Competing Spiritualities: Reflections on John 6 in Global Perspective

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Within the landscape of the fourth gospel one of the favourite stopping points for biblical geologists is John 6. It sits somewhat awkwardly as a block between the preceding and following chapters, leading some to propose reordering and others more persuasively to as added in the gospel's final stages (Beutler, 2013, pp. 61, 205). In addition, within John 6 there appear to be layers of tradition, inviting the adventure of speculation about how each arose and how the layers are interconnected (e.g. Fortna, 1970; Anderson, 2010; Theobald, 209, pp. 425-426; and see the discussion in Beutler, 2013, pp. 206-207). While acknowledging the legitimacy of pursuing such goals, though with caution and more humility than is sometimes shown, I shall seek in this paper instead to revisit the contours with which it now presents us, in order to examine what it conveys in its diversity when read as a whole. In particular I shall explore how the spirituality of the fourth gospel comes to expression here, set in contrast with competing spiritualities. By spirituality I mean how the author portrays what it means to engage in a relationship with God. That is a question of history, but also one which remains current in our world today, and so I will also add comments about what we might learn from the competing spiritualities of John 6 for our addressing the question: how one engages in a relation to God in our contemporary cultural contexts.

I use the term “spiritualities” because as I shall seek to demonstrate there are various spiritualities or models of how one understands engaging with God in John 6. I shall begin with the more positive, that is, the spiritualities which the author seems determined to affirm, before then turning to those the author appears to reject or at least seriously qualify.

The most central image expressing spirituality in John 6 is that of Jesus as the bread of life. Bread is understood not as a luxury extra, but as a necessity for life in the same way that in John 4, with which our chapter is connected through

6:35, the image of water is used not as something to satisfy supplementary indulgence but as a basic necessity. Thus, the imagery indicates a claim that what Jesus is and offers in his person is not a religious extra to enhance one's relationship with God but is fundamental to it. To relate to Jesus is in this sense to relate to God. This also makes sense of the fact that we find similar images drawn from the basic necessities of life also applied to Jesus, such as light and life and in a spatial, directional sense: way. One may add: vine, where the assumption is that one needs a vine to produce grapes and wine, also understood as staple to the normal diet of the time, rather than as a luxury extra. Many of Jesus' "I am" sayings use such imagery to have him make the claim, that he and he alone is the source of human spirituality.

The claim not just to bring but also to *be* bread, light, life, way, and vine, is extraordinary. It raises, in turn, the question of spirituality: how then does one engage with and receive this bread and light and life? The answer in the fourth gospel is simple: one believes. That belief entails acceptance that Jesus is bread and light and life, but more than a cognitive response of assent to his claims. It also includes a personal response of choosing to enter a relationship which entails loyalty and commitment and, in that process, opening oneself to receive the benefits of what the images convey: the necessities of life, usually expressed as eternal life.

Eternal life does entail a future aspect, which includes assurance of a place with Jesus, the Son, in the Father's house, and avoidance of the condemnation which future judgement would bring, so certainly including forgiveness of sins. It also includes a present aspect of being included, accepted, in a relationship with the Son and the Father and with others in a community whose relationships are governed by mutual love. That present benefit includes therefore both a sense of belonging as well as a level of mutual care which in the circumstances of most people of the time would also mean, of course, help for survival in face of the ever-present threat of poverty, an aspect frequently overlooked by interpreters in contexts not faced with such needs, as I have argued elsewhere (Loader, 2016). In its projections forward to the time of the church, the gospel also depicts such benefit in association with the giving of the Spirit, with or in whom Jesus and the Father come to dwell in the believer, and so consolidate the relationship of love which bears fruit benefitting the believer and expands that generosity of offering life's basic necessities also to others in mission beyond the community.

The meaning of the imagery of bread and life and light, but also water, is spelled out in terms of a relationship through the Son with the Father, which, because of its nature as a relationship of love, generates benefits in the present and promises them for the future for those who continue in that relationship, to use another image, who continue to abide in the Son. The foundation for this spirituality or way of engaging with God is profoundly christological. It is primarily in his person as bread and light and life that the good news is found, more than anything which he said or did. Indeed, it is one of the key features of the gospel that the author uses traditional sayings and anecdotes about Jesus, some with parallels in the other gospels, and perhaps indirectly dependent on them, in order to convey the same message over and over again, that he is the bread and light and life. While not entirely losing a sense of sequence and history of events, and sometimes incidentally preserving useful historical information not present elsewhere, most recently convincingly reassessed by Frey (2018, pp. 59-142), the gospel primarily presents Jesus in his person as the source of life, as the one who came from the Father to offer bread and light and life to the world.

The place where this most obviously comes through is in the prologue, which thus sets the tone and provides the key for understanding the rest of the gospel. For the one later depicted as offering the water of life, as being bread and light and life, is here depicted as the Logos, the Word. And already here we find the imagery of light and life and the explicit identification of the Word as Jesus Christ, the Word enfleshed, bearing the divine glory of the divine Son, full of light and truth. In the rest of chapter one we find motifs associated with the Jewish hope for a Messiah, Lamb, Son of God, but these are now fulfilled in the one who in his person is the good news (Loader, 2017, pp. 436-442). Such motifs are now integrated within a pattern or structure of thought which primarily portrays the good news as the person of Jesus himself and the possibility of engaging in relationship with him to receive the benefits of the bread and light and life he is and brings. This coheres with the image of John 6 according to which Jesus claims that he is the bread of life come down from heaven, sent from the Father.

Associated with the images of bread, but also light and life, are the words, “I am” (for a fuller discussion see Loader, 2017, pp. 347-354; Thompson, 2015, pp. 156-60; Theobald, 2009, pp. 463-466). These have evoked for readers the reference to “I am”, “I am that I am”, to Moses as God’s name at the burning

bush, and to uses in 2nd Isaiah as a self-designation of God, raising the question whether Jesus is claiming the divine name for himself in these instances. In 6:35 Jesus declares “I am the bread of life”, which is picked up in the objection by “the Jews”: “He said, ‘I am the bread which came down from heaven’” (6:41), where one would expect an accusation of blasphemy should “I am” be understood as claiming the divine name for himself. It is clear that in the exchange the objection does not hear it this way and nor apparently does the author, but instead the focus is on the claim to have come down from heaven: “How now is he saying, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” (6:42), set in contrast to what they know, namely that he is Joseph’s son and they know his parents. (6:42). When 6:48 has Jesus repeat the claim, the same applies. It is not a claim to the divine name. The anecdote about Jesus walking on the water has Jesus respond to the disciples’ fears with the words, “I am/it is I. Do not be afraid”, almost identical to the way his response is given in the parallel story in Mark: (“Be of good courage. I am/it is I. Do not be afraid” (6:50). Neither in Mark nor in John does *Ego eimi* appear to be understood as an allusion to the divine name, where one would expect a significant response to Jesus’ statement. In both versions it is best heard simply as saying: “It is I” or more colloquially: “It’s me” (Thompson, 2015, p. 143).

This is but one of the contours we find on the landscape of John 6, but it is the primary one. We remain a little longer pondering its significance and, in this regard, seek to supplement our understanding by looking beyond this landscape to similar but related terrain.

I begin with 1 John where we read: “God is light”, as well as “God is love”. There is no contradiction between Jesus’ claiming “I am the light” and the author of 1 John declaring, “God is light”, but the fact that this occurs does draws our attention again to the nature of Jesus’ claim. The best commentary is probably to be found in the opening of the prologue which declares: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God”. In effect the christology of the fourth gospel has become so heightened that somewhat paradoxically Jesus disappears, as it were, into the life of God or, put another way, for all intents and purposes, Jesus is God. That is however by no means a simple equation, for despite this oneness the author differentiates the Son and the Father, subordinates the Son to the Father and never the other way around, and depicts movement which entails distance in time and space, the Son coming from the Father and returning to the Father. The later doctrines of the

Trinity would seek to resolve such paradoxical language. In John it is nevertheless clear that Jesus is reduced, or one might say more appropriately enhanced, to become *de facto* a presentation of God. Jesus is bread and light and life not independent of God, but because God is bread and light and life. Jesus is in that sense an extension of God. John's christology is fundamentally therefore theological and that is the foundation of Johannine spirituality: a relationship with God.

If we look in other direction seeking similar terrain, we see looming large on the horizon a constellation of the same imagery of water, bread, light and life, associated with God's Wisdom. In fact, there is a direct continuity between this terrain and what is said in the prologue of the Logos, such that one could easily replace Logos by Wisdom. It is clear that the author of the fourth gospel is claiming that what was said of Wisdom is not only true of Jesus, but that Jesus *is* Wisdom, the Word, and *only* Jesus is Wisdom and Word. Some of the closest parallels are found in the Parables of Enoch where we read that Wisdom came and was rejected (1 En 42:1-2), just as the Word came to his own and they rejected him (1:11). But the more positive depiction in Ben Sira is equally relevant, that Wisdom came to Israel and was positively received (Sir 24:1-12). A major difference however from Ben Sira (and also Baruch) is that both identify Wisdom with Torah, as God's word to Israel (Sir 24:23; Bar 4:1). Wisdom/Torah is bread and water and light and life (Sir 24:19-22). The author of the fourth gospel knows that tradition but does not embrace it. Instead it declares that God's gift of Torah through Moses (1:16-17), not identified as Wisdom, preceded and foreshadowed the greater gift destined to replace it, namely Jesus, identified as Logos as light and truth, and so by implication as God's wisdom. The difference between Torah and Jesus as the Logos (and Wisdom) comes to expression in John 6 which draws upon the imagery of Torah as manna and has Jesus declare: "Moses did not give you bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. The bread of God is the one who came down from heaven and giving life to the world" (6:32-33). "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (5:39-40).

Even though there is a clear distinction between Torah and Jesus the Word, to which we return below in discussing continuity and discontinuity, the link between the two has implications for understanding the spirituality of the fourth

gospel because the structure of the spirituality which both presume is similar. According to the former, one receives bread and light and life by living in a relationship with God governed by God's word, Torah, which includes belonging to a community of others who share that relationship. Similarly, according to the latter one receives bread and light and life by living in a relationship with God governed by God's Word, Jesus, which includes belonging to a community of others who share that relationship. The relationship with God is fundamental for both spiritualities. Its mediation or governance is different. But the governance or control which determines the latter is expressed in who Jesus is and so ultimately in who God is. In both spiritualities the foundation is therefore theological, with the latter having its focus less on commandments and rituals and more on some primary values, such as love and its implications, though always interpreted according to the ethical principles embodied in Torah. It is historically incorrect to depict the former as a spirituality of keeping rules and commandments. These have a subordinate role to enable the relationship to be sustained which also has its basis in divine generosity. In that sense there is a continuity of spirituality, but a difference over the extent to which the ritual provisions, in particular, are to be upheld, but informing both is a theology according to which God in love offers an ongoing relationship.

In this sense the spirituality implied in the claim that Jesus is the bread of life, the key image in John 6, is very Jewish in structure: ongoing engagement in relation to God as the source of life and appropriating the blessings of shared community. While at one level such claims made of Jesus appear extraordinary and for many alienating in their exclusiveness ("no one comes to the Father except through me" 14:6), the fact that they are primarily theological and ultimately are about who God is, paradoxically, makes them more accessible and universal than some of the claims found elsewhere in the gospels. For John's good news, expressed through the existential imagery of water, bread, light and life, speaks a language universally understood across human cultures, and so can be translated globally into diverse settings. Its simplification of the complex Jesus tradition into a claim that ultimately there is a God who seeks relationship based on love and promises a community of life and hope to address human existential longing renders it accessible to all. It can also provide a template or measure for identifying the same spirituality elsewhere, wherever it may occur, including in diverse religious traditions of humanity. It has, in that

sense global relevance and is a key resource for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. While John has Jesus express this exclusively: “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me”, one could also find ground for going beyond John to argue: Jesus’ understanding of God as the God who seeks relationship is the way, the truth, and the life, and so the only way to relate authentically to God. Light does not wear labels and we may recognise the light we have seen in Jesus wherever it shines, a truly global perspective.

While this universal dimension appears to me to be a corollary of John’s christology and theology as represented in the core image of John 6 of Jesus as the bread of life, it is a spirituality alongside others in John 6 which also deserve our attention. This is evident in the change in surface structure of the text when we move into 6:51-58. Here the language of faith takes on a new form in the imagery of eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking his blood. This goes beyond the nature of faith discussed thus far and is directly related to an expansion of the horizon from looking to Jesus’ coming as the bread of life and his ministry to looking at his death and its consequences. The imagery of bread used in the discourse since 6:30 necessarily implies eating, as the imagery of water implies drinking, and thus far such eating and drinking has been equated with assent to Jesus’ claim to be the bread of life and engagement in relationship with him through joining his community of faith.

Some see the more specific comments of eating his flesh and drinking his blood in 6:51-58 as simply further elaboration of such faith (Menken, 1997, 185-88). There are some indications, however, that it must mean more than that (see the discussion in Loader, 2017, pp. 169-171). These include that the change coincides with the introduction of a reference to Jesus’ death in 6:51: “I am the living bread come down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he shall live forever, and the bread which I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world”. There is also a change in tense. He had spoken of being that bread in the present. Now he speaks of giving it in the future, from the perspective of his earthly ministry, so related to his death and the time following his death. In addition, the previous statement about giving bread in the future is found in 6:27, which refers to “the food (βρῶσιν) which remains forever, which the Son of Man will give you. For God has set his seal on him”. The title, “Son of Man” reappears in 6:51-58, where he speaks of eating the flesh of the Son of Man (6:53) and we find another reference to “food” (βρῶσις) (6:54), echoing 6:27. In addition a more striking verb is used of eating: τρώω (54, 56, 58). Aside from

3:13 where Son of Man refers to Jesus' descent alongside his ascent, all other uses of this title appear in contexts related to the climax of Jesus' ministry, namely his death, exaltation and return to the Father (Loader, 2017, pp. 213-280). That is clearly its context here and fits the allusion to his death with which this section begins. This part of the landscape appears designed to shock and confront, part of the author's rhetorical interplay with his sympathetic hearers, who know that this has nothing to do with cannibalism or the like.

The allusions to eating his flesh and drinking his blood are best understood as allusions to the eucharist (Beutler, 2013, pp. 225-26; Thompson, 2015, p. 154; Frey, 2013A, p. 406; Frey, 2013C, p. 576.). Supporting this conclusion is the likelihood that the author would hardly have been unaware of eucharistic tradition, especially if he has some awareness of the other gospels or at least Mark (Mackay, 2014, pp. 237-256), even though he does not bring an account of Jesus' last meal on the night when he was arrested. At this point on the landscape of John 6 we have therefore a reflection of the spiritual practice of the Johannine community, which included as a core element the appropriation by faith of Jesus the bread of life through consuming the elements of bread and wine, representing Jesus' body and blood, but essentially representing who he was and is as the bread of life, and so ultimately, opening oneself to God

One might want to add that there is an additional benefit here flowing from an understanding of his death as vicarious (Knöppler, 1994, pp. 94-95, 202; Frey, 2013B, p. 531). This may be present, not least since it is an aspect of the eucharistic traditions we know from Mark and Paul and their parallels. This should not however be seen as now offering something not already given in the person of Jesus as the bread of life during his ministry. On the other hand, nor is there warrant in the light of his being the bread of life to exclude an allusion to his death as vicarious (cf. Forestell, 1974, p. 76; see discussion in Theobald, 2009, p. 478). It was possible to hold both perspectives together, such as we find in the other gospels which can depict Jesus (and already John the Baptist) as offering forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4; 2:5, 10 par.; Luke 1:77; 3:3; 7:47) while also alluding to his death as vicarious (Mark 10:45 par.; 14:25 par.). As in Judaism, an inclusive stance could hold together the notions of martyrs' deaths as vicarious with belief that forgiveness is accessible through prayer and other practices. The one does not need to exclude the other. An inclusive approach to the eucharist, following the Johannine pattern, would mean that there need be no contradiction between affirming eucharistic practice alongside proffering the

more universally accessible gospel of good news of life in relationship with God.

If we turn in the other direction, we see that the landscape of John 6 has folds familiar from what will have been the past of the community. The miracle with which the chapter begins echoes the feeding miracle performed by Elisha when it tells of the lad who brought the loaves and fish (2 Kgs 4:42-43). It also echoes the miraculous feeding of Israel in the wilderness with manna, a parallel referred to directly in the discourse which follows. Similarly, the walking on water at least alludes to the miracles of overcoming the dangers of the deep, such as the parting of the waters in the escape from Egypt. The implications of such typologies are clear: the God who makes himself known in Jesus is the God of Israel of old. This is both a claim to authority and a claim to continuity. We may rightly assume that for the hearers of John 6 it mattered for their spirituality that the one who came to them as bread, light and life, was not offering a new religion in contradiction or discontinuity with the old, but was truly the one sent from the God who had acted to save his people in the past.

In Mark's version of the feeding of the 5000 the numerical symbolism serves to celebrate the gospel coming to Israel, alluded to in the twelve baskets matching the twelve tribes and probably alluded to also in the number five, matching the five books of Moses, in the five loaves and the five thousand. Its story reinforces the link by referring to the people as like sheep without a shepherd, a tradition description of Israel, and, having them divided into troops of hundreds and fifties like Israel in the wilderness. It then has the feeding of the 4000 represent the gospel coming to Gentiles, locating it in Gentile territory and using the numerical symbolism of seven to represent the universal, in seven loaves and seven baskets left over (on Mark see Loader, 1997, pp. 65-85). John's version may retain a symbolic allusion to Israel in the numbers, but it is not explicit and not used as Mark uses it to address the issue of inclusion of both Israel and Gentiles as recipients of the good news.

While John 6 underlines continuity by typology, underlining that the God who acted then is acting in Jesus, the continuity is a modified continuity. The discourse plays on the allusion to manna in the wilderness in order to make a clear distinction within the theological continuity between the past and the present in a way that goes beyond mere continuity to a claim of superiority. The miracle of manna foreshadowed the coming of the true bread. That miracle is not denied let alone disparaged, but it remained at the level of an earthly

material event belonging to the world below, whereas the coming of the true bread from heaven, from above, is something new. The author goes beyond, however, simply contrasting the past act of God in giving the manna at an earthly level and the coming of the heavenly gift. He also expands that contrast to include the symbolic use of the manna to represent God's gift of Torah (Theobald, 2009, p. 462; Deut 8:2-3; Wisd 16:26 Philo *Mut.* 253-263). Accordingly, Moses did not give bread from heaven, which means by implication Torah is not bread from heaven. Only Jesus, the Logos, is bread from heaven. This is a contrast found already in 1:16-17, where a distinction is made between two gifts of God, the second replacing the first, Christ the true bread replacing Torah (see Loader 2017, pp. 443-52). The contrast is subtle and does not disparage Torah, but redefines it as both foreshadowing at an earthly level and predicting what was to come and so what would replace it.

In terms of spirituality this means that a relationship with God is now to be based not on the covenantal nomism of living by Torah, but on faith in and loyalty to Jesus. To do the works of God is not to follow the prescriptions of Torah, but to believe in the one whom God sent (6:26-29). The theological continuity with the God of Israel who acted in the past is thus qualified on the basis that God acted then at one level, that of the flesh, also good and God's creation, but has now acted at another superior level, that of the spirit. To recognise this is to know that faith in God must now be on the basis of embracing the gift of bread, light and life in the Son whom the Father has sent, and so no longer to continue to relate to God as before on the basis of Torah. The author here and elsewhere makes every effort to avoid any sense that the old is bad or blameworthy. On the contrary to attend to it now from the perspective of the new is to recognise that it foreshadowed and predicted the new which was to replace it. This includes its predictions of a Messiah, Son of God, king of Israel, which the author sees have been fulfilled in Christ, understood now within its more developed christological understanding of Jesus as the Word, the Son sent by the Father from above.

The subtle sense of continuity and discontinuity with Israel's faith has also some similarity with the way the author in John 6 treats the Jesus tradition itself. Thus, nothing suggests that the author seeks to deny the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, but there is nevertheless a clear sense that there are appropriate and inappropriate responses to that event. That event, as the author's depiction of Jesus' discourse shows, symbolises at the earthly level below, the level of the

flesh, a reality on the spiritual level above, namely that Jesus is the bread of life. To appreciate it only at the earthly level is like appreciating God's acts in Israel's past, with which it is in continuity as God's action, and God's gift of Torah, at that level. That is to fail to see what it points to at the spiritual level, Jesus as the true bread. The account of the feeding of the 5000 in John 6 makes this critical perspective clear when it mentions those who follow Jesus because of the miracles (6:2) and especially when in response to seeing the miracle they acclaimed him "truly the prophet who is to come into the world" and want to make him king (6:14-15). Jesus walks away from such spirituality, for such faith is inappropriate, not because it acclaims the miracle and acclaims Jesus as prophet and king (Messiah), but because it fails to see that he is so much more than that. Theirs is a response still at the earthly level. John 6 later has Jesus summarily dismisses this kind of response as concerned only with food and drink (6:26) and elsewhere depicts it similarly as failing to see Jesus for who he really is.

Earlier in the gospel it had depicted Nicodemus as remaining at that level where because of Jesus' miracles Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus has come from God and is rebuffed with the need to be born from above to be able to see the higher reality (3:1-3). Nicodemus reflects the approach of those depicted in the previous verses who indeed believe in his name, language used of becoming a believer, because of the miracles, but in whom Jesus refused to believe because he knew what was in people (2:23-25). The miracles are described as signs, σημεῖα, a term whose range of meaning can include being something which points beyond itself but could also simply mean wonder in the sense of an event on the basis of which one may claim authority or influence. In typical Johannine use of double meaning, the author wants people to understand σημεῖα in the former sense, not simply the latter.

John 6 brings critical reflection to bear on both the faith of Israel and, significantly, on the faith of Jesus' followers, disqualifying both if they remain at the earthy level and fail to see the heavenly, the spiritual, which was to see and respond to Jesus as the source of life. It rejects these competing spiritualities and at least invites our consideration in our own day of spiritualities which remain at the level of alleged miracles, signs and wonders, as a basis for recruiting religious followers.

A sense of differentiation is found not only in the opening sections of John 6 and its discourse, but also in the concluding sections, from 6:60 onwards. Here,

again, we have to do with followers of Jesus, but this time they are the dissenters. The term used, that they grumble, links them with those unbelieving fellow Jewish opponents who resist Jesus' assertions in 6:41. These erstwhile followers take offence at Jesus' words. It is not immediately clear what of Jesus' claims caused offence. Given what immediately precedes in 6:51-58, it could have been the notion of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood as a shocking image. Jesus' response in 6:62 however suggests that it has to do with his claim to have come from above: "What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending where he was before?" (Theobald, 2009, p. 490). It might refer to both his coming and the way he depicts that his gift will be received, through eating and drinking (Beasley-Murray, 1999, p. 96). The words, "What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending where he was before?" imply, however, that this, his ascent, would cause greater offence). Why? It might refer to shamefulness of crucifixion which at least was the first stage in Jesus' ascent to the Father where he was before (Zumstein, 2016, p. 278). The next statement, "The spirit gives life; the flesh is of no profit", frames the offence within the contrast of flesh and spirit, below and above. This makes it likely that the suggested offence for such believers would be the claim that Jesus comes from and goes back to the heavenly world (Schnackenburg, 1977, pp. 103-107).

It would seem then that the followers of Jesus depicted here are similar to those depicted in 6:14-15, though they need not be the same. They have in common with the grumbling opponents that they are offended by Jesus' claim to have come from above and are apparently remaining in their faith at the level of wanting to hail him, perhaps as those in 6:14-15, as prophet and messiah, but are unwilling to go along with the much higher claims that Jesus is the Word, the Son who has come from the Father. It is probably significant that the encounter takes place, as John emphasises, in the synagogue in Capernaum (6:59). They respond to Jesus at the level of the flesh and fail to hear Jesus' words and receive them as lifegiving. Whereas in 6:14-15 Jesus took his leave of such followers, here these followers take leave of Jesus (6:66) and in effect cease to be followers. By contrast Simon Peter as spokesperson for the twelve reaffirms their faith in Jesus' words as lifegiving and in him as "holy one of God" (6:69), in an exchange which recalls and may be rewriting Mark 8:27-30, where Mark has Peter hail him as "the Christ". The choice of "holy one of God" may be because "the Christ" was too close to what the dissenters were willing to

confess (see also Mackay, 2004, p. 275). Confessing Jesus as the Christ is central for John, but only in a much more elevated sense.

The chapter concludes with reference to Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, as the one who would betray Jesus (6:70-71). Of others who reject Jesus the author has Jesus provide a rationalising explanation along the lines that only those whom the Father has given to the Son (6:37, 65) and whom the Father draws to the Son (6:44), who are thus “taught of God” an allusion to Isa 54:13 (6:45), respond positively and that Jesus had foreknowledge of this. The apparent determinism sits paradoxically beside statements which assume the freedom of those hearing Jesus to believe or not to do so, typical of the use of such rationalisations elsewhere, such as in the sectarian documents found at Qumran (cf. also 3:19-21).

At one level the depiction of the good news in John 6 is particularist and divisive. While it has arguably an integrated spirituality, this is articulated in a manner that excludes. It excludes a spirituality of following Jesus primarily because of his signs and wonders. It excludes a spirituality than can see Jesus only at an earthly level. It excludes a spirituality which remains committed to the Torah of the Jews as the way to life. There is also a level of exclusion in its affirming a spirituality for which celebration of the eucharist appears central. On the other hand, it affirms a spirituality based on understanding of Jesus as making God known, not in the sense of explanation, but as presence and encounter. As a result, to respond to Jesus is in effect to respond to God. Jesus and so God is thus portrayed as the source of life, depicted in the existential imagery of water, bread, light and life.

While at one level the high claims about Jesus cause great offence and division, at another level they paradoxically bring Jesus so far into the being of God, as to have him disappear, as it were, into the life of God, or at least to be merged into deity, so that to respond to him is in effect to respond to God. This is why in 1 John images of light and life and thus transferred directly to God. While the actions and words of Jesus and not least his death remain significant, the good news he offers is not so much himself nor what he has done, but the God whose person is the good news as the source of light and life and bread and water. In contrast then to the many aspects of exclusion found in John 6, at its heart is a spirituality of universal dimensions: a call to enter into a relationship with the God to whom Jesus points, who is light and life and bread. Those needs are arguably universal as is the answer to which this good news points. The God

of Jesus is the God who offers bread and light and life in whatever guise, language, culture or religion, including within the rich cultural traditions of East Asia, even where Jesus as particular bearer and embodiment of that reality may not be known.

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