



Radiantly You – Episode 66

Naming the Unnameable God with Rev. Matthew Fox

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SUSIE: Hello friends and fellow travelers on this journey we call life. This is Susie Hindle Kher and you're tuned in to another episode of Radiantly You Radio with me and the KKNW king of the airwaves, Benny Matthers.

BENNY: Wow. What a dubious honor.

SUSIE: Well, as I get into show today's you're going to understand here in just a minute. But I've been like diving deep into names and what we call people and things and so I was like, yeah, it's Benny - he's king of the airwaves.

BENNY: Wow. I don't know about that. I appreciate that - those are pretty big shoes to fill. I guess I gotta live up to it now!

SUSIE: Well at least for the next 30 minutes.

BENNY: I'm down for that.

SUSIE: I can pretty much say if it wasn't for you we wouldn't be out on the air right now.

BENNY: I can add a little bit but there are some other things that might be hard to work too.

SUSIE: So something interesting - today is national pickle day, did you know that?

BENNY: It is! Wow. So are you like a savory salt pickle or sweet relish kind of gal.

SUSIE: I used to like sweet. But now I'm more the tart, like, I like those little mini pickles, the little gherkins.

BENNY: Oh, yeah. Those aren't too bad. I'm just kind of a traditional kind of pickle guy. I'm kind of like you I grew up, you know, like sweet relish and all that. I think I might have overdone it one time too many on like a hot dog when I was growing up, then I'm like yep, we're good.

SUSIE: Well, I love that its natural pickle day because for a lot of people today's topic is kind of a pickle. And the kind of pickle I'm talking about is a quandary.

BENNY: I see what you did right there. Well played.

SUSIE: That was smooth right.

BENNY: Super smooth.

SUSIE: Well what we're talking about today, the pickle that a lot of people get into, is when they're talking about how to give a name to the highest of higher powers. That's right. We're talking about God... and pickles. I don't know how we managed to go there! But you're probably thinking, wait this cosmic creator already has a name, but does he... or she... or who... and there you go, you can see the quandary we get into even just trying to describe it. Or is God really, maybe, unnameable.

When I was younger, I was raised in a Catholic Baptist home. And taking the Lord's name in vain was really a sin with a capital S. And in those days, I'd have been afraid to even contemplate another way of describing God. I mean, it actually wouldn't even have occurred to me. There might be a price to pay at the pearly gates.

But as I've matured - and I'm sure a lot of you listening are on the same journey - with me. As I've matured, so have my ideas about God and, for starters, I married a Hindu and I had to wrap my mind around the idea that all the names of their gods and goddesses are really more or less just names for different aspects of this overarching God. Now, I'm no theologian, so I might not have that completely accurate, but our guest today is kind of an expert on this conversation. He holds a doctorate in history and theology of spiritualities and has authored 35 books on spirituality and culture. Rev. Matthew Fox has a new book out and you're going to love it. It's called, "Naming the Unnamable." It is incredible.

Matthew treats this topic with love, compassion and wisdom. It's not religious. It is deeply spiritual, I would say, and I was just mentioning to him - we were talking before we went on the air - that this book has literally become my traveling companion. So I want to share with you a quote that he shares in this book from Nancy Ellen Abrams from a study actually. And she says are thinking about God today is like a potted plant that's root bound and can barely grow. The pot is made of old metaphors, images and stories. Right? And so, I think that's very much where I kind of come into that conversation and this idea of naming the unnamable feels really important to me.

Quickly, before we launch into our conversation with Rev. Matthew Fox. I want to share with you that you can check out the Radiantly You schedule, archives and transcripts on my website at radiantriverwellness.com. You can also sign up for email notifications of upcoming guests and links to show recordings and so much more. That's radiantriverwellness.com.

And now you are in for a treat, because I feel like Rev. Matthew Fox has kind of hit the reset button on this conversation with his new book "Naming the Unnamable," but then again, not really because you'll hear in this half hour, I'm sure, he'll share that the pondering of God's names dates back to very ancient times. And I know how relevant this topic is as our ideas about a higher power evolve. One of the questions I ask my clients when they come in and we start working together is whether they have a spiritual connection and if they do, what do they call it.

And that's kind of a conversation stopper sometimes and there's silence and people really have to think about this and I've been there myself.

You can find out more about the book that we're going to be talking about and this brilliant postmodern theologian at matthewfox.org. I want to give you that up front, we'll share it again at the end of the show. And if you like this conversation, please share it or even better have this conversation with friends over coffee or tea,

So welcome Rev. Fox thank you for taking time to join us today.

MATTHEW: Thank you Susie. I'm glad to be with you to discuss this exciting topic.

SUSIE: Yeah, it really is. When you wrote the book I was thinking, wow, I've kind of struggled with this idea of the name of God myself, not really knowing where it was coming from, but your book has really helped me kind of get it. You know when we're born little human beings we are we get a name and our parents probably are deliberating profusely over our name, right? It's kind of an important part of being human, but Matthew, maybe help us understand why it's so important for us individually and even culturally to have a name for this transcendent higher power.

MATTHEW: Well I think, of course, names help in in communicating with one another and communicating with oneself. And the problem is that I think we can kind of lock God down in our names for God and our projections onto God. I think there's a lot of projection that goes on. So I think opening opening it up to many, many possibilities is really a powerful thing. It's kind of like taking the top of your head off... And again, I do this in a very classical way. I call upon the 13th century mystic and saint Thomas Aquinas who was a tremendous scientist as well as theologian, and he says that every creature is a name for God. So that means there are trillions of names for God. So I choose 89 in my book, but I invite others to come up with their own. And, but he also adds that no creature is it name for God. So there's the God we can name and the God we cannot name, and that is a very important dance and dialectic that we have to beware of.

Again, we don't want to fall into the idolatry of thinking we could control what the divine is by naming it, you know, we're not parents of God, we're children of God. That makes the relationship a little bit different

SUSIE: Indeed. I completely get that, and I think one of the things I was realizing in reading the book is that in my own search for a name of God, it's sort of how I want to experience God and maybe that's projection too, right? But that's a tall order for a name, right?

MATTHEW: Right.

SUSIE: So what was your inspiration and intention when you kind of picked these 89 names, I know there are many of them. You know, what inspired you and what were you really hoping to get out there?

MATTHEW: Well, it's interesting that you said that your husband is a Hindu because I begin with a statement for the Vedas, part of the Hindu scriptures, that God has a million names. And so in the east, too, they are aware of the multiplicity, the diversity of divinity. And then, too, I invoke the practice in the Sufi tradition. There's a beautiful practice called the 99 most beautiful names for God. And the Sufi people, the Muslims, they practice these names and chant them and so forth, and I myself have practiced that particular experience and it's very powerful. And so that gave me the idea, well, why don't we take that as a springboard and then move into names that I find useful.

So I draw on science a lot, and it's interesting that you quoted from Nancy Abrams, well Nancy Abrams is a scientist. And she says, "What God even means explodes in this little book like fireworks in the mind." I really like that, and the first response to the book was from scientists. They got real excited. This one young man, young physicist...he said for him God is flow. So he develops a whole thesis about God as flow. So God is flow, God is energy, God is beauty. These are all names that that mystics and others have come up with over the centuries. And of course I came up with some that are kind of fresh today, too. So again, it's a practice, that's how Deepak Chopra responded to this book. That this is really a practice.

So you kind of get into this naming and then fireworks go off and other things happen. So I think that's why it's really a very powerful and simple book, but it's very radical because it is about opening our minds up and experiencing, as you say, it's going back to the experience of God. That's what makes spirituality different from religion. Spirituality is about the experience of the divine, religion tends to get kind of ossified around doctrines and dogmas and it has to be renewed by experience, by spirituality.

SUSIE: And one of the things that you did mention was that too often the name of God has been used to control people and kind of lock them into a very narrow view of things, right? So is the fact that we're having this conversation now, does it reflect that where maybe at a turning point as it point in our own Evolution?

MATTHEW: That's a good question. I think that's the case. I think this is where a lot of young people are kind of turned off by organized religion. They don't find it inviting to their own creativity. They don't feel intimately involved. And, yeah, I think that's very important that we're in this crisis as a species anyway facing the demise of the planet as we know of, and this is part of the crisis, that our God talk is not kept up with our evolution. So, I think to move to a fuller expression of what it means to be human, it really it really assists us to inspire our imaginations about some of the most important terms and languages and names that we have in our collective memory, and that's what we're doing here. We're inviting people to get back to the experience. Which of these names, for example, struck you as a most useful and and what did they trigger in you? Because, you know, this is an open-ended book. As I say, I came up with 89 days, but if there are trillions, you may come up with more that are useful to you.

I just think it's a big invitation and it's beautiful that I'm not proposing this just off the top of my head. I'm invoking a 13th century saint who gives us permission, so to speak, to do this when he says divinity has trillions of names.

SUSIE: Yeah. Well, I would have to say that, as I was reading through them, the ones that I was latching onto, really I could feel - almost physically feel - a softening in my heart. And my favorite, honestly, is number 39, which is God is the Beloved. Because when I say that, it just feels like it's like from love to love. Like this endless flow back and forth between this sort of transcendent mysterious higher power.

MATTHEW: That's really nice.

SUSIE: And I wanted to like readers know also that along with each name, you've given a little bit of a contemplation for people, a little bit of a reflection too. So, you know, you have everything from, my gosh, there's so many of them here. Oh, you know, God is the universe, God is energy, God is breath, God is laughter. And for each of those you include a really wonderful contemplation and I love how it almost makes me, that trillion faces, almost makes me feel like it's like all these different aspects of a whole. Those trillion faces are a trillion faces of one thing. And then at the back. I wanted to mention. I'd love if you could elaborate a little bit on the practices that you have, because you actually have practices in the back of the book.

MATTHEW: Sure. I just want to pause for a second on your favorite one, the Beloved. Because as I point out, this name is used by Saint John the cross - the 16th century Spanish mystic, but it's also used by Rumi the Sufi mystic, and so forth. So these names, they also the cross religions. You might say that these images, these names, these experiences are not just Christian or not just Muslim or not just Hindu or Buddhist. They're really archetypal, they're deeper than any one tradition, any one culture. And I think that's wonderful that the Beloved as a name for God is found in many traditions and within Christianity as I [garbled] not just John of the Cross, but Julian of Norwich and others who talk about God as a Beloved, so I just wanted to kind of speak to that in light of your of your choice, your primary choice there of the Beloved.

And I like what you said about these names, the names that soften the heart. It's so important because we can get so rigid and so sure of ourselves when we talk about God, we beat people over the head with our Bibles or something. It's refreshing to do just what you talked about, to just soften the heart. And Thomas Aquinas says the first effect of love is melting, and I love that teaching - melting. And with these names, as you practice them and you chant them as a mantra over and over, and say the Beloved, the Beloved, the Beloved, there is a melting of the heart and of the mind that goes on.

And I think given the rancor that is happening in our culture today at so many levels in the media and politics and everything else, a little melting of the hearts is a really good thing. And a melting of boundaries between people of different traditions and ethnicities and races and religions. I think it's a good time for some of that softening of the heart as you say or melting of the divisions between us. So your question was about the practices themselves.

SUSIE: They're simple, they're very simple, but and I love that because they're easy to do.

MATTHEW: Sure, one thing to do with these is to put them into art form. For example, to dance your names for God, or to paint the names for God, to image them, or to chant them, put them to music, to poetry, create rituals around them. I mean it's just a whole a whole plethora of possibilities emerge when you play with these names and that's what you want to do. Thomas Aquinas says the nearest thing to contemplation is play. So we're invited to play with these names. To me this is a very playful book, though it's also very radical because it it undoes a lot of rigid thinking about divinity.

I quote Meister Eckhart, the great 14th century mystic who said, "I pray God to rid me of God." You know, so if you want to be rid of an all-male God or an all-old God or and punitive father God, who's a punishing God and so forth, you know, this is one way to do it, kind of cleanse your soul and your mind from bad images of divinity. And the fact is that we do get these bad images. They come to us just like other toxins in the air. You know, you can take in bad theology just like you can take in bad water and air.

SUSIE: So I'm wondering, do you feel that it's possible to kind of relinquish the names of God that we've had, maybe up until now. I mean, I'm thinking about my own upbringing, where in a Catholic Baptist household there was even argument over the whole idea of Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit. I mean, even within Christianity there's been arguments about different names given. I mean for me, it felt good to sort of have a releasing, almost like a relinquishing of that so that I could bring in new ideas.

MATTHEW: Definitely, I mention that in the introduction, that you outgrow, we outgrow...you know many people as a child have an image of God as Santa Claus, up north someplace. Yeah, who's going to give us things that we ask for, you know. Of course, as we evolve, as we mature, it's important to move beyond childish understandings of the divine, not childlike, you know. I think that bringing the mystic alive in us isn't that bringing the child alive in us as adults. And so there is this playfulness that we should treasure and keep alive as you grow older and it should apply to our spirituality for sure.

But definitely we want to outgrow and move beyond, like I said, for example, the all-patriarchal God. And so there's a whole section here on the divine feminine. The feminine names for God, God is Dao, for example. Or God is Gaia, the Earth. And God is the Black Madonna, these archetypes of the divine feminine are very important to balance in both men and women and awareness of the sacredness of the masculine on the one hand and of the divine feminine. And when this happens in us personally, then we'll start making institutions, including education and politics and economics and religion, that mirror this kind of balance.

Currently, for example, I think our educational system is extremely patriarchal. It leaves out intuition. Einstein complained about that. He said values don't come from the intellect they come from intuition, but we live in a society that honors the intellect and has forgotten intuition. And the he said, I abhor American education for this very reason, that is value free.

Because real values come from intuition. And so I think it's real important to celebrate the diverse gender sides to divinity. At the same time, that we of course also respect what the last part of the book is about, which is the experience that God has no name at all, Meister Eckhart said.

SUSIE: I'm so glad that you're bringing that one up, because this was a whole new concept that I had not really heard of before, this idea of names for the God without a name. Is it pronounced apophatic Divinity?

MATTHEW: That's right.

SUSIE: I'd actually not heard of that word before. Can you explain that to us? Because that nine of the 89 names that you include in the book fall under this category.

MATTHEW: Right. Well, it's a Greek word. Apophatic means no light, it's in the darkness. The great mystery is the great mystery. It's God is silence and the great mystic Meister Eckhart says God is superessential darkness who has no name and will never be given a name. So that's about respecting the the mystery of divinity. And of course, the Jewish tradition does that by forbidding people actually to write or even to speak the divine name on many occasions. So that kind of respect for the apathetic divinity is lost in our culture. We stamp "In God We Trust" on our dollars and coins.

SUSIE: Oh my gosh, yes. I hadn't thought about that.

MATTHEW: Yeah, and so again, that's really abusing the divine name. It's using and exploiting it. So I end the book with these nine ways of talking about the God without a name. And this too is important, that silence is such an important part of our relationship to divinity. And even awe which opens up our hearts to divinity. Awe leads you to silence, which is beyond words really. This is one reason why I tell my students that there are two ways to respond to a mystical experience. One is silence and the second language is art. So we put it into music and dance and theater and film and so forth. Our experiences of the deepest dimensions of life.

And God is Life is another name for God, which I like very much, and it's found in many mystics, including Leo Tolstoy. He said that the God is life. But so yeah, I think all this helps us to enrich our theologies and invites us to undergo these experiences and trust them and come up with our naming of the divine.

SUSIE: And one of the names that you had in there is Kali also, right?

MATTHEW: Kali, yes.

SUSIE: I've viewed that one as almost, not the opposite of life, but a little bit more of a destructive force. Can you explain that one a little bit?

MATTHEW: Sure. Well, I have God as Kali. I also have God as a power of destruction and God as chaos. I have another one here, I call God a Wilderness and Destroyer. Yes, because divinity is about this power and the power we see in the universe.

For example, the universe began, by 700,000 years there was a fireball. A fireball was not a pleasant place to be. It was a wild place to be. But there was cooked the hydrogen atoms and nitrogen atoms that made the galaxies possible and everything that's followed since. So, you know, you don't want to be on the scene when the fireball happens, it's too hot and uncomfortable, but we're glad for the results. It's just like cooking anything else, you know, you don't get in the oven with what you're cooking, but you're glad somethings in there that comes out smelling good and tasting good.

So, that we go ahead and leave the wildness out of divinity is a danger in our culture; that we domesticated the divine. And in fact, there's a wildness about divinity. Thomas. Berry says there's a wildness about all creativity. All creativity is evoked from wildness. He talks about how the whale and the bird, you know seeking its food and seeking its home, its place to nest and so all this is creativity. And just like poets and dancers and writers and musicians who are two legged, we're all involved this vast scene of wildness. Well, it seems to me then, that we can clearly say that the universe is wild and therefore divinity is wild. And now we know, speaking of wild, that the universe is two trillion galaxies big. That is wild.

SUSIE: That is very wild!

MATTHEW: It's beyond any imagination. I was told by a scientist, what that means, because each galaxy has hundreds of billions of stars, it means that there are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on all the beaches on Earth. That's how big the universe is. Think of that. And a star is huge, the sun is a star, it's huge.

SUSIE: Exactly and this conversation is so huge, I mean, we're out of time. I wish we had more time. I encourage everyone who's been listening to this conversation with Rev. Matthew Fox to check out his new book. It's called Naming the Unnamable: 89 Wonderful and Useful Names for God... Including the Unnameable God. You can check him out at matthewfox.org. Thank you so much for being on the show today. I really love this episode and especially the wilderness part.

MATTHEW: Well, thank you Susie, and thanks for your excellent questions.

SUSIE: And this show will be on my website as a podcast with a transcript and that's at radiantriverwellness.com. This is Susie Hindle Kher and you've been listening to Radiantly You. Please tune in next Wednesday morning when I'm talking to Alexia Vernon about how to step into your moxie. Until then have a radiant week.