters who find it such a scandal. How do we do this? Given that my favorite Bible is the Jerusalem Bible, how do I get around this? How do I handle it in class when I am teaching? I am more than willing to respect the authority of the Vatican, and respect the wishes of our brothers and sisters in God, but I have not figured out how this can be handled. I would appreciate it if you could address this question.

Father Felix Just's response: Thanks for your question, which will allow me to clarify certain aspects of this issue:

First, let's locate the **source**. On June 29, 2008, the "Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments" (CDWDS) published a "Letter to the Bishops' Conferences on 'the name of God.'" This short letter, published by Francis Cardinal Arinze, the Prefect of the CDWDS at that time, begins by explaining the rationale and then gives three brief "directives." The full text is available online on the website of the US Bishops' Conference: <http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/NameOfGod.pdf>

Second, let's consider the **scope** and **purpose** of the letter. All three directives specifically address "*liturgical*" situations (official public worship), rather than private reading of the Bible or the printed Bibles themselves. The first directive states, "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." The second directive says that in modern translations of the Bible "destined for the liturgical usage of the Church," the *tetragrammaton* should be translated with an equivalent of *Adonai/Kyrios*, such as "Lord" in English, "Señor" in Spanish, etc., which has long been the practice of most biblical translations. The third directive specifies that when *Adonai* and YHWH are used together in the Bible, then the translation (again for liturgical use) should be "Lord God," following the practice of the ancient Greek and Latin translations of the Bible.

Third, in reading the "Exposé" that forms the beginning and bulk of this short letter, we notice that the **reasons** given are not primarily to avoid offending the Jews, but to uphold the long-standing tradition of the Church regarding how the *tetragrammaton* has been translated throughout most of Christian history. The use of "Yahweh" in the *Jerusalem Bible* (JB), the *New Jerusalem Bible* (NJB), and in some contemporary songs and prayers may seem familiar to us, but is actually a very recent innovation, one that departed from the traditional Christian practice of substituting the word "Lord," as mentioned above.

Fourth, let's properly understand the doctrinal **weight** of this letter by recalling the theological doctrine of the "hierarchy of truths," which states that not all teachings of the Church have the same importance. Decrees of Ecumenical Councils or infallible teachings of the Popes are on a much higher level than letters published by individual Vatican Congregations. This does not mean that we should ignore the "directives" in this letter; but we should also be careful not to overreact. The letter does not forbid Catholics ever from reading, using, or speaking the name of God in the form "Yahweh," but is mostly addressing "*liturgical* usage."

So, **what will be the effect of this letter?** Publishers of Catholic hymnals will in future editions either omit songs that explicitly include the name "Yahweh," or the composers of those songs may be able to adapt the wording. People who write prayers for use in the liturgy (esp. Prayers of the Faithful) should avoid using "Yahweh," using "the Lord" or "God" instead. But we certainly do not have to destroy or burn our copies of the *JB* or *NJB*, or that we are not allowed to continue using these very good and beautiful translations for personal reading or even small-group prayer.

Applying the spirit of these Vatican directives a bit more broadly than their limited (liturgical) scope, I would say that it would also be good not to use the *JB* or *NJB* translations in ecumenical or interreligious contexts, but to choose another translation (the *NAB*, *NRSV*, etc.) for larger public services. Or, if you wish to use the *JB* or *NJB* publicly, you could also simply do what Jews and Christians have done for centuries when reading the Bible: whenever you see "Yahweh" in print, just say "the LORD" out loud.

OK? I hope this makes sense, and gives you several easy options to apply.

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