

**“The Light Shines in the Darkness”:
Johannine Dualism and the Challenge for Christian Theology of Religions Today**

Special Topics Forum
Christian Theology's Engagement with Religious Pluralism: Biblical Texts & Themes
American Academy of Religion
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, November 2006

Introduction

A few years ago shortly after the appearance of my second book exploring the plausibility of a pneumatological theology of religions,¹ a colleague whose specialization was in early Christianity asked me if and how my Spirit-centered approach could avoid the distinction in the New Testament texts between believers and unbelievers that described the former as those who had come out of darkness into the light.² He could not see any way around the implication that the first Christians understood themselves to be in the light while adherents and devotees of other religions remained in the dark. Hence the light-darkness motif in the Christian Testament translated into a theological stance which understood people in other religions to be in darkness when compared to the light of Christ and the Christian faith.

On the surface of things, this division between believers and unbelievers is pretty clear cut, and no doubt undergirds the traditional ecclesiocentric soteriology – e.g., as expressed in the classical motto, *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (“there is no salvation outside the church”) – and

¹ See Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions* (Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 20; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), and *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003).

² Representative texts include: “to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18); “Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14); “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light” (Eph. 5:8); “But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness” (1 Thess. 5:4-5); cf. Matt. 4:16, Lk. 1:79, Col. 1:13, and 1 Pet. 2:9, among other texts. For explication of this light-darkness motif in the NT vis-à-vis early Christian understandings of conversion, see Joel Green, “‘To Turn from Darkness to Light’ (Acts 26:18): Conversion in the Narrative of Luke-Acts”, in Kenneth J. Collins and John H. Tyson (eds), *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), pp. 103-18, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Overtures to Biblical Theology 20; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). Note that all Scripture quotations in this paper will be from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

exclusivistic theology of religions. I want to argue in what follows, however, that things are not so obvious under the surface. To do so, I will focus on the light-darkness motif in the Gospel of John. The respective sections of this paper will a) survey the light-darkness theme in the fourth gospel (FG); b) assess this theme as related to the early Christian polemic against the Jews; c) explore this theme at the intersection of recent studies of Qumran and early Christian sectarianism; and d) identify other trajectories in the FG which complicate attempts to develop a theology of religions from the Johannine understanding of light and darkness. I will conclude with some suggestions for a contemporary theology of religions that in some ways go beyond the exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist framework, but that nevertheless are suggestive for the further articulation of a pneumatological approach to interreligious engagement.

One caveat before proceeding: I am neither a biblical studies scholar nor an expert in the voluminous scholarship on the FG.³ My background and training is in constructive and systematic theology and the study of religion. Yet insofar as Christian theology will go only so far as biblical interpretation will allow, the systematician and comparative theologian must inevitably deal with the “hard texts” of scripture. I will hazard the following reflections on the FG because the light-darkness motif is not on the margins of the evangelist’s account, and because I am convinced more substantive theological space will be cleared for a more nuanced approached to Christian theology of religions if the case can be made even in the face of the pervasiveness of this theme in the FG. Needless to say, my argument is therefore vulnerable to correction from both the theological and the exegetical side. Hence I submit these thoughts in

³ For this reason, I do not deal with questions of authorship, source critical theories, and other such convoluted issues in Johannine interpretation. I assume the canonical form and place of the gospel, and proceed with the conviction that the Christian theological task has to ask the question of how to read “John” – representing the author(s) of the text and the community which produced the text – for today. For an overview of these other scholarly issues, see D. Moody Smith, *John among the Gospels: The Relationship in Twentieth-Century Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

trepidation, but also in eager anticipation of the responses of my colleagues, including the one who asked the fateful question to which this essay is but the beginning of a response.

Light and darkness in John: Aspects of a Classical Christian theology of religions

Any impartial reading of the FG will immediately notice the centrality of the light-darkness motif to its plot, characterization, and rhetoric.⁴ From the beginning, the Prologue presents the Logos in contrast to the darkness – “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:5) – and says that the Baptist (like the evangelist) “came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him” (1:7). Further, Jesus identifies himself as “the light of the world,” saying also, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (8:12; cf. 12:46). And as the light, Jesus admonishes his listeners: “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light” (11:35-36).

From this, it is clear that the fourth evangelist is concerned not only about describing Jesus as the light, but also with ensuring that his listeners and readers walk in Jesus’ light rather than allow the darkness to overtake them. But John is worried because the light of Jesus also brings about judgment into the world: “And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been

⁴ See, e.g., Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Light in the Darkness: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974).

done in God” (3:19-21).⁵ But to remain in the dark not only risks coming under the judgment of God, it also transforms those in darkness into lovers of evil and haters of the light. For this reason, whereas those who are in the light are doers of the truth and believers in and followers of Jesus,⁶ the world of darkness hates Jesus and his followers (7:7, 15:18-24, 17:14).

Taken at face value, these and many other passages in the FG represent the “darkness” as unbelief in and rejection of the revelation of Jesus, who is the light. Hence those who are in darkness remain in the state of not knowing God and of being spiritually separated from God.⁷ In this way, the light-darkness motif functions in the FG to demarcate between the saved and the lost, between the elect and “the world.”⁸

Given this clear opposition between believers and unbelievers, it should not be surprising that Christian thinking about the religions has long been dominated by a similar logic. The traditional exclusivist position developed along these lines, reasoning at least in part from this New Testament idea that only believers in Jesus were in the light to the conclusion that members of other religious traditions were by definition those who remained in darkness. Colonial and missionary expansions from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries were justified in part as the necessary work of reaching the multitudes of lost “heathen” in the non-western world with the light of the gospel.⁹ Insofar as such “heathen” were adherents of other religions and members of non-Christian communities, they were undoubtedly lost in darkness without the light of

⁵ On darkness as a symbol of judgment in the Hebrew Bible, see Elizabeth R. Achtemeier, ‘Jesus Christ, the Light of the World: The Biblical Understanding of Light and Darkness’, *Interpretation*, 17:4 (1963), pp. 439-49.

⁶ See Zane C. Hodges, ‘Coming into the Light – John 3:20-21’, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 135 (1978), pp. 314-22.

⁷ Arguably, one could make the argument that the gospel is an extended elaboration of the Johannine claim, “If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true” (1 Jn. 1:6); cf. Charles P. Baylis, ‘The Meaning of Walking “in the Darkness” (1 John 1:6)’, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 149 (1992), pp. 214-22.

⁸ See C. K. Barrett, *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), ch. 7 on “Paradox and Dualism.”

⁹ Representative of missionary literature during the colonial period is J. E. Godbey and Allen Howard Godbey, *Light in Darkness: or, Missions and Missionary Heroes – An Illustrated History of the Missionary Work Now Carried on By All Protestant Denominations in Heathen Lands* (Boston: Eastern, 1888). For more recent analyses, see Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (New York: Avon, 1992).

Christ. In this scheme of things, the light-darkness motif provided the church throughout much of its history with a fairly stable theological frame of reference for locating and defining the religions of the world as lying “outside” the light of God in Christ.

In the rest of this essay, however, I wish to complicate this reading of the light-darkness dualism in John in light of efforts to wrestle afresh with the topic of theology of religions in our late modern context. My approach will attempt to understand how the light-darkness motif functions in John against the backdrop of early Jewish-Christian relations, of dualism at Qumran, and of other Johannine references to the world and to the Gentiles. In each case, I hope to show that any simplistic application of the light-darkness motif that contrasts the light of Christian faith with the darkness of other religions is problematic on exegetical, hermeneutical, and theological grounds.

John and the Jews: New Implications for theology of religions

Jesus’ claim, “I am the light of the world” (8:12), sets the context for his confrontation with the Pharisees in particular (8:13) and “the Jews” in general (8:22 and passim). Now the Jewish context of this self-revelation of Jesus should not be underestimated. Based on simply textual considerations, once the passage about the woman caught in adultery (7:53-8:11) is recognized to be a later interpolation, Jesus’ claim is seen to be made in the temple courtyard in the context of the climactic day of the Jewish celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles (7:10-11, 14, 37; cf. 8:20). Whereas Jesus had claimed to be “living water” earlier, perhaps on the occasion of the water-drawing ceremony on the last day of the festival (cf. 7:37-38), here he claims to be the “light of the world,” perhaps on the occasion of the lighting of the lamps ceremony

concluding the Feast.¹⁰ This piece of detail reminds us that we need to understand Jesus' declaration to be the light of the world in its original Jewish context.

When this contextual background is factored in, the light of the world is seen to pass judgment not only on darkness in general, but on Jewish disbelief in particular. Following this proclamation, Jesus engages in a heated exchange with the Jews (*hoi Ioudaioi*¹¹), during which he denies that they know neither him nor his father (8:13-20), condemns them to death in their sins unless they believe in him (8:21-26), and rejects their claim to being legitimate children (*tekna*) of Abraham because they neither know nor accept him (8:31-42). When the Jews respond that they are both children of Abraham and of God, Jesus counters, "You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (8:44). Whereas before this tensions were already brewing between Jesus and the Jews (7:1-9, 44), from here on there were not only verbal polemics – with the Jews countercharging that Jesus was demon-possessed (8:48, 10:19) – but also attempts to assault Jesus and even a conspiracy to murder him (8:59, 10:31, 39, 11:53-57).

Jesus' exchange with the Jews should be understood also against the background of the

¹⁰ For commentary, see George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 2nd ed. (*Word Biblical Commentary* 36; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), pp. 127-28, and Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, Kevin Smyth (trans), 3 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1982), vol. 2, pp. 189-90. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), discusses the entirety of 7:1-10:42 under the section title "Tabernacles and Hanukkah."

¹¹ There seems to be no consistent reference for *hoi Ioudaioi* in the fourth gospel. In some contexts, they refer to Christian Jews who are outside the Johannine community, while in others they refer to Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem, Jewish neighbors in Johannine community who are not disciples of Jesus, or residents of Judea. The debate involves decisions about the provenance of the gospel as well as the date(s) of its (various) redaction(s). There is certainly an increasingly pejorative connotation as the narrative progresses (into the Passion). For our purposes, no definitive resolution is necessary, although I would concur with the judgment of Udo Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John*, Linda M. Maloney (trans) (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), that in general, "the Jews" are representatives of an unbelieving world (p. 36), and with Rudolf Schnackenburg's commentary that, "The leading circles of the Jews represent the cosmos; they remain impervious, without understanding (cf. 8.14, 19; 9.29; also 8.28, 43) and indeed blind (9.39) when confronted with the 'light of the world'" (*Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 1, p. 258).

ejection of believers in Jesus from the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2; cf. 7:12-13). It is possible that these expulsions had persisted during the time of the composition and even final redaction of the gospel. Even if this were not the case,¹² still the *sitz im leben* of the FG reflects the painful process through which the earliest Christian community emerged out of and began to separate from its Jewish roots.¹³ In this context, we can perhaps better understand the hostilities between Jews and Jewish-Christians, as well as the concern of the evangelist to both encourage and admonish those who were less mature in their Christian faith to persevere in the face of persecution.¹⁴ The Jews are portrayed as opponents of Jesus who were self-opinionated (chs. 7-8), foolish (ch. 9), disloyal to God (19:15), deceived and ignorant regarding their rejection of Jesus (7:49), and even demon-possessed (8:48), all in order to warn the readers of the gospel about their adversaries, to discredit their opponents, and to persuade the nascent Christian community to stand fast amidst whatever circumstances might come upon them.¹⁵ Further, this socio-historical background also illuminates the rationale for the evangelist's preserving Jesus' words to walk and work while it is still day, before the night falls (9:4, 34, 11:9-10, 12:35-36).

¹² Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John*, pp. 31-36, registers a minority opinion among contemporary scholars in suggesting that the gospel of John was written at some remove from earlier polemics with Judaism, with the references to synagogue expulsion being more retrospective (even functioning as a literary designation for unbelievers) than concerning contemporary historical realities. Schnelle argues instead that the central contrast in the fourth gospel is between law and gospel rather than between Jews and Christians. Going beyond Schnelle, Raimo Hakola, *Identity Matters: John, the Jews and Jewishness* (Supplements to *Novum Testamentum* 118; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), ch. 2, argues against the conflict-expulsion thesis, claiming that there were insufficiently strong leadership among the post-70 CE Jewish communities that could have articulated and then defended a new orthodoxy; rather, the early Jewish-Christian communities slowly came to distance and alienate themselves from their Jewish backgrounds as they embraced Gentiles.

¹³ Hence, there are those who now argue that the debate is really between Jews committed to the Torah and Jews committed to following Jesus. If so, then this less a case of Jewish-Christian polemics than it is an intra-mural Jewish disagreement; on this point, see Craig A. Evans and Donald A. Hagner (eds), preface to *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), p. xix. But consult also the now standard study on this complex issue: Jack T. Sanders, *Schismatics, Sectarians, Dissidents, Deviants: The First One Hundred Years of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1993).

¹⁴ Hence Schnackenburg comments on the evangelist's reference "to the Jews who had believed in him [Jesus]" (8:31) that, "the evangelist has in mind Jewish Christians of his time who – perhaps as a result of Jewish counter-propaganda – are in danger of lapsing from faith in Christ" (*Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 2, p. 204).

¹⁵ See further, Sean Freyne, 'Vilifying the Other and Defining the Self: Matthew's and John's Anti-Jewish Polemic in Focus', in Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (eds), *To See Ourselves as Others See Us': Christians, Jews, 'Others' in Late Antiquity* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 117-43.

Whereas the “night” that is coming refers first to the passion of the Christ (cf. 13:30), yet Jesus’ admonitions become for the Jewish-Christian readers of the gospel urgent “summons to do what is required at any particular time, to hear the voice of God here and now.”¹⁶ Toward the end of his extended presentation of Jesus as the light that brings judgment on the Jews, then, the evangelist brings to a culmination his argument that the major problem to be explained is the unbelief of the Jews, and this can be explicated in part based on God’s having blinded their eyes on the one hand, even as the Jews are nevertheless responsible for their own obstinate rejection of the light on the other (12:37-46).¹⁷

While much more can and should be said about the light-darkness motif in relationship to the Jews, time and space constraints require that we move on to ask theological questions regarding the religions. The major issue to be confronted here, I suggest, is that the light-darkness motif has contributed toward a Christian theology of Judaism which has in turn shaped, both implicitly and explicitly, Christian reflection on the broader question of theology of religions. In the case of Christian theological reflection on Judaism, two levels of analysis require attention. First, there is the question about whether or not the negative portrayal of the Jews in John’s gospel in particular and in other portions of the New Testament in general becomes a normative guideline for how Christians should think about Jews, Jewishness, and Judaism. Some would argue that once we locate the anti-Judaic rhetoric – which should clearly be distinguish from “anti-Semitism,” since “anti-Judaism” is more geographically and historically delimited in contrast to the loaded language of “anti-Semitism – in its original socio-

¹⁶ Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 2, p. 242.

¹⁷ See John Painter, ‘The Quotation of Scripture and Unbelief in John 12.36b-43’, in Craig A. Evans and W. Richard Stegner (eds), *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel* (JSNT Sup 104; *Studies in Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity*, 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 429-58. Similarly, the man born blind (ch. 9) nevertheless truly sees, not only because his eyes were opened by Jesus, but because he recognized and accepted Jesus as Lord (9:38), in contrast to the seeing Pharisees who nevertheless remained spiritually blind because of their incapacity (unwillingness?) to receive the Messiah. I will return to this episode later.

historical context, then we realize, as Luke Timothy Johnson has argued, that “the slander of the New Testament is typical of that found among rival claimants to a philosophical tradition and is found as widely among Jews as among other Hellenists.”¹⁸ Building on Johnson’s argument, Stephen Motyer proposes that while John might be considered “anti-Jewish” in terms of seeking to delegitimize Jewish beliefs and practices and to legitimate belief in Christ, John is not hostile toward the Jews; rather, even the polemical claim in 8:44 “serves not merely to *denounce* but more particularly to *warn*, to *persuade*.”¹⁹ Thus, “far from ‘demonising’ the Jews, this charge [8:44] is part of a strategy, rooted in the conditions of late first-century Judaism, which is designed to appeal to Jews to see Jesus as the Messiah, and is motivated by a deep commitment to the good of Israel.”²⁰

But even if we grant the original *sitz im leben* of an intramural debate, other scholars are convinced that the plain surface reading of the FG has played its part in nurturing later Christian anti-Semitism toward Jews.²¹ Now to be sure, the sources of anti-Semitism are by no means fully derivative from early Christianity.²² At the same time, even if scholars can agree that the New Testament as a whole or the FG in particular are not inherently theologically anti-Semitic, it is

¹⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, ‘The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108:3 (1989), pp. 419-41, quotation from p. 429. Johnson suggests that there is stronger anti-Gentile rhetoric in the New Testament – he cites Matt. 6:7, 32; Rom. 1:18-32; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Eph. 2:11-12; 1 Thess 4:5, 13; Tit 1:12; 1 Pet 1:14, 18, 4:3-4, etc. (p. 441n66) – and that by comparison, the anti-Jewish rhetoric is actually fairly mild.

¹⁹ Stephen Motyer, *Your Father the Devil? A New Approach to John and ‘the Jews’* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1997), p. 212; italics Motyer’s.

²⁰ Motyer, *Your Father the Devil?*, p. xii.

²¹ E.g., Robert Kysar, ‘Anti-Semitism and the Gospel of John’, in Craig A. Evans and Donald A. Hagner (eds), *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 113-27, revised in Kysar, *Voyages in John: Charting the Fourth Gospel* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2005), ch. 9, and many of the authors of R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, and F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (eds), *Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000* (Assen, The Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001). The more radical thesis – that is, that the New Testament is anti-Semitic rather than that the New Testament only nurtures later Christian anti-Semitism – has been widely accepted in some circles since the publication of Rosemary Radford Ruether’s *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Crossroad, 1974).

²² See J. N. Sevenster, *The Roots of Pagan Anti-Semitism in the Ancient World* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 41; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), and John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

certainly the case that later generations of Christians far removed from the original context have developed an anti-Semitic Christian theology of Judaism by drawing from these texts, and some have even proceeded to act upon those beliefs.²³ In other words, the assumption that Jews are those who remain in darkness in the service of their father the devil has not only fostered certain Christian attitudes and postures toward Jews,²⁴ but has even served to justify oppressive Christian practices against Jews over the centuries. Unfortunately, it is no simple matter to distance Christian texts from their interpretations, reception, and effects.²⁵

What then about Christian theology of religions in terms of the light-darkness theme in John? At one level, it might be argued that no conclusions can be drawn since the FG identifies those in darkness as Jews, and this permits us to extract only a Christian theology of Judaism rather than a full blown Christian theology of religions. In this case, the special relationship between Christianity and Judaism – either in terms of covenant connectedness or in terms of intramural hostilities – means that the division between light and darkness in John has no bearing on Christian theological views regarding other religious traditions. But of course things are never that easy since the fact that Judaism falls under the category of a “non-Christian religion” itself has implications for Christian theological reflection about the religions.

But given the connections between Christian theology of Judaism and Christian theology of religions, we can also pursue the implications of Christian rethinking the domination of the light-darkness theme in its theology of Judaism. As the rupture of the Holocaust has led

²³ One of the standard historical accounts is Edward H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-three Centuries of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Macmillan, and London: Collier, 1965).

²⁴ Arguably, such attitudes made possible the Holocaust. After identifying a number of reasons why America did not do more to save the Jews, historian David Wyman concludes, “The real obstacle was the absence of a strong desire to rescue Jews”; see David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 339.

²⁵ See R. Alan Culpepper, ‘The Gospel of John as a Threat to Jewish-Christian Relations’, in J. H. Charlesworth, with F. X. Blisard and J. L. Gorham (eds), *Overcoming Fear Between Jews and Christians* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 21-43

Christians to reconsider the relationship between Christianity and Judaism from the ground up, might this also open up theological space to rethink and simplistic division between Christian faith and non-Christian religions? For example, insofar as there are now widespread attempts to develop a non-supersessionistic theology of Judaism,²⁶ is it possible also to formulate a more inclusive rather than exclusive Christian theology of religions? More precisely, if Judaism is associated not with the category of darkness but recognized instead as the “elder brother” of Christianity – with not only responsibilities, but also the rights (e.g., respect) thereof²⁷ – then might other religious traditions also serve in their own way as *praeparatio evangelica* to the Christian faith?²⁸ In other words, if it is possible to reconstruct a Christian theology of Judaism that is not framed by the categories of light and darkness, is it not also possible today to reconfigure Christian theology of religions in other terms?

These possibilities, however, presume that Christian theology of religions informed by John has to be extrapolated from a Christian theology of Judaism. Rather than this indirect approach, some will argue that the light-darkness motif is applied by the evangelist not only to the Jews, but also to the world at large. Hence we must now turn our attention to this more comprehensive understanding of light and darkness in the FG.

The light shines in the darkness: John’s Prologue and sectarianism at Qumran

The Prologue to John sets the world as the stage for the incarnation. The cosmic frame of

²⁶ The most sustained efforts so far have been made by Paul M. Van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*, 3 vols. (reprint, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1995), Clark M. Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), and James F. Moore, et al., *Toward a Dialogical Community: A Post-Shoah Christian Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004).

²⁷ As recently proposed by Morris A. Inch, *The Elder Brother: A Christian Alternative to Anti-Semitism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005).

²⁸ See Ian S. Kemp, ‘The Light of Men’ in the Prologue of John’s Gospel’, *Indian Journal of Theology*, 15:4 (1966), pp. 154-64.

reference is unmistakable: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (1:3). So when the evangelist proceeds to declare that, “in him was life, and the life was the light of all people,” and “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:4-5), two observations are pertinent. First, if the Logos is the light, then the world lies in darkness. But secondly, the darkness is not summarily dispersed by the light; rather, the darkness attempts (even if it fails) to resist – “overcome” is from *κατελαβεν*, which could be translated apprehend, comprehend, or overtake²⁹ – the light. Schnackenburg thus concludes, “The Enemies of God do not merely walk in darkness..., they are themselves ‘darkness’.”³⁰ In this case, all unbelievers, which include not only “the Jews” but also, by extension, those in other faiths, are by definition those who in the darkness.

There are, however, other exegetical, contextual, and theological considerations. Most textually pertinent is when John goes on to say, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (1:9). Here it appears that the light that enlightens the world also offers salvation to the world, and that rather than give up in the face of rejection, the Logos became flesh precisely in order to be received by humankind.³¹ To be sure, although the Logos “was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him” (1:10). Further, there is also the question about whether or not the “everyone” of 1:9 refers

²⁹ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 387, asks: “Does *κατελαβεν* mean that darkness could not ‘apprehend’ the light intellectually (so Cyril of Alexandria), that darkness did not accept the light, or that darkness could not ‘conquer’ the light (Origen and most Greek fathers)? More than likely John, whose skill in wordplays appears throughout his Gospel, has introduced a wordplay here: darkness could not ‘apprehend’ or ‘overtake’ the light, whether by comprehending it (grasping with the mind) or by overcoming it (grasping with the hand).”

³⁰ Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 1, p. 246.

³¹ For a defense of this reading, see Ernst Haenchen, *John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1-6*, Robert W. Funk (trans), 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), vol. 1, p. 118. I should mention that some interpreters believe 1:9 constitutes not God’s special or saving revelation, but God’s general revelation. But even here, some understand such general revelation to be subjectively endowed in each heart (the dominant view throughout Christian history), while others argue that such general revelation is objectively present to all people (a version of the doctrine of prevenient or common grace). For an overview of these debates, see Ed L. Miller, ‘The True Light Which Illumines Every Person’, in Ed L. Miller (ed), *Good News in History: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 63-82, esp. pp. 69-78.

comprehensively to the world – after all, grammatically, “was coming into the world” could connect just as well to “the true light” – or only to the Logos’ own people. If the latter, then “He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him” (1:11). So on the one hand, 1:9 could be the basis for a more optimistic theology of religions if indeed it were understood that at least potentially, the light of the Logos offers salvation to all human beings.³² On the other hand, 1:10 takes back what 1:9 gives away and 1:11 suggests that the scope of “everyone” in 1:9 may be restricted to the Jews, but whoever it is that is referred to nevertheless rejects the Logos.³³ Still, there seems to yet remain the opportunity for any and even all to believe and receive the Logos, and to these are given the right and power to become children of God (1:12).

But what is the wider context within which these claims regarding the light of the Logos and the darkness of the world can be further understood? This is an especially crucial issue given the increasingly accepted hypothesis that the Prologue (and the FG itself) is itself shaped by dualistic assumptions that was “in the air” during the first century.³⁴ What a previous generation of researchers had suggested were features of Gnosticism – e.g., the dualisms of light and darkness, truth and falsehood, and life and death³⁵ – have more recently come to be seen as characteristics of a pervasive first century Jewish-Hellenistic milieu that included “the dualism of Qumran and other Jewish apocalyptic texts, *hekhalot* mysticism, Hermeticism, Philo and

³² 1:9 is the most quoted text in defense of a more inclusive Christian theology of religions by Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997).

³³ Hence while the Logos perseveres in revealing himself to the world, the world rejects him. In this case, the offer of salvation intimated in 1:9 functions more as a judgment on an unrepentant world; see William J. U. Philip, ‘The Light of Glory – An Exposition of the Prologue of John’s Gospel’, *Churchman*, 116:2 (2002), pp. 113-26, esp. pp. 119-23.

³⁴ See Hakola, *Identity Matters*, 197-210.

³⁵ See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Kendrick Grobel (trans), vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1955), ch. 2, esp. pp. 17-21. For a discussion of the difficulties related to associating the FG with Gnosticism, especially the more definitively heterodox versions characteristic of the later second century, see Judith M. Lieu, ‘Gnosticism and the Gospel of John’, *The Expository Times*, 90 (1979), pp. 233-37.

Neoplatonism.”³⁶ Here, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the community at Qumran suggests both comparisons and contrasts between the dualism of the FG and that of Qumran. Generally speaking, whereas Qumranic dualism is both cosmic and metaphysical, Johannine dualism, while not excepting these features – including the blanket claims regarding the world being in darkness and in bondage to the devil (12:31, 14:30, 16:11) – is more straightforwardly soteriological and ethical, especially with regard to requiring moral decisions and personal commitments of its readers (and community members).³⁷ While the Qumranic Community Rule more explicitly distinguishes between the Spirit of Truth versus the Spirit of perversity, and the Sons of Light versus the Sons of Darkness, yet “In the Rule and John light symbolically represents life, truth, knowledge, and eternal life; conversely darkness represents death, falsehood, ignorance, and annihilation.”³⁸ Now even if Johannine dependence on Qumran is rejected,³⁹ yet it is arguable that the fourth evangelist had adopted a Greek philosophical idea, the Logos, but yet at the same time reshaped it according to the dualistic sensibilities of Jewish Hellenism prevailing in the first century.

Why and how did this transformation occur? I suggest that the similarity of their socio-historical contexts may cast some light on this question: both the Qumran community and the

³⁶ Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, John Bowden (trans) (London: SCM, and Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), p. 113.

³⁷ E.g., James H. Charlesworth, ‘A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in 1QS 3:13-4:26 and the “Dualism” Contained in the Gospel of John’, in James H. Charlesworth (ed), *John and Qumran* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1972), pp. 76-106; orig. *NTS*, 15 (1968-1969), pp. 389-418, and Devorah Dimant, ‘Dualism at Qumran: New Perspectives’, in James H. Charlesworth (ed), *Caves of Enlightenment: Proceedings of the American Schools of Oriental Research Dead Sea Scrolls Jubilee Symposium (1947-1997)* (North Richland Hills, Tex.: Bibal Press, 1998), pp. 55-73.

³⁸ Charlesworth, ‘A Critical Comparison’, p. 100. Other parallels cited by Charlesworth include: Fragment of Book of Noah 108:11-15; Test Zebulun 9:8; Test. Levi 2:8-3:1; 1 Enoch 58:5ff; and 2 Baruch 17:4-18:2, 48:50; 59:2.

³⁹ Against Charlesworth’s argument that there is mutual dependence between John and the Community Rule, David Aune suggests that at best there is “indirect dependence” and more probably simply a vague overlap based on the composition of both documents during a similar time period; see David E. Aune, ‘Dualism in the Fourth Gospel and the Dead Sea Scrolls’, in David C. Aune, Torrey Seland, and Jarl Henning Ulrichsen (eds), *Noetestamentica et Philonicai: Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen* (Supplements to *Novum Testamentum* 106; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), pp. 281-303.

Johannine community were sectarian groups, the former resisting the Roman rule (among other dominant forces) and the latter “the world” in general and “the Jews” in particular.⁴⁰ There are hence at least two aspects to what we might call Johannine sectarianism: the social and the rhetorical. From the perspective of recent social scientific research, the Johannine community has many of the features of a sectarian movement: with beginnings in protest against the establishment view of reality; an egalitarian ethos and a voluntary association; love and acceptance promised to community members; and total commitment commanded from its members.⁴¹ In this framework, Johannine exclusivism is a direct offshoot of its being a sectarian first century Jewish movement parallel to, if not overlapping with, other Jewish sects such as the Essenes at Qumran.⁴² It should not be surprising, then, that the FG adopts the kind of rhetoric prevalent among other sectarian groups of its time. Dualistic categories serve the purposes of crafting a “resocializing story” that protests against the socio-political-religious establishment through the articulation of an “anti-language” wherein (in the case of John, Qumran, and other first century Jewish and Jewish-Christian sectarian movements) spirit, above, life, light, not of the/world, freedom, truth, and love – all of which are essential features of the Logos now revealed in the flesh in Jesus – contrast with flesh, below, death, darkness, this/the world, slavery, lies, and hate.⁴³ From this socio-rhetorical perspective, “The social experience of John and his people engendered a fear that made life in this world hateful because it had become

⁴⁰ Here and throughout the rest of this essay, I use “sectarian” and its cognates descriptively rather than pejoratively. See also Fernando F. Segovia, ‘The Love and Hatred of Jesus and Johannine Sectarianism’, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 43:2 (1981), pp. 258-72.

⁴¹ Robin Scroggs, ‘The Earliest Christian Communities as Sectarian Movement’, in Jacob Neusner (ed), *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Greco-Roman Cultus: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, vol. 2: *Early Christianity* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), pp. 1-23.

⁴² George W. E. Nickelsburg, ‘Revealed Wisdom as a Criterion for Inclusion and Exclusion: From Jewish Sectarianism to Early Christianity’, in Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (eds), *To See Ourselves as Others See Us’: Christians, Jews, ‘Others’ in Late Antiquity* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 73-91.

⁴³ The concepts of “resocializing story” and “anti-language” are described in Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 11-14.

untenable. Having been hated by the world, they came to hate the world, which is yet another special language inversion.”⁴⁴ The Johannine duality of light and darkness (among other contrasts) has the effect, “for the insider who accepts them, of demolishing the logic of the world, particularly the world of Judaism, and progressively emphasizing the sectarian consciousness. If one ‘believes’ what is said in this book, he is quite literally taken out of the ordinary world of social reality.”⁴⁵ Hence the FG is sectarian not only in terms of its original social climate (Jewish-Christian polemics), but also in terms of its rhetorical strategies, with the latter either derived from Qumran or mutually partaking with the Qumranic community of a common dualistic worldview.⁴⁶

What do all these ideas have to do with Christian theology of religions today? Three sets of questions emerge from the preceding. First, while some have rightly questioned why some aspects of Johannine sectarian theology have been historically subordinated to other New Testament voices,⁴⁷ from a socio-sectarian perspective the dualism of the FG has and will always continue to speak to Christian communities on the margins of their respective societies. But does that mean that a Johannine inspired theology of religions is necessarily limited in relevance only to marginal communities on the “underside” of the dominant forces of their societies? Is the light-darkness motif only appropriate for Christians who are being persecuted by other faith

⁴⁴ Norman R. Petersen, *The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light: Language and Characterization in the Fourth Gospel* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1993), p. 86.

⁴⁵ Wayne A. Meeks, ‘The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism’, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 91:1 (1972), pp. 44-72; quote from p. 71.

⁴⁶ On the other side, such a sociological interpretation of John would need to be balanced by a more theological approach which would insist that it is not social dualism that produces metaphysical (cosmic) and theological (mythological) dualism but the other way around; see Trond Skard Dokka, ‘Irony and Sectarianism in the Gospel of John’, in Johannes Nissen and Sigfeid Pedersen (eds), *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 84-107, esp. p. 100, and Robert H. Gundry, *Jesus the Word according to John the Sectarian* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 53 and passim.

⁴⁷ For example, Gail O’Day, ‘Johannine Theology as Sectarian Theology’, in Fernando F. Segovia (ed), *‘What is John?’ vol. 1: Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), pp. 199-203, wonders why none of the dominant theories of atonement – ransom, substitutionary or moral influence – register John’s relationship model of reconciliation as recorded in 10:17-18 and 12:23-36.

communities (as the Johannine Christians were arguably being persecuted by the Jews), and is such a theological perspective (that is dualistic and exclusivistic) valid only in the “world” of those Christians under similar interreligious conditions and circumstances? On the flip side of this question, is the ascription of darkness to other religious communities a (subjective) socio-rhetorical expression of the feelings of a persecuted and beleaguered group rather than an (objective) account of how God actually sees non-Christian religious people? In his discussion of Jn. 8:44, for example, Raimo Hakola comes close to suggesting this point of view when he says, “Dualistic polemic in John is not written with the outsiders in mind but tries to confirm the insiders who are faced with the world’s rejection; this polemic aims at justifying the decision to turn their backs on central aspects of Jewish traditions.”⁴⁸ In other words, the fourth gospel is as much, if not more, an active attempt to develop a sectarian identity as it is a response to actual “demonic” enemies. But while the Jews were not actually demonic, it is nevertheless true that the Johannine community perceived their opponents as such. Extrapolated to contemporary theology of religions, then, exclusivism is more about Christian self-identity than it is a theological description about religious others to the eyes of God. (Those interested in making this move can still defend the veracity of scripture in a similar way to how biblical infallibility – and inerrancy – is preserved through emphasizing the scriptural authors’ perspective in any biblical claim.)

This line of response raises a second set of theological questions. If Johannine dualism arises out of a certain early Jewish-Christian-sectarian matrix, to what extent is the applicability of its central categories, including the light-darkness motif, constrained by that original context? For example, insofar as scholarly research has observed that the FG presents a distinctively soteriological and ethical dualism emphasizing response to the light (in contrast to Qumran’s more cosmic and metaphysical dualism), then should not contemporary applications of the light-

⁴⁸ Hakola, *Identity Matters*, p. 210.

darkness distinction also jettison absolutely dichotomistic understandings of this motif in favor of a more ethical framework?⁴⁹ Insofar as a rigorous absolutism cannot but divide “the world” into the light of Christian faith and the darkness of Judaism and other religions, such a distinction can neither account for the various spheres of “the world” – e.g., the political, the economic, and the cultural,⁵⁰ all of which are intertwined with the religious – nor recognize the various degrees of truth, beauty, and holiness that is manifest in the religions (as affirmed by Vatican II). An ethical rendition of the light-darkness motif, on the other hand, opens up theological space for a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of “the world,” and requires instead a discerning posture toward the various spheres of human life as they intersect with the religious dimension.

This ethical criterion also requires contemporary Christians to be self-critically reflective and honest about Christian practices vis-à-vis those in other faiths, especially in light of the historical track record of the Church. Even if it is the synoptic gospels and not John that commands us to love our enemies (a point to which I will return momentarily), a canonical reading of the New Testament requires us to examine the fruits of our beliefs (doctrines and theological ideas) as they are manifest in our practices. Hence we need to ask about the practical implications of framing Christian theology of religions in terms of light and darkness. On this question, whereas anti-Judaic (and, by extension, anti-Islamic, anti-Buddhist, etc.) rhetoric in the hands of marginalized Christian communities could be understood as essential to the formation and preservation of Christian identity (as social-scientific readings of the New Testament confirm), the same in the hands of socially and politically mainstreamed Christians could be oppressive for those in other faiths. The problem is not that minority disenfranchised groups

⁴⁹ To be sure, an epistemic criterion is also present in John, but we will postpone until the next section the question about how this is related, if at all, to the issue of theology of religions. Suffice to say at this point that the ethical criterion of responding to the light will need to be qualified as that which is “available to them.”

⁵⁰ On these aspects of “the world,” see Bill Salier, ‘What’s in a World? *Κόσμος* in the Prologue of John’s Gospel’, *The Reformed Theological Review*, 56:3 (1997), pp. 106-17.

identify themselves as being in the light over and against all others; rather, the problem accrues when groups have the power to act on their convictions about those who they believe are in darkness.⁵¹ Hence Christians need to be cognizant of the performative dimension of theology of religions, and this raises the question of the proper posture and practices that Christian beliefs about the religions should inculcate and foster. Before doing so, however, we must engage with a few other questions that need to be taken into account in any attempt to develop a theology of religions out of the light-darkness motif in the FG.

At dawn and at dusk: ambivalence regarding a Johannine theology of religions

In this section, I want to briefly pursue three sets of additional questions: a) the tension in the FG between the believing community and the world; b) the dynamic characterizations that blur any fixed lines between light and darkness in John; and c) the question about the unevangelized. Together, I suggest these considerations give us further pause about any simplistic dichotomy between “Christian light” and “other religious darkness.”

We have already mentioned that the Prologue identifies the mission of the Logos’ coming into the world as intended to offer salvation (light and life) to the world. This theme of God’s concern and love for the world is not a marginal one in the FG. The evangelist records that Jesus himself said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (3:16a). Clearly there is a sense that while the Logos came first to his own people, the Jews, his salvific mission also

⁵¹ As David Rendsberger puts it, “In a culture where Christianity has been the established religion, such statements have the ring of oppression.... Sweeping claims such as these could have been ignored [in the first century], laughed at, or given some consideration, but they could not have been enforced.” See Rendsberger, ‘Sectarianism and Theological Interpretation in John’, in Fernando F. Segovia (ed), *What is John?*, vol. 2 of *Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), pp. 139-56, quotation from p. 145; cf. James H. Charlesworth, ‘The Gospel of John: Exclusivism Caused by a Social Setting Different from That of Jesus (John 11:42 and 14:6)’, in R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, and F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (eds), *Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel: Papers of the Leuven Colloquium, 2000* (Assen, The Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001), pp. 479-513.

encompasses the whole world. Other putative references to the salvific efficacy of the incarnational mission as including but reaching beyond the Jews are the Samaritan realization that Jesus “is truly the Saviour of the world” (4:42), Jesus’ statements that “the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (6:51, italics added) and “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold” (10:16a), and the (inadvertent) “prophecy” of Caiaphas the high priest that, “Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God” (11:51-52).⁵² To be sure, the assumption is that the salvation of these Gentiles constitutes in their conversion (believing and receiving the Christ). At the same time, we now understand conversion to include the transformation and not necessarily displacement of whole life histories. People do not lose their ethnicity, culture, and language totally in conversion to Christ. Is it not then also true that prior religious identities may not be entirely negated but rather transformed in Christian conversion, and if so, would not the cosmic reach of the God’s love be redemptive of ethnicity, culture, language, and *religion* rather than threaten their eradication?⁵³

At the same time, however, even granting the cosmic scope of God’s love in the FG, there is nevertheless a tension between this “outward” reach and the “inward” focus on the believing community. In his study of Jesus’ “High Priestly Prayer,” Fernando Segovia suggests that the this-world/other-world dichotomy is much more porous than at first glance when we consider that the prayer is not for the world but for believers (17:9), but yet the goal is that the world of non-believers will believe that Jesus has been sent by the Father (17:21), and that there

⁵² This leads R. Alan Culpepper, ‘Inclusivism and Exclusivism in the Fourth Gospel’, in John Painter, R. Alan Culpepper, and Fernando F. Segovia (eds), *Word, Theology, and Community in John* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), pp. 85-108, to “caution against setting any limitations on the Johannine vision of God’s redemptive purpose” (p. 102).

⁵³ Elsewhere – Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), §4.3 – I argue for the interrelationality of language, culture, and religion.

is radically privileged distinction of the believers over and against the world (17:14-16) but yet they are also being sent out into the world (17:18).⁵⁴ To be sure, the rhetoric of John 17 is designed to console, edify, encourage, and admonish the believers in their minority stance and posture toward a hostile world. Segovia hence concludes:

Behind such consolation, I would argue, lies an unmistakable but unspoken fear of loss, of seepage across that ultimately porous barrier bet the given dichotomies of the world-at-large and the circle of disciples. Indeed, one could even argue that it is such fear above all that is ultimately responsible for the collapse of the prayer as an ideological product: if such a superior group [who know, are in the light, are loved by God, etc.] cannot be altogether trusted to deliver on its assigned “task” [in the world], then a fundamental revision of such a conception of chosenness and privilege is clearly in order.⁵⁵

Now Segovia’s own agenda is to destabilize the text so as to break down dichotomies that might otherwise be used to justify certain destructive practices against those on the margins. My preliminary response, to be expanded on in our concluding comments, is to remind us that Christians on the margins are nevertheless precisely those who will continue to find encouragement from this text, especially in situations where they are suffering persecution. At the same time, I agree with Segovia that the tensions between concerns for the believing community and emphasis on the importance of their engaging the world render dichotomistic

⁵⁴ Fernando F. Segovia, ‘Inclusion and Exclusion in John 17: An Intercultural Reading’, in Fernando F. Segovia (ed), *What is John?*, vol. 2: *Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), pp. 183-210, esp. pp. 199-206.

⁵⁵ Segovia, ‘Inclusion and Exclusion in John 17’, p. 206.

views of Christianity and the world, including the “worlds” of other religious traditions, problematic. Put in other words, the motifs of God’s love for the elect and God’s love for the world at large in the FG serve to check and balance triumphalistic exclusivism on the one hand and sentimental inclusivism on the other.⁵⁶

The permeability of the boundaries between Christian light and non-Christian darkness in John can also be seen in the dynamic characterizations of the evangelist. Very quickly, we can note that the depictions of Nicodemus, Judas, and the man born blind (Jn. 9) do not permit any simplistic assignment of them either to the light or to darkness. Nicodemus initially comes to Jesus at night, perhaps “lest his deeds be exposed (3:20 [cf. 19:38]),”⁵⁷ and his status as a follower of Jesus is uncertain until much later in the gospel when he “who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds” (19:39). Judas is identified as chosen by Jesus (6:70), although he is never under suspicion among the twelve – hence the narrator’s interpolation in 6:71 that Judas was to later betray Jesus – not even after Jesus identified him at the Passover supper and he went out into the night (13:30).⁵⁸ Finally (for our purposes), the man born blind was assumed (and would have been assumed by the original readers of the FG) to have been suffering the consequences of sin,

⁵⁶ Sectarian or liberal readings of the FG, of course, would attempt to collapse the tension. Robert Gundry is at least honest in his own proposal for a contemporary sectarian interpretation of John that the gospel in speaks of God’s love for the world, whereas even Jesus’ love is limited to the circle of the disciples; see Gundry, *Jesus the Word according to John the Sectarian*, pp. 57-64 and 105-6.

⁵⁷ See Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 573. Insofar as in the context of Qumranic dualism “Darkness and night symbolize the realm of evil, untruth, and ignorance” (Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970], p. 130), E. C. Hoskyns rightly suggests that the darkness in which Nicodemus stood hints at his “dangerous position betwixt and between” (cited in Beasley-Murray, *John*, p.47)

⁵⁸ Not coincidentally, Judas goes into the night only after “Satan entered into him” (13:27). Schnackenburg comments: “‘Night’, after all, has its own symbolism in the fourth gospel. For Judas, ‘night’ represents the sphere of darkness into which he has fallen and, what is more, of which he has become a definitive part. It is, moreover, the zone in which man is ruined (cf. 11.10). For Jesus, it is the hour which marks the end of his work among men (cf. 9.4). This brief statement, closing the account of the traitor’s departure, gathers into itself all the darkness of this event” (*Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 3, p. 32).

either that of his own or that of his ancestors (9:3).⁵⁹ Yet it is he who has spiritual sight and understanding, whereas the seeing Pharisees who threw him out of the synagogue were those who were ultimately blind.⁶⁰ In each of these cases, Johannine characterization reveals that the lines between light and darkness are fluid, with movement in both directions, sometimes in the same life, and it is not always easy to discern where a person is on the spectrum. Most (apart from the Jewish opponents of Jesus) are in some sort of transition at dusk or dawn, rather than being stationary at either midnight or noonday.

The same ambivalence applies also to “religious traditions,” if we factor in the characterization of the Samaritans in John 4. Elsewhere, I have suggested the Jewish-Samaritan (non-) relations in the first century were equivalent in many ways to interreligious (non-) relations in our time.⁶¹ But whereas Jews of that time did not “share things in common with Samaritans” (4:9), Jesus chose to interact with the Samaritan *woman*! Further, he also announced that true religion transcends both Judea and Samaria and that “the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (4:21). And finally, whereas “the Jews” in the FG were those who rejected Jesus, the Samaritan “outsiders” “believed in him” and even “asked him to stay with them” (4:39-40). The strict lines between light and darkness presumed to have applied between Jews and Samaritans were in this case obliterated.

Still the Samaritan contrast was that unlike the Jews who were presented with the gospel and rejected it, they responded in belief to the Messiah’s self-presentation. But what about the

⁵⁹ Jesus himself seems to confirm that at least in some cases (e.g., 5:2-14), disability is related to sin; I discuss this mentality in the ancient (Hebraic) world that associated sickness, disease, and disability with sin and divine punishment at greater length in my *Down Syndrome and Human Destiny: Disability Studies and the Renewal of Theology in Late Modernity* (under review with University of Notre Dame Press and Baylor University Press), §2.1.

⁶⁰ See Jeffrey L. Staley, ‘Stumbling in the Dark, Reaching for the Light: Reading Character in John 5 and 9’, *Semeia*, 53 (1991), pp. 55-80.

⁶¹ See Yong, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh*, §6.1.2.

unevangelized?⁶² Do the fourth evangelist's assignment of unbelievers and evildoers to the realm of darkness include all those who have never heard the gospel? This may be a legitimate inference from John's division between "Christian light" and "non-Christian darkness," but any such rigid demarcation regarding the unevangelized sits uneasily with the Johannine narrative itself. Rather than make an extended exegetical argument, I focus instead on a crucial text:

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God (3:17-21).

Two comments suffice. First, in contrast to Gnostic and Qumranic dualism, Schnackenburg rightly points out that in 3:17 (and 3:16 before that), "John affirms that God wills the salvation and not the destruction of the 'world', the well-being of all men and not just that of a privileged section."⁶³ It seems that only those who hear and nevertheless love their darkness remain condemned. Jesus himself later states, "Very truly, I tell you, *anyone who hears my word*

⁶² By "unevangelized" and "those who have never heard," I am referring to any and all who lack proper knowledge to believe and receive Jesus. This would include those who have literally never been evangelized as well as those only partially evangelized and even those evangelized by groups who hold to non-orthodox theological (or christological) positions. Of course, there is always the question of what constitutes sufficient knowledge of Jesus in order to believe or reject him, and if there is ever any human being that has attained such a level of understanding, but we'll leave that question for another occasion.

⁶³ Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 1, p. 401.

and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life” (5:24), and then again, “This is indeed the will of my Father, that *all who see the Son* and believe in him may have eternal life” (6:40; emphases added).

Second, and perhaps as important, is that ethical dualism of the FG is clearly pronounced in this text. The dividing line between light and darkness is less what people do or do not know, and more so what they do. Keener observes “that the contrast between faith and unbelief can also be expressed in terms of obedience points again to the practical rather than merely theoretical nature of genuinely salvific faith in the Fourth Gospel. Whereas the Spirit ‘abides upon’ Jesus (1.33) and Jesus will abide in his disciples (15: 4, 7), wrath ‘abides upon’ those who disobey him through unbelief (3.36).”⁶⁴ This distinction seems to be further confirmed by Jesus when he later says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; *whoever disobeys* the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath” (3:36), and “Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and *those who have done evil*, to the resurrection of condemnation” (5:28-29; italics added). In the Johannine scheme of things, then, light and darkness are most clearly manifest in what people do. If so, the unevangelized, including those who are also members of other faith traditions, are judged to be in light or darkness just as are followers of Jesus: according to their deeds.

Pressing the question: performing Johannine theology in the interreligious encounter

⁶⁴ Keener, *The Gospel of John*, p. 583. Raymond Brown writes with regard to this passage: “Notice the present tenses, ‘believes,’ ‘disobeys’; John is not thinking of a single act but of a pattern of life. Notice too that the contrast to believing is disobeying; we saw in 18-21 the strong connection between the way a man lives, acts, and keeps the commandments and his belief in Jesus. Evil deeds and disobedience to God’s commands express themselves in refusal to believe in Jesus; and since God’s commandment means eternal life..., ‘whoever disobeys the Son will *not see life*’” (*The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)*, p. 162).

What then can we conclude about Christian theology of religions today in light of the preceding discussion? On the one hand, our discussion of the light-darkness motif in John suggests that the classical categories of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are less pertinent.⁶⁵ There is simply not much that is said about other religions in John, unless we attempt to develop a theology of religions out of the fourth evangelist's views regarding the Jews, and going down that road is problematic both on account of the very particular socio-historical circumstances "behind" the text and on account of the undeniable special relationship between Judaism and Christianity within the broader history of religions. If this were not enough to complicate matters, there is also as much darkness amidst the "Christian" camp as there may be light in the "other religions."

On the other hand, our study in no way requires the rejection of the light-darkness motif for Christian theology of religions, only a more nuanced application. Hence I propose, in line with an argument I develop elsewhere,⁶⁶ that a Christian posture toward the religions in general and the interreligious encounter in particular informed by the FG will be flexible, contextual, and multi-faceted, featuring at least the following three mutually related modes of engagement. First, in view of the high Johannine christology and its attendant soteriological and ethical dualism, there is abundant theological rationale for explicit evangelism, kerygmatic preaching, and interreligious apologetics in the appropriate contexts.⁶⁷ This would be the case not only for marginal or persecuted Christian communities, but also for those that are socially and even

⁶⁵ Two recent surveys conclude just that, proposing in turn more sophisticated categories and typologies; see Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions: Biblical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003). I argue also that these labels need refurbishing in my *Beyond the Impasse*, pp. 22-29.

⁶⁶ See Yong, *The Spirit of Hospitality in a World of Many Faiths: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and a Performative Theology of Religions* (The Annual William M. Menzies Lectures, Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, Baguio City, Philippines, January, 2007).

⁶⁷ See also Paul J. Griffiths, *An Apology for Apologetics: A Study in the Logic of Interreligious Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

politically established.

But second, and this not in subordination to but in conjunction with the first, the Christian mission is also dialogical. John's transmutation of the Hellenistic philosophical concept of the Logos and Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman are but two examples in the FG of this more dialogical approach. There is a time for proclamation even as there is a time for listening and understanding. We should not underestimate the dialogical power of the FG especially for the religiously plural world of the twenty-first century.⁶⁸

Beyond dialogue and proclamation, however, might be the demonstration of love and the expression of hospitality.⁶⁹ Here the ethical dualism of the FG demands that followers of the way of Jesus first ask themselves whether or not they are performing their faith and loving one another that the world may know that the Father has sent the Son. Alan Culpepper rightly notes that in today's religiously plural world, "John's circumscribed love command – that you love one another, that is, fellow Christians – is no longer adequate. To paraphrase Matthew rather ironically, 'Do not even the Gentiles do the same?' (Matt 5:47)."⁷⁰ While the offering of such hospitality may be more difficult in some socio-political contexts more than others, this is indeed the response that the Word made flesh is seeking. The fourth evangelist indicates as much when he says that, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (1:12), with the word "receive" here meaning to welcome and embrace in

⁶⁸ In her account of the reception of the FG in Japan, Bonnie Thurston conveys that Japanese Buddhists have been attracted to Christianity and even converted to Christ through the gospel of John at least in part because of the "experiential" approach of the gospel (which invites readers to come and examine the applicability of the gospel message for themselves); see Bonnie Bowman Thurston, 'The Gospel of John and Japanese Buddhism', *Japanese Religions*, 15:2 (1988), pp. 57-68.

⁶⁹ See also Yong, 'The Spirit of Hospitality: Pentecostal Perspectives toward a Performative Theology of Interreligious Encounter', *Missiology* (forthcoming).

⁷⁰ R. Alan Culpepper, 'The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith in a Pluralistic Culture', in Fernando F. Segovia (ed), *What is John?*, vol. 1: *Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), pp. 107-27, quote from p. 116.

intimate relationship.⁷¹ The Word will remain a stranger in a strange land until the world sees his followers embracing one another and, by extension, inviting others into a mutual embrace. And the believers in Jesus have been commissioned into the world for precisely such a task. Hence, “the church as a community [is] always located ‘outside the gate,’ at home with other outsiders, distrustful of any impulse to set itself apart yet faithful in proclaiming the unique but paradoxical Lordship of Jesus.”⁷²

Each of these responses – proclamation, dialogue, and the expression of hospitality – are inherently pneumatological since they are all activities that are empowered by the Holy Spirit. I thus hope in this paper to have made some sense of the connection between a pneumatological theology on religions and early Christian understandings of light and darkness. A more explicit elaboration of this connection, however, will have to await another occasion.⁷³

Endnotes

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⁷¹ On this point, see Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 1, p. 260, and Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 97.

⁷² Thomas Breidenthal, ‘Reconstructing Christianity before Supersessionism’, *Cross-Currents*, 49:3 (1999), pp. 319-48, quotation from p. 347.

⁷³ Thanks to... [Marvin Wilson, Kevin Spawn, Jamie Clark-Soles, John Christopher Thomas, Glen Menzies, Gerry McDermott, Raiford “Doc” Hughes III ...]