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HPPD7006: Christianity: Texts and Traditions

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Textual Analysis

Jesus's words to his disciples in the farewell discourse (John: 14:1-14)

Introduction

These verses are considered as the commencement of the farewell discourse (chapter 14) where Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure. The verses adopt a didactic stance as Jesus alternates between comforting his disciples as well as psychologically and spiritually preparing them for his final physical departure from the world. It is also dotted with few imperatives as he reassures them of his return.¹ The essay will concern itself first with the wider literary context of chapter 14 and its connecting traditions in historical context. Next, it will move into the theological interpretation of the verses. Finally, the essay will attempt to gauge the challenges and opportunities these verses offer for engagement in interfaith dialogue. The scope of this essay will only be limited to analysing verses 14:1-6.

Greek-Jewish Testamentary tradition in the Johannine Context of the Farewell Discourse:

An analysis of Greek literature suggests that most of their oral or literary narratives were apocalyptic discourses. Example, Luke's reconstruction of Jesus's farewell by narrating Paul's final meeting with the Ephesian elders on the island of Miletus (Acts 20:17-38).² The Johannine gospel also follows a similar pattern. The verses in consideration are significant because they initiate the farewell discourse of Jesus and his final teachings before he physically departs from the world.³

Theological Analysis:

14:1

These words are repeated by Jesus in v. 1a and v. 27b. These are identical statements whereby Jesus encourages his disciples not to worry as he is leaving them. These are also the words of a dying hero in the Jewish testamentary tradition.⁴ The disciples are worried about the fate of Jesus. The anticipation of death also troubles Jesus (cf. 11:33, 12:27, 13:21). This leaves no doubt that his disciples too would be discouraged by the agony of parting from him as well as, subsequently, the pain of seeing him crucified. This could lead to perplexity and despair, which might waver their faith in him. Thus, not only as a pacifier, but the verse is also seen as a command from Jesus.⁵

14:2

Advocating belief in Jesus is the essence of John's Gospel. He declares that belief in Christ leads to salvation (cf. 20:30-31) which is 'achieving eternal life' while in this world through belief in Jesus. The word 'life' or 'eternal life' (*Zoe aionos*) is mentioned 36 times in John's gospel. Already in the prologue John foretells the dualistic framework of the reception to Jesus' mission. John connects this human dualism of physical life with spiritual life with the cosmic dualism of the world above and the world below. Within this human dualism lie groups of

¹ Francis. J. Moloney SDB, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), p. 392.

² D. M. Smith, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), pp. 264-265.

³ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, p. 392.

⁴ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, p. 397.

⁵ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), pp. 306-307.

believers and unbelievers. As the incarnation of God's Word, Jesus embodies God's revelation.⁶ If they do not believe in him, they would be forever condemned to a cycle of ignorance and death. Through his discourses, Jesus is also identified as a judge and the separator of believers from the unbelievers (5: 21,24).⁷

To support this theological message, we can refer to a few other verses. For example, Jesus calls himself the light which invades the darkness (1:5, 3:19, 12:35, 46) interpreted as ignorance.⁸ Jesus's role as a witness according to the Greek text of Isaiah: "In his role as a light to the nations, the servant of the Lord is called upon to bear witness to the lord." (43:10). As Jesus takes on the role of a servant, his witness is valid since it was the role of the chosen servant to bear witness (according to the Greek text of Isaiah) and "to bring light and offer light to those who follow him" (8:12.13) and believe in him.⁹

Thus, belief is the core of the Johannine message and it is supported throughout the gospel in various verses extending and cementing its significance.

14: 2-3

In this verse, there are two significant theological aspects. One is the term 'dwelling places' and the other the words "come again" which have multiple layers of meaning. The essay shall first attempt to understand various interpretations of the term "dwelling places".

Dwelling place as a permanent communion:

Jesus says that he is going to his Father's house which has many dwelling or abiding places. The word used here is *monai* (noun) and the cognate verb is *menein* which means 'permanent dwelling'. The verb is used elsewhere in John (1:32, 7:27, etc.). Jesus, by expressing that he is going to prepare a "place" (*topon*), also alludes to a "permanent, life-giving dwelling" where he is. As he is with the Father, it also brings the assurance of a 'permanent possibility of communion' with the Father.¹⁰

Cosmic dualism:

John promotes another interpretation of 'cosmic dualism' which differentiates between the world above (heaven or the abiding place) and the world below. Jesus had disclosed that he is from above (the heavens) while the people are from below (the earth).¹¹ When he says that he shall come back, it also means: as he has to die a physical death he will also be resurrected. Thus, it follows that his believers too shall have to die physically, and he will raise them in the eternal world.

⁶ Catrin H. Williams., Faith, Eternal Life, and the Spirit in the Gospel of John', in *Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, eds. Judith M. Lieu, Martinus C. de Boer (Oxford: OUP, 2018), pp. 352-353.

⁷ Catrin H. Williams., 'The Gospel of John', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, eds. Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, Jonathan Roberts & Christopher Rowland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 108-109.

⁸ Catrin H. Williams., 'The Gospel of John', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, pp. 108-109.

⁹ David. M. Ball, ' "I am..." The "I am" Sayings of Jesus and Religious Pluralism', in *One God, One Lord, Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, eds. Andrew D. Clark & Bruce W. Winter (Michigan: Paternoster Press, 1992), p. 68.

¹⁰ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, p. 394.

¹¹ Catrin H. Williams., 'The Gospel of John', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, p. 109.

The essay shall further explain the various interpretations of the words; ‘come again’:

Paraclete:

Williams suggests that the term ‘coming back’ could be a reference to Jesus’s “continued presence in and through the fellowship” of the Paraclete. The word Paraclete is derived from the Greek word *Parakletos* which literally means “to be called alongside”. It is also interpreted as “mediator, interpreter, or helper”. According to William, scholars refer to this term mostly in a Judicial context. After Jesus’s departure from this world, his advocate (the paraclete) would fulfill Jesus’s role as both the defender of truth and as the judge. Disciples would be called as a witness of Jesus and the spirit (paraclete) would serve as their defendant against the hostile world. (15:26-27, cf. Matt. 10:19-20, Acts 5:32) where he will also serve as their prosecuting council (cf. John 16:8-11).¹²

A question of time or metaphorical understanding?

One of the interpretations of the term ‘coming back’ suggests a conscious enigmatic play of ‘time’. The phrases “that I am coming again” and “that where I am you may be also” suggest a future as well as a present manifestation. The question is a mystery of how one who departs can also be present? This suggests not an ordinary departure, but also an ongoing presence. Many verses (cf., e.g., 3:15, 16, 36) suggest that the Gospel has asserted that the time is coming and is already here. For those who believe that Jesus has eternal life: even if he is physically gone, he will still dwell in the present with those who believe in him.¹³ Thus the dwelling place is to be symbolically understood as the heart of a believer instead of an out worldly heavenly abode.¹⁴

14:4-6

According to Smith, Jesus’s ‘I am’ statement in 14:6, express exclusivity, especially the statements which come with a predicate. Jesus applies concepts from the old testament through an exclusivists’ position when he claims to be the only way to the father. Connecting (14:6) with (10:8,9) he suggests that Jesus identified himself with Yahweh. Another verse (8:24) ‘you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am’ also shows Jesus’s exclusivity in this power of forgiveness of sins which would only come about by belief in him as the one who is identified with the Yahweh.¹⁵

According to Lincoln, Thomas (the disciple) is seen as the representative of the ignorant disciples with his insistence that they do not know the way where Jesus is going and so cannot know the way. This is when the declaration of 14:6 comes forth. In the first century Jewish context this exclusive claim to embody the Father stands above the claims of the Torah. Torah held that the law provided the way (cf.e.g. Pss.86.11; 119.30) and the community at Qumran due to its observance of the law, called itself, ‘The way’ (cf. IQS 8.12-16;9.17-18; CD 1.3). Jesus’s expressions recapitulate in different symbolism that of (10.9) ‘I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved’ Also the prologue gave a similar claim to Jesus opposite to the law in (1.17-18). Because of the previous discussion in 13.36-14.4, Jesus’s declaration to be the way is the primary one and his expression to be the truth and life define how and why

¹² Catrin H. Williams., ‘Faith, Eternal Life, and the Spirit in the Gospel of John’, in *Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, pp. 356-357.

¹³ Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, p. 394.

¹⁴ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Black’s New Testament Commentaries. The Gospel according to Saint John* (London, New York: Hendrickson Publishers. Continuum, 2005) p. 390.

¹⁵ D. M. Smith, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: John*, p. 269.

he is the way. His mission is to bring life (cf. 10.10) and the incarnation to Logos in whom was life (1.4) and is also the manifest of that life (cf. also 11.25). Jesus alone is the means to access the Father is seen also as the key claim for Johannine Christians as against the synagogue, but it was also the one that above all the rival claims in the Graeco-Roman world to access the divine. Its exclusivity is grounded in the declarations of Jewish monotheism. In Isa. (43.11), for example, there is no Saviour other than the God who is identified as I am, and therefore no salvation apart from this God.¹⁶

Williams opines that the Johannine, 'I am' statements are seen to be as metaphorical articulations that connote Jesus's life-giving significance. There have been studies to understand the distinction between absolute (*ego eimi*) declaration and the ones which are followed by a predicate. The former is associated with Jesus's identity and the latter ones with his works. According to her, this differentiation is deficient due to many reasons, mainly because Jesus's role as the giver of eternal life is made more explicit in the metaphorical statements. All the images connected to absolute declarations have life as a primary referent and in many situations are derived from everyday life perceived by the senses. For example; Jesus is the source and sustainer of eternal life (bread, light, resurrection, life, vine) and it is through his person that the believer would be able to arrive at the door of eternal life. Jesus guides the believers and reveals the (truth) life that leads to communion to God. All the metaphors are spiritual gifts to move the reader from a literal level to a spiritual level of understanding.¹⁷

Challenges and Opportunities for Interfaith Dialogue:

Challenges to interfaith dialogue occur when the core principles of the believer's faith are assumed to be compromised. For example, it is blasphemous in Islam to equate man with God while Jews do not accept Jesus as the messiah. Thus, 14:4 and other similar "I am..." statements are accused of claim to exclusivity, and also seen by some as an act of "presumptuous pride"¹⁸ which is also one of the most difficult challenges that Christology faces. For example "the way" stands for "the way to the father" (14:6), "I am the way that leads to truth and life" In Psalms the "way" of God is spoken many times (see Pss 1:6, 5:8, 18:30, 25:8-1227:11). In these statements, Jesus is seen as "intrinsic to God", as "God embodied", and "equal to God". However, Jesus's most controversial identity as the unique Son of God comes from the expression, "no one comes to the Father except through me".¹⁹

Thus, concerning "the way" promoting exclusivism, this textual analysis will now attempt to navigate some alternate pluralistic interpretations which can also serve as opportunities in promoting interfaith dialogue. Let us explore these further.

Bieringer quotes Tack (2015) in her paper. Tack offers a pluralistic interpretation of 14:6. According to her when 14:6 is read on its own, it develops an exclusivist position that is not

¹⁶ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Black's New Testament Commentaries. The Gospel according to Saint John*, pp. 390-391.

¹⁷ Catrin H. Williams., 'Faith, Eternal Life, and the Spirit in the Gospel of John', in *Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, p. 354

¹⁸ David. M. Ball, ' "I am..." The "I am" Sayings of Jesus and Religious Pluralism', in *One God, One Lord, Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 83-84.

¹⁹ Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, p. 309.

conducive for pluralism or interfaith dialogue. But instead, she suggests that it needs to be read in light of 14:2-3. Tack opines that 'the way to the Father' needs to be treated in a 'relational' perspective. These terms are not to be read as exclusively pointing towards the son, such that $A=B=C$, but as relational demonstrators as how Jesus, the son, is the 'way', 'truth' and 'life' in relation to the father. Jesus's identity is shaped by his relationship with the Father, it depicts unity in diversity. Tack suggests that the entire language of the Gospel is metaphorical and should not be treated in literal terms. Thus, in 14:2-3 where Jesus speaks about the many mansions that are in the Father's abode, mansions can be interpreted as an inclusive term. The metaphoric language allows us to interpret mansions as many rooms that could be taken as rooms or spaces which open an understanding of many different religions having their space in and with the Father.²⁰

Culpepper asserts that many verses of the Gospel can be interpreted in a pluralist understanding. There are parts of the Gospel which relate to 'hermeneutics of ethical accountability'.²¹ For example, the Johannine Gospel's declaration of God's boundless love for his people overrides the polemics against the Jews. Its concern that the community of faith may be united countermands social and ethnic boundary between believers, and its assertion that the work of the Logos cannot be restricted to the time of the incarnation initiates the way for asserting the heritage and experience of individuals of faith in other religions.²²

Culpepper also attempts to interpret the theological exclusivism of the Johannine Gospel in a pluralist culture. John 14:6, 6:44, 45, 53 are the foundations of Christianity. He approaches exclusivism through an alternate interpretation of the 'Cosmic Christ' in John 1:9. According to John, the understanding of the work of the Logos is through the 'Wisdom tradition'. 'As Wisdom, Logos was the creative agent',²³ Wisdom manifested God's construction and influence over all creation. Thus, Culpepper suggests that the exclusivist claims of the verses in question must be comprehended in the light of the opening claim that the revelation that came through Jesus is the one that is universally present in Logos. Jesus is the incarnation of Logos who made the work of the Logos known to mankind. This brings to the forefront the understanding that Christianity may not have the exclusivity on the revelation of God. In other words, Logos made himself known through Christ, he also may have made himself known to Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah too.²⁴ The utmost significant work of salvation that was brought through Jesus, could also have been brought through other saviors known through other religious traditions. It is the effort of Logos to draw all people to the knowledge of God, to himself. The cosmic understanding of wisdom personalized in the Yahweh; the one God is the preliminary thought of John's Logos Christianity. One of the core interpretations of John's prologue is that the work of the Logos was to save mankind. Thus, John's Logos Christianity

²⁰ Reimund Bieringer., 'Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel Fifteen Years after the Leuven Colloquium', in *John and Judaism A Contested Relationship in Context*, eds. R. Alan Culpepper & Paul N. Anderson (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), p. 258.

²¹ R. Alan Culpepper., 'The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith', in *"What is John?" Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), p. 127.

²² R. Alan Culpepper., 'The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith', in *"What is John?" Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 127.

²³ R. Alan Culpepper., 'The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith', in *"What is John?" Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 123.

²⁴ R. Alan Culpepper., 'The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith', in *"What is John?" Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 124.

allows its believers to accept and affirm that believers of other religious traditions may come to know God through the work of Cosmic Christ.²⁵

John Hick and Wiles suggest that the Gospel be treated in a non-historical method. The theory of pre-existence in John's gospel is the reason that Jesus is identified with God. According to Hick, the "I am" sayings do not identify Jesus with the creator of the world, but it is either the adoration of the people or confession of Jesus through the 'I am' phrases that led to the exclusive understanding. He proposes that as the sayings refer to the Isaianic background, and Jesus is seen as accomplishing the prophecies of Isaiah, instead of John conveying these phrases, they could have been an 'invention of the church'.²⁶ Many religions have appropriated an interpretation of verses of scripture that agrees with their cultural and social norms. For example, In Islam, different traditions of the faith interpret verses of the scripture and issue norms for the community. Over the years this may lead to tampering of the verse to confirm with the understanding of the community. This is one of prime reason of conflicts between two major traditions of Shi'i and Sunni Islam. Similarly, it is possible that the claim to exclusivity could also have been a later development of the church.

Wiles suggests that the exclusivity claims must be seen in its context where John's Gospel was written in the Greek city of Ephesus around the end of the first century, where the Gospel was presented to a community with conflicting religious claims. He explains that these claims were made to attract believers in the Greek city of Ephesus. Further, Wiles suggests that with such "I am.." exclusive phrases, Jesus not only drew similarity and an ontological identification between Yahweh and him, but it also led to excluding all other rivals from God's worship. According to Isaiah, no other Babylonian gods (who identified themselves as children of God) or any of the Greek polytheistic gods could match that claim.²⁷ Thus, these verses could be an attempt at promoting proselytization instead of a claim to spiritual salvation.

These attempts to interpret John's Gospel from a pluralist perspective thus encourage opportunities for interfaith dialogue.

Conclusion:

John 14:1-14 is significant as it denotes the beginning of the farewell discourse. As they embody the final message of the Johannine Jesus to his most beloved disciples, they are among the most cherished and memorable expressions in the Christian faith. The message is also rich in metaphorical language and spiritual symbolism. There is the use of emotive and figurative language as Jesus describes his journey and destination ahead. While the precise meaning of 14:6 is not very clear, it represents past and as well as present actions, which is, on the contrary, appreciated for the symbolic style of expression which allows for multiple interpretations. The passage serves as evidence of Jesus's promise of eternal communion with his believers. They not only disclose and commit the hereafter, the 'what' to expect, but also presents the 'how' - the path to eternal life which becomes a reality through Jesus. Thus, theologically, the passage is momentous in strengthening the believer's faith in Jesus. However, it also extends itself for

²⁵ R. Alan Culpepper., 'The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith', in *"What is John?" Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 124

²⁶ David M. Ball., ' "I am..." The "I am" Sayings of Jesus and Religious Pluralism', in *One God, One Lord, Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 83-84 .

²⁷ David M. Ball., ' "I am..." The "I am" Sayings of Jesus and Religious Pluralism', in *One God, One Lord, Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, pp. 79-80.

pluralist analysis through which it is instrumental in supporting the believers to adopt a more inclusive attitude towards other faith communities.

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