

99  
*Names  
of God*

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With Calligraphies by Shams Anwari-Alhosseyni

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## The word “God” . . .

. . . stems from human history’s most consequential discovery. It is a prehistoric artifact, which, even today, glows red-hot from the fires that smelted it in the forge of mystical experience. The insight that enlightened our ancient, only just human ancestors was that we stand in a personal relationship with the unfathomable mystery of life, indeed of the cosmos, of all of reality. And that we may call to that mystery, because it calls to us. This word “call to,” with its meaning of invocation, marks the etymological root of the word “God.” It is not a name, but rather a reference to our relationship with the nameless; it is not a term for some creature, but rather points to the origin by which all creatures originally sprang from non-being into being. In short, it is a word with the momentous task of pointing to the mystery.

Mystery, in this absolute sense, is not a vague term. It means that deepest reality which we can never take hold of, but may understand if we let it take hold of us. This distinction between taking hold of—that is, grasping, or comprehending—and being taken hold of—that is, being touched, or understanding—is familiar to us all from our experiences with music: We cannot take hold of its nature, cannot grasp or define it in concrete terms, cannot comprehend it intellectually. And yet we can understand it in the moment in which the music touches us—takes hold of us. Being touched from within allows us an understanding—that is, “standing

within”—that goes beyond any comprehension or grasping, which always approaches things from the outside. That experience in music applies to the Mystery as well. And it is especially through music that the Great Mystery can often touch us. However, any other touching experience can work just as well, since the Great Mystery is the reason for and foundation of all experience.

Being touched, words fail us. We fall silent beneath the vaulted, starry sky. The vast grandeur of nature in all its freedom is overwhelming. When we look through a window, however, things are different; then nature seems familiar, something we can get a handle on. Through the names of God, we can contemplate the supernal mystery as through windows—otherwise we would have to fall silent. It is human comprehension which determines the shape of these windows and limits their size. None of them can show everything, and no two of them show the exact same picture. For this reason alone, it is worth getting to know the names of God in other religious traditions. Nowadays, there is a far weightier additional reason: All too often, one partial view is played off against another, name against name, to the point of mutual bloodshed.

Reverential encounter with the names of God in Islam, therefore, can be of great significance to Christians. Even merely paying attention to them can signal a readiness for dialog—and what could be more necessary today than dialog? It may be what our collective survival depends on. For that reason, I have delved into a traditional list of the 99 names of Allah, contemplating one name after another, and collecting my thoughts into this book. In turn, I hope that my reflections will encourage readers to reflect. Here, images as well as

words seek to inspire reflection. The calligraphies depicting the individual names offer an opportunity for silently immersing oneself in their forms and so coming nearer to the silent mystery than one could with words alone.

Now that I hold it in my hands, I am filled with gratitude for this book. Through his masterful calligraphy, my friend Shams Anwari-Alhosseyni has made it more valuable than I could have ever imagined. Those who follow my reflections with heart and mind can now also follow the silent message reflected in the letters—and so it has become doubly a book of reflections. The joy of reflection is also, not least, made possible by the pleasing design of the book. For this, I thank all the staff of Tyrolia publishing, especially graphic designer Martin Caldonazzi and my editor and friend, Klaus Gasperi, who in addition to his many helpful suggestions for the text also did great services in rendering the layout of each page. For valuable advice, my thanks go out to Prof. Maria M. Jaoudi-Smith, Prof. Brigitte Kwizda-Gredler, Prof. Reinhard Nesper and Heidi-maria Stauber, Dr. Hortense Reintjens-Anwari, and Alberto Rizzo with Lizzie Testa. The counsel and encouragement of these faithful friends have supported me again and again over the past decade of work.

This book of reflections is dedicated to the people—of any and all religious denominations—who dare to pass through the gates of the many different names of God into the one nameless Mystery that unites us all.

—Brother David Steindl-Rast, OSB  
on the hacienda *La Güelta de Areco*  
near Azcuenaga in the Pampas,  
Argentina, March 2019