

“What is Your Name?”: Names Comparatively Compelled in Christian and Buddhist Texts

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Abstract

This paper addresses a significant lacuna in comparative theological studies by reading Christian and Buddhist texts which feature empowered names through the political hermeneutical lens of Louis Althusser’s interpellation theory. While this theory has typically been used to understand how hegemonic systems subjectify individuals, this paper illustrates how interpellation also provides a compelling way to account for the dynamics of manipulation in texts where names and naming are used to compel certain behavior. Specifically, the paper examines the exorcistic battle between Legion and Jesus in Mark 5 and a tenth-century collection of spells featuring the Buddhist deity Bhṛkuṭī. The paper analyzes each document in light of both Althusser’s theory and the other text in order to show why and how onomastic obtainment plays such a powerful role: how obtaining and wielding another’s name effectively interpellates the other, securing that figure (that is, Legion, Bhṛkuṭī) within an ideology of relative weakness vis-à-vis the speaker. Through this comparative analysis, this article identifies both the artifacts’ commonalities with respect to interpellation, as well as the unique aspects of their respective presentations. In so doing, this comparative discussion underscores complementary, yet divergent, ways ancient texts demonstrate Althusser’s modern theory.

Keywords

interpellation, hermeneutics, names, Legion, Jesus, Bhṛkuṭī, Althusser, Buddhism, Christianity

The conviction that obtaining the name of another grants one some degree of power over that figure is ubiquitously attested in the records of societies stretching back millennia. Studies on the existence of this phenomenon abound.¹ However, instead of simply acknowledging *that* personal names bear a certain power, this paper seeks to move beyond such baseline acknowledgment in order to explicate one way of accounting for *how* and *why* this capacity exists. Citing the theory of interpellation articulated by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, this paper will offer

¹ A classic (though problematic) example of such a study being: James Frazer, “Tabooed Words,” in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, Abridged ed. (New York: Penguin, 1996), 294–315.

an Althusserian analysis of the contestation and manipulation of proper names in two diverse texts: the famous exorcistic battle between Jesus and Legion in the Gospel of Mark (5:1–13) and a tenth-century collection of Tibetan spells which invoke the goddess Bhṛkuṭī.²

Interpellation Summarized

Summarized briefly, Louis Althusser's interpellation theory provides a way of explaining how individuals accept upon themselves positions or roles within power structures—roles imbricated within Althusser's notion of ideologies³—that are not favorable to the individuals themselves. For example, take Althusser's most famous example: a policeman “hailing” an individual in public.⁴ When the policeman says “Hey, you there!,” and the hailed person turns around in response, the individual through her very responding becomes a subject. Moreover, in the act of turning, that subjectified individual also acknowledges as “real” the “ideology” of which both the policeman and now she are a part, an ideology about authority, law, individuals, rights, and a host of other variables that, through the act of turning, become acknowledged and accepted.

Interpellation in Mark 5 and the Spells of Bhṛkuṭī⁵

However, the relevance of Althusser's interpellation is not restricted only to individuals within contemporary political structures. In fact, this framework offers an insightful way to account for overlooked power dynamics in ancient texts, especially those in which proper names (such as the names of gods, spirits, and other divinities) are requested and then invoked to access divine power. While a plethora of such examples could be cited, let me draw our attention to just two examples from diverse contexts: Jesus' acquisition and then use of Legion's name in Mark 5, and the invocation of the name of the goddess Bhṛkuṭī, as prescribed by a tenth-century Tibetan spellbook.

In Mark 5, names are invoked to control others' behavior in two ways: direct address or invocation (Legion/man's question to Jesus in 5:7); and interpellation à la Althusser (Jesus'

² This paper draws upon two recent studies: one which interprets Mark 5 through Althusser's interpellative hermeneutic, and another which analyzes the Bhṛkuṭī spell collection alongside certain early Christian texts in conversation with posthumanist philosophies. See: Joseph L. Kimmel, “Coercive Names: Interpreting Mark 5:1–13 with Althusser's ‘Interpellation,’” *Biblical Interpretation* 31 (2023): 356–73; idem, “Agentive Names and Posthuman Ontologies: Onomastic Invocations of the ‘More-than-Human’ in Early Christian and Medieval Tibetan Artifacts,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, forthcoming.

³ For Althusser, an ideology is the constructed reality in which one lives, a world based on the “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation,” in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster [New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001], 85–126, at 109.) Ideologies, in other words, mark the way in which we believe the world must work, including our role(s) in that world. These beliefs are both solidified and expressed through seemingly mundane practices, such as Althusser's paradigmatic example of “hailing” and “being hailed.”

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The following analysis of Mark 5 draws upon my previously published article, Kimmel, “Coercive Names.” The other comparand, the Bhṛkuṭī spell collection, is discussed alongside Acts 16 in Kimmel, “Agentive Names and Posthuman Ontologies.”

question to Legion in 5:9). First, names first coerce via Legion’s invocation of Jesus’ name (5:7). In this verse, Legion provocatively asks and commands Jesus: “What have you to do with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torture me.” Here, as in Mark 1:24, a spirit engaged in exorcistic battle with Jesus attempts to gain the upper hand by wielding Jesus’ name against the exorcist. As Adela Yarbro Collins observes in her commentary on this verse, “[Legion] attempts to control Jesus. . . by pronouncing his name and demonstrating that he knows Jesus’ identity.”⁶ Significantly, Legion pairs this invocation with both a title of Jesus (“son of the Most High God”; υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου [*uie tou theou tou upsistou*]) and an adjuration that invokes God (that is, made “by God”; τὸν θεόν [*ton theon*]).⁷

Ultimately, Legion’s multipronged vocal barrage of Jesus is successful: through invocation, adjuration, and, eventually, begging, Legion compels Jesus to obey the spirit’s wish to enter the herd of swine rather than being removed from the area. We thus see in Legion’s success an example of the value—and power—of knowing another’s name and knowing how to use it. In this context of spirits and humans (and spirits in humans), names “do” things. Under certain conditions, a name can be brandished by a spirit against a human to secure a specific, desired outcome.

Second, just as Jesus’ name works effectively when invoked by Legion, so too does the utterance of Legion’s name by Jesus produce powerful outcomes. After Legion’s initial effort in v. 7 to control Jesus’ conduct, Jesus then responds in v. 9 with his own attempt to manipulate Legion by wielding the spirit’s name. Significantly, this onomastic power play occurs not via invocation (as in v. 7), but rather through a two-part process that encompasses: a) subjectification of Legion through forced self-naming (echoing Althusser’s interpellation), followed by b) Jesus’ ability to utilize Legion’s name in order to compel the spirit to behave in certain ways.

First, after absorbing the Legion’s adjuration against him in v. 7, Jesus then counterattacks in v. 9 with a seemingly harmless question: “What is your name?” This question, however, though seemingly innocuous, marks a crucial turning point in the battle and reveals the value of name-based knowledge: before Jesus’ question, Legion is able to challenge Jesus boldly, even adjuring him “by God” to act in certain ways, but after Jesus obtains its name, Legion can do nothing before Jesus but beg (5:10).

Why is Jesus’ question to Legion about its name so significant? How does the question, followed by Legion’s answer, so utterly attenuate the spirit’s power? More generally, what does this scene suggest about names’ value, power, and function? While scholars regularly describe the

⁶ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 268. Note that in the Matthean and Lukan parallels of this pericope, while Luke portrays Legion uttering *exactly* the same combination of name and title to address Jesus as in Mark’s text, Matthew presents two demoniacs referring to Jesus simply as “Son of God” (υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ [*uie tou theou*]) in 8:29: “What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torture us before the [proper] time?” (Τί ἡμῖν καὶ σοί, υἱὲ τοῦ θεοῦ; ἦλθες ὧδε πρὸ καιροῦ βασανίσαι ἡμᾶς; [*ti emin soi, uie tou theou? Elthes ode pro kairou basanisai emas?*]).

⁷ In a context where personal names channel power, revelation of Jesus’ identity through Legion’s multipronged approach threatens to unmask this power source, opening Jesus to potential manipulation by those who want to harness his power for their own ends. Jesus’ desire to avoid such manipulation offers one way to account for his insistence that others—whether humans or demons—not reveal who he is (see, for example, “be quiet!” [Φιμώθητι [*Phimōthēti*]] in 1:25; also, 1:44, 8:30).

onomastic question as an “exorcistic technique,”⁸ much less work has been done on *how* this question increases the interrogator’s exorcistic authority. In addressing this lacuna, the following paragraphs will interpret the events of 5:9 through a two-part process: First, Jesus’ question forces Legion to subjectify itself by the spirit’s own act of response. This self-subjectification, according to Althusser, involves locating oneself in an “ideology” in which one’s position vis-à-vis one’s interlocutor is inferior. Second, the forced revelation of Legion’s name by the spirit itself then supplies Jesus with even greater power over the spirit, which Jesus can wield in order to compel Legion to behave in certain ways.

In the first part of this process, Jesus’ deceptively simple question to Legion backs the spirit into a very precarious position, because even the very act of replying to the question causes Legion to self-subjectify. That is, by responding to Jesus, Legion accepts its status as a “subject” in an ideology in which Jesus is more powerful than itself. In addition, through the act of replying, Legion effectively accepts Jesus’ “right” to question it and to elicit the very personal information of its name. By giving up this valuable data, Legion in effect acknowledges Jesus’ authority over itself, as well as its subservient position relative to Jesus. This scene parallels Althusser’s example of a policeman “hailing” an individual in public, in that Legion’s decision to answer Jesus’ question accomplishes a very similar result: namely, that Legion’s response makes the spirit into a subject within the ideology in which Jesus is a powerful exorcist and the spirit is a relatively weaker, more vulnerable being.

Second, after Legion thus self-subjectifies, the spirit further weakens its position before the exorcist by revealing its name. If the act of replying were not damaging enough, the specific information provided by Legion in its response utterly undermines any hope it might have had of resisting Jesus, because now that Jesus’ exorcistic arsenal has been enhanced with knowledge of Legion’s proper name, he has all the more ability to order the spirit by name to behave as Jesus desires. Mark, however, does not depict Jesus wielding this knowledge, but instead comically portrays Legion acknowledging that at this point all hope is lost: instead of trying to maintain its battle with Jesus, Legion simply capitulates to Jesus’ increasingly strong position. Knowing that once the exorcist knows its name, any hope of success is lost, Legion simply resorts to humiliated and earnest begging (5:10: παρεκάλει αὐτὸν πολλὰ [*parekalei auton polla*]; “he/it begged him earnestly”).

Thus, while Mark’s depiction of Legion’s and Jesus’ respective use of the other’s name differs, both cases evidence a link between names and authority: for example, being able to order another figure via their proper name to act in certain ways. More specifically, Mark does not portray how Legion came to know Jesus’ name, but instead centers on Legion’s brandishing of this name in battle against the exorcist. By contrast, Jesus is depicted acquiring knowledge of Legion’s name but is not explicitly shown using it. Instead, the power Jesus gains via his acquisition of Legion’s name is indicated implicitly through Legion’s desperate, humiliating

⁸ Collins notes simply, for example: “Asking a demon to reveal his [*sic*] name is a typical exorcistic technique.” Similarly, in his classic article on exorcistic methods, Campbell Bonner offers two rather bland explanations for why an exorcist would demand a spirit’s name: either to ensure that a spirit actually was present within a disturbed individual and/or to gain greater control over the maleficent spirit. How the acquisition of a name would provide such greater control is not discussed, however. See: Collins, *Mark*, 268; Campbell Bonner, “The Technique of Exorcism,” *HTR* 36 (1) (1943): 39–49.

begging. In both cases, however, Mark expresses a powerful connection between names and authority in an ontological context of humans relating with spirits.

In the language of Althusser, Mark 5 displays to its reader how interpellation occurs through Legion’s willing response to Jesus’ question about its name. As soon as Legion responds, the spirit has submitted itself to the ideology in which, among other things, Jesus has a right to question it. Through his question, Jesus—Althusser’s policeman—has essentially called “Hey, you there!” to Legion, and through its reply, the spirit has turned towards the summoning officer and thereby subjected itself to an ideology in which its position vis-à-vis Jesus is one of inferiority and weakness.⁹

A similar interpellative dynamic can be seen in another text—one from a very different time and place—in which proper names are similarly invoked to compel particular actions. In the middle of the 10th century, someone living near the Silk Road trading site of Dunhuang decided to create a compendium of useful spells. These spells encompass a wide array of not only objectives—from healing to rain production to invisibility—but also methods, including a significant number whose successful execution depends upon the utterance of a specific, revered name. The text therefore reflects a similar concern as Mark 5 around threatening, non-human beings.¹⁰ For example, one section of this spellbook promises that: “By that mantra, every untamed god, yaksha, and demon will be subdued, and there will not be even one who does not listen... This is the mantra: *Om bur kur ti*.”¹¹

Later this same mantra is linked to a host of other benefits, stating: “If you want to enslave and force into subjection all evil spirits, perform seven times the ‘essence of reality’ *mudrā* and the mantra [of *Bhṛkuṭī*]. If you repeat the mantra seven times, the untamed and evil demons dwelling in this world will come as a servant of the ritual practitioner [*vidyādhara*].”¹² Moreover:

[For] pacifying the harmful intent of wild people, poisonous serpents, [and] untamed poison, etc., [go to] their house or whatever living place [e.g., snake’s lair] and make a

⁹ This pattern of verbal sparring, a literal “war of words,” between demon and exorcist can be traced from its appearance here in Mark out in time through noncanonical early Christian literature (for example, Acts of Peter 10–11) into Patristic texts, such as Evagrius’ *Antirrhētikos*. See: David Brakke, trans., *Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons* [*Antirrhētikos*], by Evagrius of Pontus (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

¹⁰ I am certainly not asserting that a first-century Christian author and a tenth-century Tibetan Buddhist one held matching conceptions of the “demonic,” but rather that each text evidences a concern about, as well as a name-centered method of controlling, beings whose description in both contexts shares certain traits: non-human, generally malevolent, capable of entering and controlling humans, etc.

¹¹ Compare van Schaik’s translation: “When you use the following mantra, all gods, ogres, and malevolent demons will be tamed, and not a single evil spirit will remain. They will not be able to manifest, all will be pure and unpolluted, and everything will be better... This is the mantra: *Om bur kur ti*.” (Tibetan: sngags des lha dang gnod sbyin dang/ ‘dre ma rungs pa kun thul cing/ myi nyan ba gcig kyang myed de... sngags ni/ om ‘bur kur ti/ [IOL Tib J 401: 5v2-5]) (Sam van Schaik, *Buddhist Magic: Divination, Healing, and Enchantment through the Ages* [Boulder, CO: Shambhala], 136).

¹² ‘dre gdun thams cad dbang du dgug cing bkol bar ‘dod na/ de nyid kyi snying po ‘i phyag rgya dang sngags kyi lan bdun g.yab cing/ sngags lan bdun bzlas na/ ‘jig rten na gnas pa’i ‘dre ma rungs pa dang/ gdug pa de (n: ma rungs pa) rigs ‘dzin gi khol por mchi ‘o// (IOL Tib J 401: 5v5-6r1)

few recitations [of the mantra] around the door (“*ōm ‘bur kur ti*”). If [you] do [this] 108 times, harmful activity will not be possible until daybreak.¹³

These passages thus assert that the subjugation and pacification of a host of threatening forces, including demons, yakshas (a kind of potentially malevolent spirit), other humans, snakes, and even poison can be accomplished through a verbal act: uttering the divine name “*bur kur ti*” prefaced by the sacred syllable “*Ōm*.”¹⁴

This name identifies a particular female deity, Bhṛkuṭī, who appears elsewhere in Buddhist ritual literature and incantatory texts (*dhāraṇī*) found in Nepal. She occasionally is represented artistically as an attendant deity to the Buddha of compassion (Avalokiteśvara), sometimes with (or alternatively as) the Tibetan female deity Tārā.¹⁵ In this particular spellbook, while Bhṛkuṭī is not described in detail, van Schaik has observed that “the content here suggests her wrathful form, with four arms holding a renunciant’s staff, a vase, and a rosary.”¹⁶ This wrathful form is also likely due to the text’s stress on specialized training and a series of preparatory measures to be taken before actually invoking Bhṛkuṭī for one’s mundane goals. For example, the text opens with detailed instructions about how to create Bhṛkuṭī’s mandala and to summon the deity into this ritual tool. The text also specifies that Bhṛkuṭī’s mantra (*Ōm bur kur ti*) be recited one hundred thousand times before invoking this divine name to attain specific outcomes.¹⁷

Most significant for our purposes, however, is this text’s assertion that the mantric invocation of Bhṛkuṭī’s name garners access for the human speaker to Bhṛkuṭī’s divine power—a power capable of such stunning feats as the subjugation of demons and the neutralization of poison. But how is this access achieved? By what mechanism does repetitious invocation of Bhṛkuṭī’s name enable the speaker to wield the goddess’ power? Though less explicitly presented than Mark 5, the Bhṛkuṭī spell collection similarly implies an interpellative process at work under the surface of the text. This mechanism is suggested by the certainty with which the spellbook promises divine power to anyone who follows its ritual roadmap: Bhṛkuṭī, in other words, will assuredly be compelled to act by any human who follows the spell’s instructions for invoking her mantra, which at its heart, lies Bhṛkuṭī’s name.

As in Mark 5, where Jesus’ obtainment and utilization of Legion’s name places the spirit in a position of vulnerability and weakness relative to the exorcist, so too, according to the Tibetan spellbook, a human speaker’s utilization of Bhṛkuṭī’s name forces the deity into a subjugated position. In a sense, interpellation already has occurred in the spellbook, and the power accruing from this act is implied as complete: while Mark 5 shows the reader the process

¹³ *myi ma rungs pa sbrul gdug pa/ sdug ma rungs pa las bstogs pa’i [=la sogs pa’i] gnod sems zhi bar bya ba/ de dag gi khyim ‘am/ gnas khung du yang rung ste/ kha bskor la sngags tshig cung zad bgyid cing/ (ōm ‘bur kur ti zhes) lan brgya rtsa brgyad btab na/ nam zha ‘i bar du gnod par bya myi nus so/ (IOL Tib J 401: 6v2-5)*

¹⁴ Originally imported to Tibet from India, this syllable—along with Bhṛkuṭī’s Indic roots more generally—underscores the always already comparative and assimilated nature of the Tibetan rituals associated with this goddess.

¹⁵ van Schaik, *Buddhist Magic*, 135.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Such requirements ensure that one does not invoke Bhṛkuṭī casually or regard the use of her mantra flippantly. Only those willing to invest significant time, attention, and energy will be rewarded with access to the power inherent in Bhṛkuṭī’s name.

of interpellation in narrative “real time,” the spellbook suggests that this interpellation has already taken place. The spellbook (and by extension its reader) already knows the valuable information of the divine name. Moreover, the spellbook itself is the means by which the resultant power imbalance is facilitated. That is, by telling its reader the powerful information of Bhr̥kuṭī’s name and how to access its inherent power, the spellbook effectively accomplishes for the reader what Mark 5 narratively depicts. By reading the spellbook and following its instructions, a human being (like Jesus in Mark 5) obtains the powerful non-human name and attains an enviable position within a socio-political hierarchy whereby the deity (like Legion) is subjugated to the human and can be controlled in service of the human’s particular ends.

Comparative Conclusions

In addition to this difference regarding whether interpellation is depicted or implied, two other significant tensions emerge between the ancient Christian and Tibetan sources, both relating to method. First, there is a difference in the number of onomastic invocations: are repeated recitations required to access divine power (Bhr̥kuṭī spells), or is a single invocation sufficient (Mark 5)? Second, the two texts also differ in whether invocation alone channels power (Mark 5), or whether invocation must be combined with other ritual practices for a successful outcome (Bhr̥kuṭī spells). On this second point, in the Tibetan spellbook, it is not Bhr̥kuṭī’s name *alone* that channels such power. Rather, this text suggests that when her name is invoked after the enunciation of “*Om*”—and often having taken other essential steps as well (for example, performance of certain prescribed ritual gestures [*mudrā*])—the speaker then becomes empowered to alter his or her surroundings. Thus the invocation of this divine name sits in a relationship of assemblage with other critical forces, which collectively can be used to accomplish particular goals.¹⁸ This assemblaged depiction contrasts Mark 5’s presentation of Jesus’ invocation of Legion’s name working “automatically”: once interpellation is complete, and the relative power of the exorcist has been established over the spirit (à la a policeman and an interpellated citizen), the spirit must respond when summoned; no other prerequisites, processes, or ritual practices are required.

In sum, both Mark 5 and the spells of Bhr̥kuṭī evidence a similar political process of interpellation behind their depictions of the successful manipulation of non-human power by human speakers. While interpellation is more explicitly detailed in the Markan pericope, it also appears operative in the spellbook—and even is facilitated by the spellbook itself. Taken together, these two accounts of human/non-human interactions mediated by onomastic power commend Althusser’s theory of interpellation as a way of moving beyond the acknowledgment *that* names can alter reality to offer one way of explaining *how* this powerful process might occur.¹⁹ Moreover, we see

¹⁸ Put briefly, assemblage theory highlights the complexity and fluidity among factors whose convergence—not any single factor—causes subsequent outcomes. In other words, according to this theory “things happen” not due to one impetus operating in isolation, but rather because of the dynamic and ever-fluid mixtures and interactions among numerous entities. See Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (New York: Continuum, 2006). In regard to assemblages vis-a-vis comparative onomastics, see my recent dissertation: Joseph L. Kimmel, “Power in the Name: Towards a Theological Posthumanism” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2023).

¹⁹ In addition, interpellation theory can be applied to elucidate other New Testament passages which feature names and naming. This broader application in turn sparks a range of additional questions: for example, Can the power accrued via interpellation be extended to one’s followers? (See Luke 10:17.) Can such power be effectively wielded

in these ancient documents examples of how this insightful political theory can be applied in contexts beyond contemporary socio-political relations to account for the power dynamics of rituals, texts, and traditions in which the human and more-than-human interact.

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when one uses another’s name without authorization? (See Mark 9:38–40; Acts 19:13–16.) How can a powerful name’s failure to effect change be explained? (See Acts 19:13–16.)