

Reflection on John 14.6

'I am the way, the truth and the life: no one comes to the Father but by me.'

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I have long been fascinated by the 'I am' sayings of the Gospel of John: indeed one of the privileges of my working life was being part of the international team which wrote the Bible studies for the 2008 Lambeth Conference, which focused on these 'I am' sayings.

As we realised then, it is a mistake to suggest, as is often done, that there are only seven 'I am' sayings in the Gospel. The list often quoted is:

- I am the bread of life
- I am the light of the world
- I am the resurrection and the life
- I am the good shepherd
- I am the gate (door) for the sheep
- I am the way, the truth and the life
- I am the true Vine

In fact the words 'I am' (used by Jesus in referring to himself) appear in the Gospel considerably more often, which was fortunate for those of us working on the Lambeth Conference Bible studies, as we had 16 days worth of Bible studies to prepare. Many of these other 'I am' sayings are not so obvious to a casual reader, and can sometimes be half hidden by the English translation, but if you count up the number of times in John's Gospel that the emphatic Greek first person pronoun *ego* appears directly in front of the first person singular of the verb 'to be', *eimi*, you will find over 20 examples (though some simply repeat or reinforce what has been already said a couple of verses earlier).

I am sure, as are virtually all the interpreters of John's Gospel, that in these repeated uses of *ego eimi*, we are intended to see Jesus as alluding to the self-description of God in the Old Testament, and making a claim to divinity. This then gives the sayings a particular authority, and, for example, in the case of John 14.6, the saying under special consideration, means that its apparent exclusivism might become more challenging for those of us who are committed to honouring interreligious relationships.

But... to pick up the full significance of this apparent claim to identity with God, perhaps we need first to go back to the pages of the Old Testament, and look at the point where 'I am' in relation to the name of God first appears. It is of course in Exodus 3.14, during Moses' meeting with God at Mount Sinai. When God commands Moses to return to Egypt in order to

liberate his people, Moses' request is to know the name of the deity that is ordering him to undertake this challenging task. The exchange goes like this:

But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' ¹⁴God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you." ' ¹⁵God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you":

*This is my name for ever,
and this my title for all generations.*

¹⁶*Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, "The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt.(NRSV)*

The name itself is disclosed in verse 15 – the English translation, 'The LORD' conceals four Hebrew letters standing for YHWH, which is probably understood as a third person form of the Hebrew verb HYH, which means 'to be'. This linkage is made more likely by the 'explanation', also linked to the verb 'to be' which is given to the name in verse 14, 'I am who I am'.

But in the cultural and theological world of the ancient Middle East the revealing of names was seen as dangerous. It gave others power over the one whose name was revealed. This was especially true for a deity – 'to call on the name of God' gave humanity control over the object of their attention. The revealing of the name is a gesture on God's part of his compassion, or else his people would for ever have remained slaves in Egypt. But the name YHWH, elusive in its sounds, and interpreted as 'I am who I am' is probably intended to remind us of God's sovereign freedom and refusal to become humanity's puppet. It is interesting that when the name of God is re-revealed in Exodus 33-34, there are echoes of the earlier phrasing:

And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The LORD" and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (Exodus 33.19)

That phrasing 'I am who I am' / 'I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy' seems designed to reinforce the idea that in the Old Testament God's name is intended to reinforce divine sovereignty and absolute freedom, rather than to allow God to be controlled by humanity – however much this might be seen as being for God's own good.

The German scholar Walther Zimmerli has argued that this mysterious and elusive 'name' of God, as the one who both reveals himself but refuses to become the puppet of humanity, constitutes the central theological core of the Old Testament, throughout which the motif of God's unpinnable-down-ness is expressed in a variety of ways which may escape human logic and comprehension.

Back to the New Testament, and to the Gospel of John. Is it not possible that the 'I am' sayings of this Gospel, rather than being intended simply as an unambiguous proclamation of Jesus' divinity, are also similarly intended to remind us of God's sovereign freedom to act in ways that defy human comprehension? What might this mean then for our interpretation of John 14.6 which is so often taken as categorically ruling out real interreligious dialogue on the part of Christians? If we can only approach the Father through Jesus, may it not be that the Father that we have the privilege of approaching is characterised precisely by a refusal to be placed in that safe and secure 'box' to which Jesus alone has a key in which many Christians have wanted to confine him in?

Realistically this is a hint we are offered, rather than a conclusive argument. But there are I think a few pointers which might suggest that to see a link between this self-description 'I am' and a Jesus whose graciousness defies the human logic of exclusion.

The first is to realise that John 14.6 needs to be read in a context which certainly includes the second verse of the chapter: 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places.' *prima facie* this suggests, as it has often been understood to be so, that God's hospitality extends to many and different kinds of people. It is not, I think too fanciful to wonder how far this variety might include interreligious diversity. The 'I am' of John 14.6 needs to encompass both the generosity of verse 2 as well as the apparent exclusion of verse 6.

The second is to reflect on the word 'truth' (in Greek *aletheia*) which forms part of the predicate of the 'I am' saying in John 14.6. If we are exploring the passage in the context of interreligious dialogue it is this word that is perhaps most challenging to deal with. We do however need to reflect on what the passage, and John's Gospel as a whole, means by 'truth' which is not, I think, necessarily the same as the intellectual and academic way that 'truth' is often understood in the western academic world – influenced as it has been by Greek philosophy.

It is important to remember that in semitic languages the word for 'truth' comes from the same verbal root as the words for 'faith', 'believe' and 'trust'. Indeed that linkage is preserved in English precisely by the resonance between 'truth' and 'trust'. The semitic root is *'amn* – from which we adopt the liturgical word *Amen*. So I would suggest that the primary meaning of the Greek *aletheia* within the Gospel of John is as something like 'trust-worthy', 'reliable', 'faithful'. It may be significant that the first the noun *aletheia* appears in the Gospel is in 1.14 where it is paired with *charis*, 'grace'. 'We have seen his glory, full of grace and truth'. Interpreters often point to Exodus 33-34 as the Old Testament background for these final few verses of the Prologue, and I think they are correct. In Exodus 33.22 God promises that his 'glory' will pass by Moses while Moses is held safe in the cleft of the rock.

Then in the following chapter God re-reveals his name as YHWH and proclaims himself as a God, 'abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness' (Exodus 34.6), a pairing which seems to be deliberately echoed in John 1.14's 'grace and truth'. I find it significant that this pairing is so closely linked to the revelation of the divine name. I would also want to suggest that this initial occurrence of *aletheia* in John 1.14 may legitimately be used to define how it can be translated or interpreted in the rest of the Gospel. Some of the later instances may refer to a

primary intellectual sense of truth e.g. 'I tell the truth' (John 8.45). However other instances need to be seen primarily in relational terms – referring to Jesus as the one on whom the disciples can rely because he is faithful. To understand John 14.6 in this light is to suggest that the passage is reassuring the disciples, soon to be deprived of their master's presence, of Jesus' reliability and faithfulness in spite of his apparent absence.

My third point is to draw attention to the first time that the phrase *ego eimi* appears in the Gospel of John. It is rarely noticed because it is half hidden by most English translations. It comes in the context of Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman when, in response to their mutual discussion about the 'correct' holy place, Jerusalem or Gerizim, in which to worship God, Jesus states, *ego eimi, o lalon soi*, literally, 'I am, the one talking to you'.

I find it fascinating that the first time Jesus explicitly 'claims' this divine identity that it should be while he is in conversation with a woman, an outsider, someone who represented an alien religious tradition from his own. But that is not all. I used to describe this as 'I am saying without a predicate', contrasting it with others such as 'I am the bread of life' (in which 'bread of life' constitutes a predicate). But it was pointed out to me that actually this statement does have a predicate: 'talking to you'. Jesus is claiming this divine identity precisely in view of his conversation with this religious other. Which makes a great deal of sense given that the Gospel itself begins with a reflection on the cosmic Word which became flesh in Jesus (John 1.-5, 10-14). Might not a possible implication of this disclosure in John 4.26 be that it is in such 'interfaith' dialogue that God is revealed? And that we need to bear this in mind when in turn we reflect on the 'I am' of John 14.6?

This is I think made more plausible by the exchange that has led to Jesus and the Samaritan woman arriving at this point. They had been discussing the respective merits of Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim as 'holy places'. Walther Zimmerli, whose insights into the importance of the divine name for our interpretation of the themes of the Old Testament was referred to earlier, notes, 'The God who is invoked by the name 'Yahweh' repeatedly demonstrates his freedom by dashing to pieces all the 'images' in which humanity would confine him.' One particular and obvious expression of human attempts to confine God is to build him a 'holy place', a temple in which he could live to be available to human beings at their convenience. The story of the Old Testament, especially at the time of the exile, is of 'I am who I am' who categorically refuses to be confined in such a way. So it is more than appropriate that the first time Jesus claims the description 'I am' for himself in the Gospel of John, that it is also in the context of a discussion about the need to transcend such places and buildings. And this is the first, 'I am' of John's Gospel, which we should perhaps use as the starting point for our reflection on the other examples of the phrase – including our challenging John 14.6 which Christians have so often used to seek to confine God by the limits of human logic. Perhaps those words of the beloved hymn of FW Faber rightly have the final word,

For the love of God is broader

Than the measures of human mind

And the heart of the Eternal

Is most wonderfully kind.