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# *Christian Spirituality in the Gospel of John*

SANDRA M. SCHNEIDERS



One of the most fruitful realizations that has emerged from contemporary Scripture studies is that the Bible contains not one but several theologies. The plurality of approaches to God, community, and salvation goes back to the Old Testament itself. And the New Testament offers several quite diverse interpretations of the person of Jesus, the Church he founded, and the eschatological destiny of the world and the race that he announced. The growing appreciation of theological di-

versity in the Bible itself has not only reassured the more creative members of the scholarly community in their search for contemporary interpretations of revelation, but has provided for the reflective Christian in the pew a much richer and more varied approach to the life of faith.

What is it, ultimately, that accounts for the plurality of theologies in the New Testament? In the simplest of terms, it was the diversity of their faith exper-

iences that led the New Testament writers to express the Christ-event in diverse ways. What lies behind the diversity in theology, in other words, is a diversity of spirituality. And just as the various theologies in the New Testament are appealing to and enlightening different trends of thinking in the contemporary Church, so the various spiritualities in the New Testament can be sources of illumination and enrichment for different types of religious experience, that is, for different spiritualities in the Christian community.

It has long been recognized that the fourth Gospel is strikingly different, both linguistically and theologically, from the synoptics and Paul. In recent years the contemporary relevance of John's original, but much neglected, theology has been emphasized by exegeses like Raymond Brown and Rudolf Schnackenburg. At the heart of the Johannine theology, however, lies an equally original and relevant spirituality that is particularly in tune with some of the dominant characteristics of contemporary Christian experience.

In order to make the spirituality of the fourth Gospel more accessible to the non-specialist I would like to discuss what I consider to be the central experience of Johannine spirituality and the implications of that experience in some areas of Christian life that are particularly problematic today.

## THE CENTRAL EXPERIENCE OF JOHANNINE SPIRITUALITY: COVENANT INTERIORITY

The religious experience at the heart of the spirituality of the Gospel of John is the covenant interiority of the glorified Jesus and his disciples. In his farewell discourses Jesus assured his disciples that his death/glorification would not be the end of his presence among them. On the contrary, his physical departure is to their advantage (16:7) because it inaugurates his new presence **within them and their life in him**. In the new day, which will begin with his glorification, the disciples will live with Jesus' own life because they will experience that "I (Jesus) am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (14:20).

This new mutual interiority of Jesus and his disciples is forcefully described in the allegory of the vine and the branches (15:1-11) which situates the reality of the New Testament indwelling in its Old Testament context and thereby gives it its real depth. In the Old Testament Yahweh chose Israel to be the focus and foundation of his saving work. He planted Israel as a choice vine (cf. Jer. 2:21; Is. 5:1-7; Ez. 9:10-14) that was destined to bear the fruit of salvation for all the world. But Israel was unfaithful to her vocation and the vine of God bore wild and bitter grapes.

The vine image was an expression of one dimension of Israel's vocation, namely, her salvific fruitfulness. The source of her fertility was her covenant union with Yahweh. Consequently, her sterility was the result and sign of her infidelity to the covenant.

But God promised that a day was coming when he would make a new coven-

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ant with Israel (Jer. 31:31-34), a qualitatively different covenant characterized by its interiority. It would be a covenant "written on the heart." This new covenant would constitute a new Israel which, this time, would fulfill her mission of mediating salvation to the whole world.

The fourth Gospel presents Jesus as fulfilling this ancient promise with unexpected realism. The new covenant, according to John, is constituted by the mutual interiority of Jesus and his disciples. "Abide in me and I in you" (15:4) is the New Testament interiorization of the covenant promise: "I will be your God and you shall be my people" (Jer. 31:33). In the mutuality of their indwelling, Jesus and his disciples become the new Israel, the vine and its branches, which will bear the fruit of universal salvation (15:5-8).

This profound experience of mutual and life-giving interiority with Jesus is the mainspring of the spirituality of the fourth Gospel and a source of the particular relevance of this spirituality for the twentieth-century Christian. The post-World War II period, characterized by the anguish of personal alienation and a heightened sense of the cosmic urgency of reorganization for justice and peace, has generated a spiritual climate radically different from that of the nineteenth century. Twentieth-century spirituality is characterized by a simultaneous tension inward and tension outward.

The attempts of our generation to deal with the experience of existential anguish have been extremely varied, but they have almost all involved a turn inward. We are a people seeking meaning and authenticity in a deepened experience of our own interiority.

Whether the answer is sought in drugs, transcendental meditation, Zen, or Christian contemplation, the question is essentially the same: "Who am I, and what do I mean?"

But even as we turn inward in our search for personal meaning we are aware that our personal meaning is so determined by the social reality that we must undertake the cosmic tasks of restructuring the world for justice and of controlling the environment for human ends. Despite the inwardness to which we are attracted, or perhaps because of it, we have become the most globally conscious people in history.

The fourth Gospel suggests to the contemporary Christian a spirituality of experienced interiority which is neither solipsistic nor centripetal. Johannine interiority is essentially personal because it is constituted by the experienced reciprocal indwelling of the glorified Jesus and his disciples. It necessarily involves the disciple in an intimate relationship with all believers who are branches of the one vine. Johannine interiority is generative of community and this community of shared interiority is the witness that can save the world (17:21-23).

### **SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF COVENANT INTERIORITY**

Johannine spirituality, perhaps more explicitly than others in the New Testament, is structured by the tension, so characteristic of our own times, between the need for intimate belonging and the call to universality. The contemporary need for community is not felt only by religious persons. The commune movement, sensitivity education, basic community formation, and numerous

other social phenomena of our day testify to the search for belonging. However, despite this experienced need for close interpersonal relationships and mutual responsibility, we are singularly uncomfortable in the ghetto, whether it be national, ethnic, racial, religious, or intellectual.

The enclave, for the twentieth-century person, is experienced as a refusal of experience and thus as a frustration of growth. The community we are seeking must be, somehow, both intimate and open. The faith community itself, if it is to be a viable environment for the 20th century Christian, must achieve this paradoxical structure.

The Johannine Gospel was generated by a community that was in the process of being definitively excommunicated from official Judaism. This exclusion from their hereditary community created a heightened need for internal solidarity and, at the same time, made the Johannine community conscious that it now belonged, whether it wanted to or not, to the universal community, to that enormous "outside" reality that the Jews called "the nations."

## THE QUALITY OF COMMUNITY IN JOHANNINE SPIRITUALITY

The spirituality developed by the Johannine community as it assimilated and responded to its experience of excommunication is probably not unlike that toward which diaspora Christians of our own day are struggling. The principle of the Johannine community's spirituality was the mutual interiority of each Christian with Jesus. His single commandment, according to John, is not to love our neighbor as ourself; it is to love one another as we exper-

ience Jesus loving us: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (15:12). Jesus loves us with the Father's love for him, a love he communicates to us by dwelling within us: "O righteous Father . . . I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them" (17:26-26). Consequently, it is only to the extent that the individual disciple has experienced the love of the indwelling Jesus that he or she can participate in the community experience of sharing that love. The Johannine community is primarily an experience of shared interiority. Community is the fruit of contemplation as well as its context.

Because the Johannine community is literally the expression of the authentic interiority of its members, it is singularly mature. In the fourth Gospel, community is not primarily a way of satisfying one's needs. It is the rich overflow of the free and faithful love between Jesus and each of his disciples. The maturity of the community is the source of the almost startling simplicity of faith, morality, and Church order that we find in the fourth Gospel and that is so appealing to many of our contemporaries.

The content of faith, according to John, is to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (20:31). The other dogmatic propositions in the fourth Gospel are all equivalent to this one or are partial statements of it (cf. 6:59; 8:24; 11:27; 13:19; 14:10; 16:27; 16:30; 17:8; 17:21). This simplicity is neither minimalism nor facility. For John, "to believe" means progressive commitment to the indwelling Jesus whose Spirit will lead one into all truth (16:13).

Because the experienced mutual indwelling in the Spirit is the source and guarantee of integrity in the faith, multiplicity of credal propositions is unnecessary. Dogmatic over-explicitation is a function of the non-experiential character of Christianity. For mature disciples who "know," that is, who experience intimately, the identity of the indwelling Jesus as Son of God and Savior, integrity of faith does not depend on propositional uniformity. It consists in the development of a relationship.

The same mature simplicity characterizes Johannine morality. In the fourth Gospel Jesus gives only one commandment, to love one another as he has loved us, that is, unto the laying down of our lives for those we love (15:12-14). This is the same single command that Jesus received from his Father (10:17-18). And just as the Father did not specify for Jesus the details of his obedience, so Jesus does not spell out the concrete implications of our obedience.

Although it is uncluttered by a multiplicity of injunctions, the morality of the fourth Gospel is supremely demanding. To love as Jesus loved requires radical purification from selfishness. We are stripped of the false security of law observance and challenged to the same kind of inner fidelity that led Jesus to shatter the complacency of his contemporaries by breaking the Sabbath law (5:1-18), to challenge the religiously sanctioned racial and sexual discrimination of his day (4:9), and to defy abusive religious and civil authority (8:12-59; 17:8-11). We are called to choose service rather than domination as our fundamental social stance (13:12-17). The morality of the fourth Gospel is not a code for the immature but a voca-

tion to authenticity in the faithful exercise of true freedom. We discover the dimensions of that freedom as we experience more deeply the love of the indwelling Jesus: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (8:31).

The Church order of the Johannine community is correspondingly simple. The priority of the "disciple whom Jesus loved" over Peter (13:21-26; 20:4-8; 21:20-23) emphasizes the primacy of holiness over the primacy of office. The latter is not denied (cf. 21:15-19), but it is relativized and itself made a function of love: "Simon, do you love me? . . . Yes, Lord . . . Tend my sheep" (21:16). Hierarchy, however useful, is essentially provisional among those who experience themselves as participating fully in the inner life of Jesus himself (14:19) and whose community is interiorly structured by shared discipleship. Each disciple, really, follows only Jesus (21:20-22), for he or she draws life only from Jesus (15:5-6). It is in that experienced union with Jesus that the disciples discover community and elaborate whatever external structures are needed to foster it. It is hardly surprising that the only "office" that Jesus clearly institutes in the fourth Gospel is that of service (13:12-20; 21:15-19). Love, not power, is the principle of solidarity and of order in this community.

### THE UNIVERSALITY OF MISSION IN JOHANNINE SPIRITUALITY

The Johannine spirituality of community as an expression of interiority, despite the intimacy of belonging which it fosters, is in no sense a ghetto Christianity. On the contrary, it is the communi-

ty experience itself that becomes the characteristic Christian witness to the world. Jesus prays for the unity of his disciples: "That they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me" (17:22-23). This "knowing" is not an intellectual grasp of a fact, but the salvific experience of which Jesus says, "And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (17:3).

The two characteristics of the Johannine conception of apostolate that make it particularly appealing for the contemporary Christian, namely, its universality and its non-imperialistic nature, flow from the fact that mission in the fourth Gospel is a function of interiority. The disciple brings salvation by making the indwelling Jesus visibly present through community love.

The disciples in the fourth Gospel are sent by Jesus as he was sent by the Father (20:21). The mission of Jesus was to render the Father, who dwelt within him, salvifically present to his contemporaries (14:9). But the Johannine Jesus is explicit about the universality of this mission. He is the Savior, not just of Israel, but "of the world" (4:42). He came to seek not only the lost sheep of Israel but all the "other sheep . . . who are not of this fold" (10:16). His "lifting up" on the cross was to draw "all people" to himself (12:32). He died "not for the nation only, but to gather together into one all the children of God who are scattered abroad" (11:52).

Consequently, the mission of the disciples to render the indwelling Jesus salvifically present to their contem-

poraries cannot be other than universal. Jesus prays that their community love will be a saving witness to "the world" (17:23). And he prays not only for the first-generation disciples but also for those who would believe through their word (17:20), without seeing (20:29). The mission of the Christian is that of the indwelling Jesus who constitutes with his disciples the vine of universal salvation.

The vine image for the apostolic vocation of the Christian community is characteristically Johannine. A vine does not travel, preach, or conquer. It roots, grows, and silently bears fruit. The commission of Jesus to his disciples in the fourth Gospel is more a commission to be than to do. More exactly, it is a commission to do by being. As Jesus made the Father present, the disciples are to make Jesus present. As Jesus' contemporaries were saved by "coming to him" and "abiding in him," so the community's contemporaries will be saved by being attracted to it by the witness of its love.

Because of its inner structure as shared interiority the Johannine community is universalistic but not imperialistic. And since its missionary efficacy lies in the attractiveness of the unity that expresses the covenant interiority of its members, the apostolate strengthens rather than attenuates the union.

In many respects, the twentieth-century Christian would find the spirituality of the Johannine community very congenial. The priority of experienced interiority as source of a mature community life based not on the need for security but on the need to give; the demanding simplicity of a faith constituted by

personal commitment rather than by propositional uniformity; the challenge of a morality consisting in responsible love freely finding its own valid behavioral expressions; a Church order deriving its priorities from holiness and relativizing hierarchy in function of shared

discipleship; a community life in which intimate belonging becomes the universal salvific mission of witnessing to the attractiveness of divine life and love — these are perhaps the true dimensions of an authentic ecclesial spirituality for the post-monolith Christian. ●