

Way, Truth, Life as Holy Anarchy

IFTAG Reflection on Jn 14.6

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A personal introduction

I confess, part of my response to John 14.6 is a 'gut' reaction: the verse bewilders me. Or perhaps it's not necessarily the verse itself, but what it has come to represent. After all, my church background is not generally one in which a single verse is used to resolve a complex problem. When faced with something as intricate as religious diversity and whether or not Christians may presume 'other religions' to be 'valid', I would tend to seek out how a variety of verses, a range of stories, a mix of insights may shed light on the question – and some of them may not be the usual suspects, because all sorts of stories can tangentially touch on what salvation consists of and who it is for. (For example, in my book *Holy Anarchy* (p.191), I explored Jesus' words to Zacchaeus, 'Today salvation has come to this house', to consider how salvation in the context of economic corruption and reparation may relate to religious diversity.) After all, the question of salvation and the religions has many different dimensions – how do we decide what a valid religion is? How should we measure them? Can they be lumped together in any case? And how do the range of biblical insights relate to the issue? The effect of this is to recognise, even in relation to a single verse, that there may be both some connections between it and the question at hand, and some difficulties in making those connections.

So, on the one hand, I hear Jesus saying, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me', which raises a variety of questions and opens up rich conversation on so many levels – about the nature of the text, the nature of the community that John was writing for, and how those statements can reach across time to respond to a very specific question, 'Are other religions valid or not?' – and the conclusion of my 'gut' is that a neat conclusion is not really possible, let alone appropriate, because the issue is far more complex than can be resolved by one verse in its own particular context. On the other hand, I hear some other Christians saying that this verse ends the conversation about the status of other religions – as though nothing more needs to be said, because it gives us our unambiguous answer – and I am truly bewildered. How can we hear this verse in such different ways? But I realise that what is going on is not simply about the single verse – it is about what we bring to it, and the communal context which informs how we interpret it.

The point is: my 'gut' is connected to other parts of me and my social world. I will return to this embodied nature of the issue later on. So, too, other people's gut reactions are also connected to other parts of them in their social worlds. If some people's faith is nourished in environments in which it makes perfect sense to find definitive answers in scripture, and that the nature of God's truth is seen as necessarily giving clarity in a messy and overwhelming world, then of course John 14.6 will be encountered as that sort of gift – a giver of clarity, certainty, assurance; and consequently the end of the conversation. Whereas, for me, such a verse simply cannot end the conversation; rather, it feeds conversation and gives further trails to follow as the diverse community of interpreters weaves a tapestry of meaning – a tapestry in which there is room for open-ended questioning, bewilderment and wrestling. In fact, as I will show, I do not conceive of God as the bringer of certainty, because faith

is not that kind of truth, a truth marked by closure, but is such presence with us in the midst of our messy, open-ended living and believing. Rather than bringing 'order' to a disordered world, by contrast I suggest that God brings something more like 'anarchy' in a world which is often too ordered. This shapes not only my gut reaction, but my attempt at a reasoned argument too, before I return to the body as a whole.

What I will not say

There are some things I would like to elaborate with regards to our engagement with John 14.6, but I will instead say them only briefly. First, that when many Christians respond instinctively to the verse, as though it closes the conversation, it would be good to acknowledge that they too are bringing extra things to the verse which are not said. Namely, the verse says nothing about the particular beliefs which are required of people, if they are to benefit from coming 'through' Jesus to God the Father. It only says that Jesus is the one *through which* people must come.

It is important to recognise that there are two different ways in which Christians can take this, at face value: for those who may be identified as 'exclusivist', this means that people must consciously and explicitly believe in Jesus if they are to be saved; but for others, who may be identified as 'inclusivist', this verse allows for people in other religions also being saved, without explicit faith in Jesus, because such Christians affirm that Jesus is still the one who makes it possible for all people to enter salvation, whether or not other people know it. God's grace through Christ, as demonstrated on the cross, is such that it overflows throughout creation, regardless of the correctness of belief. In fact, because the verse is silent about any requirement of particular beliefs, this second interpretation is more authentic to the verse: it is simply Jesus' role, as the door-opener, which is affirmed, not whether people must believe certain things about him.

When people use it as though the verse is absolutely exclusive, only giving access to people who believe particular things about Jesus, they have imported extra things into the verse. They have converted it into a verse which actually says, 'No one comes to the Father except those who believe in my incarnation, atoning death, bodily resurrection and future return.' Of course, different Christians will argue over the particular details in the beliefs that are required – but that is the point; they are adding assumptions to fill the verse's silence. Whereas, for inclusivists, the verse remains true – in the sense that Jesus is the one who kicks the door down, giving access to God's saving presence – but without specifying what any individual must believe; they can simply benefit from the opened door, without knowing the details of how it was opened. While the conversation in John 14 does refer to Jesus saying 'Believe in me', again it does not say what this means. In any case, it is verse 6 which is used as though it resolves the question of religious diversity, but it does not. (In fact, as others have said, several religions did not even exist at this point, including Islam, Sikhism, Bahai.)

The second thing I am not going to say, is perhaps more controversial, but it is important for Christians to understand that we do not 'possess' scripture; the Bible is a public text which can be interpreted by people in other traditions. Obviously we will have questions to ask when someone in another tradition interprets Christian scripture, but at the very least, their interpretations are likely to make us stop and ask whether our own interpretations can really end the conversation. Perhaps, instead, their interpretations will help us to explore the nature of sacred text, the connections and differences between one tradition and another, and how conversational our theology must be.

In that light, for example, we might be surprised to encounter the real possibility of Hindu interpretations which can affirm this verse. For a Hindu may well direct us to the prologue of John's Gospel which affirms that it is the Word who became flesh in Jesus; that is to say, the pre-existent divine reality, ever present and ever true, became embodied in Jesus of Nazareth – and many Hindus

(though not all) would agree. After all, God in Hindu thought is certainly the sort of God who does not remain transcendent but engages in immanence in the midst of human life. For many of them, Jesus can therefore be revered as an appearance of the divine amongst us – an incarnation who has every right to say, ‘No one comes to the Father except through me.’ But Hindus would also say that this one eternal Word can become flesh more than once; it may come in Buddha, or Krishna, or others – and in each coming-amongst-us, it is possible that the same claim is made, ‘No one comes to [God] except through me’. This is not contradictory, to Hindus, because it is always the same eternal Word who speaks; the manyness of our experiences, in different parts of human history, are simply encountering God’s oneness.

Of course, Christian interpreters may want to question whether ‘the same’ is happening in those different appearances or revelations of the divine Word; but the Hindu point is twofold: first, that a text which is believed by many Christians to achieve closure does not actually end the conversation; and second, that intertextual exploration (between one verse and another) is not merely an intra-Christian task, but an interreligious one. It seems that, not only is the question of religious diversity very complex, but the use of text to resolve it is a more fragile approach than we might have recognised – and always involves bringing a wider range of assumptions to any verse, than simply what the verse says.

An Anarchic Approach

I am slowly edging towards a different way of handling this verse. But in order to explain it, I need to do two further things in preparation: first, explain how I see truth; and second, argue that any attempt to do theology is always entangled with other things, such as politics. Then I will interpret John 14.6.

I have argued about truth elsewhere (e.g. *Holy Anarchy* p.37), but here is a summary, which is significantly dependent on a distinction made by another theologian, Andrew Shanks. Basically, there are two ways of conceiving of truth. (Of course, there are actually many more, but this framing serves a particular purpose.) The first is what I call ‘truth-in-hand’. In this model, we might think of truth as something we can grasp, much like holding it in our hand and enclosing it in our clasp; it is something to treasure, but also to pass on. The positive version of this approach is that it certainly affirms truth as worthy of being cherished; but it can become something more negative: seizing our truth as an idol, wielding our truth in rather more combative ways, even turning to violence, deeming our truth as something to impose. By contrast, truth-in-process involves a more open-handed approach, recognising that no truth can ever be cut off from connection with other parts of reality; in fact, to close our fingers around our truth is inevitably to edit it, to dismiss the connections, and so to manage truth, or massage it, or manipulate it according to other agendas. Truth-in-process, unlike truth-in-hand, allows for the ‘risk’ of truth; that what we hold might not be the whole and that there are always new angles to be discovered, so truth-seeking involves empathy, listening, a commitment to deeper neighbourliness, a movement towards solidarity, even in relationship with those who grasp an inconveniently different truth. Truth-in-process is the basis of hospitality – and arguably it is more closely aligned with the graciousness of God, who is open to receiving our truths, despite our ungraciousness or closed-ness. God, after all, is foolishly loving, to an extent which our more limited loving cannot comprehend.

This is not to say that, if we affirm the priority of truth-in-process, we should dismiss or demean truth-in-hand, because both are needed, in life and in the things of faith. Truth-in-hand gives us some way of making claims about reality; affirming particular values over other values; and building community together – but it should not be mistaken for the very truth of things. To regard God as more like truth-in-hand would be to render an idol, whereas God’s truth-in-process consists in God’s freedom to defy

the limits of our experience, knowledge, language, religious boundaries and institutions, in pursuit of the greatest possible shalom, which is new creation for all creation.

Secondly, what we hopefully see there is that any attempt to explore theological truth is always bound up with political questions. When I claim a truth, I am making a boundary which can embrace and exclude. When I express openness to further learning, I am committing to receive the stranger and the troublesome insights they might bring. When I suppose truth is the basis of good order, I might be inclined to wield power to reinforce it. When I suppose truth is more open-ended, it may even destabilise the structures and systems I had taken for granted.

So, this is what I might say about John 14.6, recognising (as much as I can) that I am bringing certain assumptions to the verse – that it is unlikely to resolve a question as complex as the validity of religious diversity; that my grasp of it cannot presume to be the whole of it; that how this verse is connected with questions of boundaries will have repercussions, so this is best done in engagement with other verses too – but that I can still be surprised by it.

Jesus tells us that he is the way – a way which, as we see throughout his ministry, destabilises many assumptions about who is in and who is out. His own ‘politics’ must also be theological, because the nature of his way is good news for the poor, release for captives, healing for those damaged by disease and exclusion, and it points us towards a new realm, ‘the kingdom of God’, in which the last shall be first and the first shall be last. It is a turning upside-down of the prevailing order. In fact, an anarchy in the face of such order. Not something which he alone envisaged, but very much picking up on the prophetic tradition of those before him: the tradition of jubilee, the longing for justice in Amos and Micah, the vision of a new Zion in Isaiah. Jesus is the way, precisely because his personhood embodies the social reality which he envisaged, this alternative kingdom, even an anti-kingdom, or ‘holy anarchy’, in the midst of the world of Mammon which benefits the rich and complacent. His ‘way’ is not so much a group of like-minded people who can sign up to the same doctrinal creed, but is a political phenomenon: a new imagining of social reality.

He tells us he is truth, but not as we might know it. More like truth-in-process than truth-in-hand, because again and again, he showed generosity to those on the outside, hospitality to the stranger, openness to those who were excluded from closed-in truth. In that context, the idea that Jesus would say ‘you need to believe particular things about me’ seems so at odds with his immersion amongst those who were in the margins. If anyone was pushed back in his ministry, it was the rich and the religious-insiders. His truth was demonstrably anarchic. He disrupted the spaces that religion might presume to control, engaging in respectful conversation with outsiders and receiving their stories and faith. Pagan Magi bring their wisdom and gifts, and are received well, but they return as themselves though by another road, because encounter brings change. A Syrophenician woman out-argues him, opening up his ministry to Gentiles. His truth was indeed confrontational, a ‘narrow’ way if you like, but not for the sake of people who articulated a correct formula about his identity, but in pursuit of the realisation of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven.

He tells us he is life – abundant life, he says elsewhere. His way and truth are abundant life in a world of scarcity, competition and hunger. He feeds the hungry. He gives life. He does not deny it or restrict it or exclude people from it, and even invites the rich to enter it if they give up their wealth. To come ‘through’ him, is to come through this embodied commitment to life in all its fullness – a world of abundance for all, where all are satisfied and there are even twelve basket-fulls of leftovers, enough for the twelve tribes, calling Israel to rediscover its calling as a light to the nations, a beacon of peace and justice in the midst of overbearing Empire. Even in its smallness, like mustard seed, or like hidden yeast, and following the example of a child, the renewed community has the capacity to be life, if we would only follow in his way, his truth, his life. So for Christians to demonstrate what ‘house’ or

'household' we belong to – the *oikos*, which is the basis of ecumenism, but also of economy and ecology – is for us to pursue an economy of life and an ecology of life in ready solidarity with all; not separating our house from others, but celebrating that we share a 'common home', as Pope Francis affirms.

This is where I return to the gut. So often, our interpretation of John 14.6 is focused on something cerebral – whether we happen to 'believe' in Jesus or not – or we might say it is a matter of the heart; but in either case, it is something people must consciously affirm. But so much of his way, truth and life was about the gut, if not the whole body; things which may be done by empathetic instinct, intuition, even implicitly rather than explicitly, as people witness to the law written within them. It is embodied, but not necessarily stated. So it is possible, in the spirit of truth-in-process, that all sorts of people may be inspired by and participate in the ongoing anarchic door-opening of Jesus, witnessing to his way, truth and life without naming it. After all, his way of anarchy, generosity of truth, and life of abundance cannot be contained by questions of language, doctrinal assent, conscious choice, but are evidenced in the things of flesh and blood, the good news-ing extended to the poor, the releasing of captives, the healing of those who are broken, the subverting of imperial systems of Mammon, and the creating of new spaces in which diverse people live in solidarity.