

## Understanding the Church and its Mission: Insights from John 14.6<sup>1</sup>

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The cholera had awfully prevailed among the people of the whole district for several months and swept away hundreds and thousands of the wretched inhabitants to an awful eternity. (Revd. James Selkirk, missionary to Sri Lanka, writing in the year 1833).<sup>2</sup>

As this was the first time I had met a man of his stamp, I was dumb and felt that his religious experience was not only much earlier than mine but possessed a depth that astonished me....I never saw him again, but have always felt that he, if not a Christian, was at least not far from the Kingdom of God. (Timothy Richard, writing of a meeting with a 'devout' man, a non-Christian, in China in the early 1870s)<sup>3</sup>

Both James Selkirk and Timothy Richard were Baptist missionaries, one in Sri Lanka and the other in China. Both wrote in the middle decades of the nineteenth century at the height of British imperialism. James Selkirk, with an almost slick certainty, consigns hundreds of Śaivite Hindus in the north of Sri Lanka, victims of a pandemic, to hell. Timothy Richard, in contrast, is struck dumb because of the depth of wisdom and spiritual experience present in a non-Christian that he met soon after his arrival in China in 1870. The theological framework of both quotes is the biblical verse, John 14.6,<sup>4</sup> or more exactly, a certain propositional interpretation of John 14.6: that God's salvific action through Jesus Christ is definitive and final and that only those who accept this can be saved, through being restored into a right relationship with God.

By extension, this theology condemns all other religions as dangerously false and soteriologically impotent. This is why Selkirk can so easily assume that the cholera victims in the north of Sri Lanka have gone to hell and why Richard was so surprised to see deep spirituality in a Chinese person who did not claim to be Christian that his first thought was that he must have been a 'lost Nestorian'. With this exclusivist interpretation engraved in their hearts, evangelical Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century, with great courage,

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<sup>1</sup> An edited version of an essay written in 2004. The sources cited, therefore, are now a couple of decades old. However, they are still relevant to the current context.

<sup>2</sup> James Selkirk, *Recollections of Ceylon after a Residence of Nearly Thirteen Years* (London: Hatchard and Son, 1844), p. 304.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love: Theologians and Missionaries Encountering World Religions 1846-1914* (London: Epworth, 1995) p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> 'Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me".' (New Revised Standard Version).

risked disease and an early death in Africa and Asia in an attempt to 'save' from eternal hell at least some of those whom they believed to be imprisoned in darkness.

In the twenty-first century, this interpretation still lives and, for some, is the 'house' into which all other Christian doctrine must fit, informing Christian mission and the witness of the churches. For some other Christians, however, the exclusivist interpretation of John 14.6 is dangerously misleading, because it ignores both the holy in other religions and the possibility that God might have been at work throughout history, in all cultures, drawing people towards salvation and liberation.

The hope of some nineteenth century Christian missionaries that the rational appeal of Christianity would lead to the supplanting of other religions has not been realized, and, I would suggest, will not. Our world will remain religiously plural. At no time in history, therefore, is it more important for Christians to reflect on the meaning of verses such as John 14.6. We must ask ourselves whether Selkirk's assumptions should have any place in our current theologies and, if not, why not. We might also ask ourselves whether we are willing to learn from the experience of people such as Timothy Richard, who humbly opened themselves to the holy in people of other religions.

### **Interpreting Biblical Texts**

Christians make use of several models when interpreting the Bible. In this essay I would like to work with four, which I have inadequately called: the literalist; the contextual; the experiential; and the interrogative. All of these models place Jesus at the centre. What differs is how this is done. The literalist approach takes each word of the Bible as it stands, as the revealed Word of God. Scripture cannot err. It is its own interpreter and has one meaning. The contextual approach, drawing on the insights of historical criticism, seeks to interpret the Bible in the light of its historical and canonical contexts. The Bible is seen as a library of books, each written for a particular purpose and a particular audience. The authors' intentions and their historical contexts are hermeneutically important. What I have termed the experiential approach takes seriously the importance of the empirical, in the conviction that experience can be a source of authority, capable of helping us interpret the Bible and the tradition of the Church. Here, more emphasis is placed on reader response than the historical context within which the text was written. The interrogative approach allows radical questioning of biblical texts, even to the point of disagreeing with them. It is an approach that draws on Jewish rabbinical method, within which there can be a debate with God. Such an

approach can accept that there can be more than one reading of a text and that some questions will remain unanswered.

Each of these approaches, I would suggest, can be used to re-visit the message of verses such as John 14.6. Evaluating them will not produce a tied-up, unassailable argument but it may shed new light on the complexities present in the interpretation of verses such as John 14.6 – and, hopefully, the debate will continue.

### **The Literalist Approach**

The literalist approach suggests that there is no evading that John 14.6 has an exclusivist message. It is similar to Acts 4: 11-12: ‘There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we much be saved’. Both verses place Jesus at the centre of God’s salvific plan for the cosmos. The important question for both the literalist and those who seek other methods of interpretation is what we do with this exclusivism. Do we, for instance, hang the whole of the mission of God through Christ on verses such as these? Do we read them as a judgement on all religions other than Christianity? Or do we look to theologians who have grappled with these verses from an exclusivist perspective?

One theologian who embraced the exclusivist nature of these verses whilst maintaining a positive evaluation of other religions was the Belgian Jesuit theologian, Jacques Dupuis (1923-2004). He did this through arguing that the death and resurrection of Jesus was ‘constitutive’ within God’s ‘unique, divine plan for humanity’ but not final. In other words, it was essential to God’s plan but did ‘not exhaust the power of the Word of God’. Moreover, it was limited, because Jesus of Nazareth was also totally human. Outside of the events of first century Palestine, Dupuis argued, God, through his Word and the universal action of the Spirit, was and remains active within the whole of the religious history of humankind, far beyond the boundaries of Christianity. Salvific truth could, therefore, be found in other religions. His was a high Christology that sought an ‘inclusive pluralism’, namely a stance that held together the universal significance of the Christ event and the salvific possibilities of other religions, ‘within the one manifold plan of God for humankind’.

The implication for the Church’s mission that Dupuis drew out from this was that we reject insights into truth from other religions at our peril. For they may represent a word from God for us. Dupuis, therefore, encouraged a sense of humility in the face of the universal reach and power of God’s spirit. His interpretation was not officially accepted by the Roman

Catholic Church but it has helped many hold together the exclusivism of John 14.6 with a trinitarian theology that recognizes the action of God and the Holy Spirit beyond the life of the historical Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Contextual Approach**

The contextual approach throws complexity into the reading of John 14.6, by placing the verse in several overlapping contexts. First, there is the inner dynamic of the chapter within which the verse is found. Second, there is the context of the gospel of John as a whole, in its historical setting, conditioned by Christian identity-formation in the first century CE. Third, there is the relationship between the gospel of John and the three synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke. Lastly, there is the relationship between the gospel of John and the whole of the Bible. Each of these contexts offers different insights. Here, I will only point to a few lines of exploration, within the first two of these contexts.

If we examine the chapter within which John 14.6 comes, it becomes apparent that Jesus's words arose in a pastoral situation, within the intimacy of a group of friends: Jesus and his twelve disciples. They do not form part of a sermon and are not said to the general public. They do not mention any other religion or religious practice, or God's relationship with people outside the Jewish family of faith. I would suggest that imagination is needed here to enter the intimate situation described, in which Jesus reassures his closest friends that he has prepared a place for them and that their knowledge of him will help them to know the path to that place. If this is done, the verse loses some of the interreligious connotations that some Christians associate with it and also some of its propositional weight. For an intimate talk between teacher and disciple is a very different context from a theological treatise or a public sermon. In this light, to read into the verse a theology that denies that God has a relationship with people of other religions is, I would argue, to over read the verse.

Widening the context to the whole of John's gospel, those seeking a positive relationship with people of other religions have read John 14. 6 in the light of the prologue: John 1: 1-18. The prologue equates Jesus with the pre-existent 'Word' that is with God and is God, a 'Word' that has been active throughout history, enlightening all humanity. In other words, the theological context into which John places his gospel is that Jesus embodied a light that had been present in the cosmos since its inception. Some Christian theologians, Kenneth

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Dupuis S.J., Phillip Berryman transl. *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2002).

Cracknell (1935-2022) for instance, have, therefore, argued that to proclaim Jesus as the ‘Way’ need not preclude all that is good in other religions, for the ‘Way’ is the ‘Word’, which has been with God and within God’s world from the beginning. When holiness is found in other religions, Christians can, therefore, interpret this as the presence of the ‘Word’, the ‘Logos’ within these religions.<sup>6</sup> This can even be applied to a further verse in John’s gospel, which appears to be exclusivist: ‘Those who believe in him [the Son] are not condemned; but those who do not believe in him are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God’ (John 3.18). If the ‘Son’ is the ‘Word’, it is those who reject the qualities of God, the Word that is with God, who are condemned.

There are dangers, however, in this methodology. Taking into account the whole gospel of John is not about extracting yet more verses from their setting but in probing the context in which the whole gospel was written and the purpose for which it was written. Wesley Ariarajah has commented admirably on this in his contribution to this online collection. He presents John as interpreter of the meaning of Jesus to already committed, believing communities, and points to the differences between John’s presentations and those of Mark, Matthew and Luke. Within this perspective, John 14.6 becomes a ‘celebration of the Christian faith’ rather than a judgement on other religious paths. It becomes an almost mystical appreciation of religious meaning, in the context of intra-religious controversy, namely controversy within the Jewish community, some of whom had become Christians. Other religions do not come into its framework.

A reading of the Bible that emphasizes this kind of contextual analysis can never reach finality. We cannot, from our vantage point of the twenty-first century, re-create the first century CE. As post-modernism has taught us, our attempts to do this will always be conditioned by who we are and what we seek. We may need to accept that there are nuances present in the New Testament that we, with our time-bound consciousness, will not be able to recover. For me, this is a convincing reason to avoid dogmatic interpretations, particularly those that relate to religious communities that had not even arisen at the time of Jesus, such as Islam, Sikhism and the Baha’i faith. Our Christian mission will not be more effective by greater dogmatism but by greater honesty and humility.

## **Bringing in Experience**

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<sup>6</sup> See Kenneth Cracknell, *In Good and Generous Faith: Christian Responses to Religious Pluralism* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2005).

The need for less dogmatism in our reading of the Bible is also a good reason for us to use our experience of other religions, when we come to interpreting biblical passages that have been seen to relate to them. The Protestant tradition has sometimes been caricatured as insisting on scripture as the sole source of religious authority (*sola scriptura*), in contrast to the reliance on ecclesial authority in the Roman Catholic tradition. However, the Christian religious landscape has never been as simple as that. Although the Protestant churches have always maintained that scripture can act as judge over ecclesial authority, the Church of England, for instance, has also recognized tradition and reason as valid sources of authority. To these, John Wesley, founder of the Wesleyan Methodist tradition, added experience, namely each individual's personal experience of salvation. To stress the importance of experience, of the empirical, is, therefore, not alien to Christian traditions.

Timothy Richard, whom I quoted at the beginning, was led through experience of holiness in non-Christian Chinese to question the exclusivist theology he had brought to China as a Baptist missionary. He was not alone. Kenneth Cracknell's book, *Justice, Courtesy and Love*, charts the path taken by eight missionaries, including Richard, whose appreciation of the Christian message was transformed through their experience of religious others. For each of them, experience led them to re-read the gospels to find affirmation rather than condemnation of other religions.<sup>7</sup> W. John Young's study of Edwin W. Smith, missionary in Africa, is also relevant in its portrayal of Smith as someone, who, through experience, was led to affirm African culture and religion.<sup>8</sup>

In the west today, we do not have to travel far to experience other religions. The legacy of colonialism, the mobility of labour, the movement of refugees and asylum seekers, and the conversion of westerners to religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam mean that people of all major religions are our neighbours. Encounter with people of other religions, however, does not automatically lead to theological reassessment. It all depends on what we bring to the experience and exactly what is experienced. The symbols and rituals of other religions can alienate as well as attract. For the religions of the world are different and Christians will find points of agreement and disagreement when comparing what they believe and practice with other religions. Yet, the experience of most Christians who have friends within other religious traditions or who have been guests at a synagogue, mosque, temple or gurdwara is that they have come face-to-face with that which speaks of God, goodness or the

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<sup>7</sup> See Cracknell, *Justice, Courtesy and Love*: pp. 107-180.

<sup>8</sup> W. John Young, *The Quiet Wise Spirit: Edwin W. Smith 1976-1957 and Africa* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2002).

holy. Such experience has sometimes challenged their theology, opening them to new readings of verses such as John 14.6. For if awareness of God and holy living are manifestly present in people within other religious traditions, if what Christians call the Christ-like is present, then Christian theology must take account of this. If it does not, then Christians are guilty of bearing false witness against other religions and misrepresenting the God we believe in.

### **Interrogating the Bible**

The need to question our theology in the light of experience leads to my fourth hermeneutical model: the interrogative. For me, this model has been influenced by my encounter with Jewish traditions. In my dialogue with Jewish people over many years, I have been struck by the extent to which Jewish traditions appreciate the necessity of questioning the Bible. For instance, when I was interviewing fifteen people from five faiths for a CD resource pack on other faiths called *The Life We Share*, one of the Jewish speakers, Dr Edward Kessler, stressed that Jews, from a young age, are encouraged to question the Bible and to leave some questions unanswered. He continued:

I think personally that religion should be preaching more confusion than clarity. One of the great dangers is that when we preach clarity we preach certainty...and that has led to such chaos and abuse. Of course, there are certain things we must be certain about such as belief in God, such as belief in some kind of meaning. But it is very important that people should question that certainty. I say to my MA students, 'I want you to come out at the end of the year with the ability to ask difficult questions. I don't want answers. I expect you to ask honest, difficult questions'.<sup>9</sup>

Another instance was during a conference that took place some years ago organised by the Council of Christians and Jews on theologies of the land in Israel/Palestine. Rabbi Jonathan Gorsky, when asked about some of the violent texts in the Hebrew Bible, admitted that this was a troubling question. However, he went on, 'We are permitted to ask questions of God. We are permitted to challenge'. He mentioned a rabbinical story of Noah challenging God about God's decision to flood the earth, with Noah taking the side of the victims. The story shows God asking Noah why he had not argued in this way before the flood.

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Harris ed. *The Life We Share*, published by the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Methodist Church, 2003.

The rabbinical tradition of rigorous questioning has rarely been appropriated by Christians. Wrestling with God, challenging God to explain God's self, or putting one's case before God have not featured much in Christian hermeneutics. Should it? I would suggest that a dose of questioning could take the pressure off the controversy surrounding John 14.6. To see that we, as children of God, can use our reason and our experience to question the meaning of scripture, even to the point of asking whether scripture has got it right, can be liberating.

Speaking personally, I have often laid before God my own experience of other religions. I have offered to God the wisdom I have gained from them about holy living. I have also said before God that, if John 14.6 should mean that the people of other religions from whom I have learnt so much are destined for hell, then I would rather be with them than in a heaven that excluded their goodness, a stance I am not alone in taking.<sup>10</sup> Has God responded? He has responded in many and various ways and none of them has precluded the need to continue struggling and questioning. For there are no easy answers here.

### **Implications for Mission**

As Christians, we are called to witness to what we believe. We are called to tell our story and also to walk our talk, to live what we believe. The key question is how. Throughout this short essay, I have mentioned what I see as ways forward: the need for a proper humility in the face of what God might be trying to teach us through other religions; the avoidance of a dogmatism that refuses to take into account our experience of other religions; and a willingness to struggle with and question the meaning of scriptural passages such as John 14.6.

I can imagine some readers asking: Where is the robustness in this? Where is the certainty of faith? I can only speak personally here. The message of Christianity, for me, concerns the overflowing grace and love of God, shown in Jesus. It also concerns the Reign of God, already present but also yet to come, and the call to all humanity to defeat the greed and love of self that hinders God's Reign. There is robustness in this message and I would suggest that it is a robustness that does not preclude good relationships with people within other religions.

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<sup>10</sup> S. Wesley Ariarajah voices something similar at the beginning of his book, *Not Without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1999). He describes his struggle when, as a young person, he was told by some Christians that his Hindu neighbours would go to hell: 'At that time I could not make any theological sense of the problem; nor did I have the tools to do so. But I "felt", somewhere deep down, that it would be unfair on the part of God to receive us, the Christian family, into heaven and send our next-door Hindu neighbours to hell. It was inconceivable to me; it was clearly unfair. I wouldn't want to be in a heaven where our neighbours were not' (p. 4).

On the contrary, it opens the door to dialogue about the meaning of life and to the sharing of wisdoms. It enables collaboration with people of all religions and none, who want to see an end to greed, materialism and selfishness in our world.

In conclusion, I can think of no better qualities to govern this process than those suggested by Kenneth Cracknell, drawing on one of the missionaries he studied: justice, courtesy and love. The demands of justice mean that we will not bear false witness against our neighbours of other religions by misrepresenting what they believe and practise. Courtesy invites us to listen to what those within other religions can teach us. It will also prevent us from forcing our views on others or from using any sort of coercion. Love enables us to tell our story with sensitivity and conviction. It helps us to make friendships that will transcend religious barriers. It helps us to see what many of Christians have missed for too long: that there is more that unites people of different religions than separates them.