

God's
Affirming
and
Subversive
Word to the Marginalized

Herbert R. Marbury

Several years ago my younger brother, an elementary school student at the time, burst into the house after an afternoon of video games with his best friend and reported that he had discovered that his playmate was Muslim. Remembering the previous week's Sunday school lesson on John 14, my brother reflected, "That means he's not going to heaven, doesn't it?" I was a high school student at the time and was not much more theologically sophisticated than he, so I responded affirmatively. The very next day my brother again burst into the house after only a short visit with his friend and announced that all was well now because they had prayed the "sinner's prayer" together. Thinking that his evangelistic activity had gotten him thrown out of the neighbor's home I asked

why had he returned so early. He remarked that his friend had to leave to perform salat for Friday prayers.

"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Such a simple and powerful statement of our faith, yet John 14:6 is more often used to evaluate the merit of other faith communities than as marvelous assurance for Christians. Some well-meaning Christians have used the text as a bully club to circumscribe the boundaries of Christ's salvific activity, others have used it as a litmus test to evaluate orthodox Christian belief, and still others have used it to bolster Christian superiority over other faiths in discourses around religious pluralism. In the ever-widening and ever-diversifying religious landscape of our world, some well-intentioned

Christians have even dismissed this text as an embarrassing example of Christian exclusivism.

None of these understandings of the text reflects the simple but powerful affirmation of our faith as expressed by John's community. For that minority community in the late first century, such an affirmation was an exciting, joyous, and even subversive claim to truth and right living as revealed in the life of Jesus. I believe it still is.

The community that gave us the fourth Gospel struggled to define itself against a larger Jewish presence from which some believe it had been expelled. Two themes, reflecting that struggle, resonate throughout John's gospel and become foundational as the evangelist carved out a space for his community's faith: (1) God is revealed in Christ through the Incarnation;

and, (2) believers claim a relationship with God through their relationship with Christ. Such statements were radical for the theological landscape of the day. But with these two claims, the community would plant its theological stake in the ground and demonstrate its firm conviction in the resurrected Christ. By doing so, it defined itself against larger, more established religious communities and assured its members of their relationship with God. This realization that the Johannine community enjoyed a relationship with God was at once both affirming and subversive. It affirmed a minority community's relationship with God in the face of rejection. By asserting that a

meaning of the word *odos* (way).

As with much of the dialogue between Jesus and others in the Gospel of John, Jesus says one thing and the disciples and others understand something different or misunderstand him altogether. The Gospel writer masterfully develops the dialogue in order to make clear for the reader the distinction between the disciples' understanding of "the way" (*odos*) and Jesus' intent. In 14:1-5, Jesus speaks of a place, "my father's house" (*oikia tou pater*), but without a geographical location. He also refers to a "way" (*odos*) to the Father's house, but not a road. That Jesus' nuanced usage of these terms is lost on both Philip and Thomas is evidenced by

"Way" in the Hebrew Bible often refers to a way of living in line with a particular standard of morality. For ancient Israel, the Law of Moses was that way. For the Fourth Gospel writer, that way was revealed in Christ. In truth, the disciples already knew the way to the Father; they had lived it with Jesus for three years. Both "truth" (*alethia*) and "life" (*zoe*) follow "way" (*odos*) in this passage and qualify it, describing the character of Jesus as the "way."

But what might this have meant to its original community and what meanings might God be calling us to discover today?

While I served as chaplain at Clark Atlanta University, I experienced a wonderful wave of religiosity among the student body. Most days, I genuinely was excited by the heightened interest in matters of faith and was generally affirming of our students' expressions of their faith. There were a few incidents, however, when one student's zeal infringed upon the freedoms of another. Such instances were usually minor and involved no more than one student anointing the residence hall door or possessions of another student with oil or affixing "WWJD" stickers throughout the campus.

Since the student body was almost entirely Christian, such expressions, although excessive, were always viewed in the context of our shared faith. One incident, however, was quite different and changed forever my understanding John 14:6. One spring semester, a female Muslim student appeared in my office, shaken and distraught. She had attempted to pray between classes and found herself the object of derision from some members of the community, while others attempted to "convert" her from Islam. She mumbled something about John 14:6 and said she had heard it from one of the proselytizing students. As I comforted her and attempted to offer some clarification of the verse, I realized that such an affirmation takes on an entirely different meaning when its usage travels from a minority Christian community like that of the Fourth Gospel to a majority Christian community such as the student body at Clark Atlanta. Such usage is so far from the Johannine context that it does violence to the meanings held by John's community. In that believing collective, the very spirit of John's gospel was a defi-

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marginalized minority had a legitimate claim to the truth, it subverted the majority's power. In truth, the text does not speak to an exclusivism or a universalism, but rather a particularism. In other words, God knows and cares for this particular community. Their knowledge and relationship is assured through their experience with God, the Incarnate One.

John 14:6 is part of a larger body of material called a farewell discourse where Jesus speaks of his imminent departure. Understandably, his disciples respond with trepidation, ambivalence, and a little fear. If their fellowship with Jesus was about to end, then what had been the meaning of their time together? Would they have the ability to continue without him? So Jesus begins the conversation by telling them to "stop being afraid" (present tense). The remainder of the discourse turns on the

their responses. Thomas responds, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way (*odos*)?" His query would have made perfect sense if the way to the Father's house could be traveled as one would take a Roman road to a place like Jerusalem. Philip goes further with the request, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Philip's request also would make sense if the Father could be located geographically in a place such as Capernaum or Cana. It is clear in this exchange that the disciples understand Jesus' words simply and literally, but they are misguided. Jesus corrects them with a straightforward and profound assertion; he is the way. The way to the Father is not a road to a place but rather, "way" takes its meaning from the Hebrew word *derek*, as in Psalm 119:1,3,5,9,14,15,26 and Proverbs 16:2,7,9.

nite affirmation of God's relationship with a small, marginalized community, against those who would exclude them for believing differently. It was neither employed as the mantra of a majority nor was it used to exclude others from a relationship with God. As I sat in my office that day, I realized that this Muslim student personified the Johannine community. She was the marginalized one needing affirmation and we, the majority, should have been convicted by our misuse of the Gospel. I began to realize that such a text was never intended to bear questions of the current interfaith discourse, such as the relative merits of Islam, Buddhism, African Traditional Religions, Native American Religions, Judaism, or Hinduism or the fate of their adherents. These were my questions, modern questions that neither the Gospel writers nor their believing communities would have asked of the text. The theological significance and power of the affirmation in John 14:6 is as a central claim of our Christian identity and faith, "We are distinct from other faiths because we know God through the Incarnation."

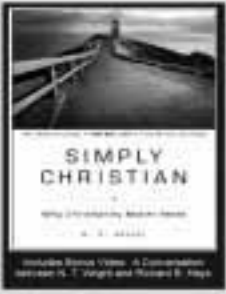
Later that academic year, with the assistance of an intern, our office established a prayer room for Muslim students and an interfaith conversation for all religious groups on campus. During those discussions we came to terms with what such a text would mean in a society where Christians were the majority. Out of those meetings, both groups were strengthened in their respective faiths and emerged with an increased respect for the other.

Our own circumstance is not unlike that of the students at Clark Atlanta University. In such a context, God calls the faithful to hear John 14:6 as the Gospel writer's community must have heard it two millennia ago; not as God's assurance to a majority as much as God's affirming and subversive word to the marginalized. The scripture calls us to reflect on how we might act out our faith led by the spirit of this text and the context out of which it arose. First, the scripture calls us to claim our unique identity as people who know an assured relationship with God through Jesus, his life, teachings, death and resurrection. Second, the scripture remains a subversive call to the faithful to witness against the louder, and often more powerful majority of our own day. Surely this text calls us to witness to the "way, truth and life" against

those who trumpet the evil of war over peace, division and strife over inclusion and harmony, and profit over justice? Might John 14:6 be a cautionary note to the now majority Christian community against our own self-assuredness and complacency, exhorting us to claim afresh our values inherited from that small Johannine collective as followers of the One who is the Way, Truth and the Life. □



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