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In "conversation" with Andrew Murray Jr on Johannine Spirituality: God's presence in Christ's absence in the Fourth Gospel

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Abstract

For Andrew Murray Jr (1828–1917), John 15 was significant for understanding believers' unification in Christ. Imagining a conversation with him, the essay explores experiences of Jesus' presence and absence in the Fourth Gospel [FG]. References to God's presence are characterised by the transferral of "temple" imagery to both Jesus and the Johannine community as the dwelling place where God's "tabernacling" presence is experienced (1:14; 2:13–22; 14:1–6). These images, distinctive of the 'household' dynamic of the FG (1:12–13, 18), are reflected in Jesus' engagement with his disciples (Jn 13–17) as mutual indwelling between God and them. Amidst his departing words (13:33; 14:2) and his followers' disillusion and grief (13:36–38; 14:1, 27; 16:20–22), Jesus invites them to "remain/dwell" in him/his love (15:4, 9), waiting upon the Counsellor whom 'the Father' will send in his name (14:26; 16:7, 13).

Keywords

Andrew Murray Jr; household/temple imagery in FG; John 15; remaining in Christ

Abide/remain in me … abide/remain in my love. (Jn. 15:4, 9 NRS)

[An imaginary "conversation" between two voices: Andrew Murray Jr (Oom Andrew/OA) and Elna Mouton (EM).]

EM: Dear Oom Andrew, let me introduce myself before we start our conversation on Clairvaux's *stoep* – since 1892 your favourite space for receiving visitors, transacting your business, and writing your

books (Du Plessis 1919:485). I am Elna Mouton, honoured to have been appointed the first chaplain of the Centre for Spirituality named after you here in Wellington. Your old stable on this property has been converted into a beautiful chapel where we conduct three services every day during the week and special services on request for visitors who express certain needs while on retreat. Allow me the freedom to imagine us having this conversation about the important role in your thinking of John 15. You regard this chapter from the Fourth Gospel (FG) as most significant in describing the uniting of believers in Christ – a *leitmotif* in your work since the spiritual revival of 1860 (Du Plessis 1919:462). Your biographer, Johannes du Plessis (1919:470), refers to your first devotional writings having mainly the building up in faith, love, and prayer of believers in mind. The publication *Blijf in Jezus* in 1864, developed into your first book in English, *Abide in Christ* (1882), is such an example, with many others. Later on, you seem to have dwelt "with greater persistency on the subject of *sanctification*" (Du Plessis 1919:469–470). Your mystical thinking on the mutual indwelling of God and believers in John 15 seems to be part of this period in your writing (De Villiers 2015:645–656).

I want to start our conversation by quoting a saying by the Yoruba people of Nigeria: "To be happy in one's home is better than to be a chief." As a person living in the postmodern 21st century where many people live electronically connected, impersonal lives, I remain intrigued by the "home" where followers of Jesus are invited to live in the light of the "household" dynamic of John's Gospel. May I ask you: What do you as a pastor and theologian see looking out over the vineyards from your Clairvaux *stoep*?

OA: I have great memories of Wellington, especially of Samuel and Clairvaux, living here with Emma and the children. "Homecoming" is what Christian life is all about. It's about inhabiting, living in and through the source God provided for us in Christ. It's about a love relationship. As you mentioned, I've tried in various ways to articulate the profound mystery of our uniting in Christ. The imagery of John 15 helps me to embrace this mystery. It's like the abiding life of close communion between the branches and the vine (Murray, 1944a–c;

1962:129–142). To quote from *The True Vine: Meditations for a month on John 15:1–16* (Murray 1897:2):

> I am the true Vine. This is a heavenly mystery […] The *experience* [italics added – EM] of this is part of the hidden mystery, which none but Jesus Himself, by His Holy Spirit, can unfold and impart. I am the true Vine. The vine is the living Lord, who Himself speaks, and gives, and works all that He has for us. If you would know the meaning and power of that word, do not think to find it by thought or study; these may help to show you what you must get from Him to awaken desire and hope and prayer, but they cannot show you the Vine. Jesus alone can reveal Himself. He gives His Holy Spirit to open the eyes to gaze upon Himself, to open the heart to receive Himself. He must Himself speak the word to you and me.

EM: Does this profound mystery, the unification through God's Spirit of Jesus Christ and believers, represent your theology? (cf. Du Plessis, 1919:435–459; Brümmer 2013:85–103; De Villiers 2015).

OA: To me, this is the heart of the New Testament, the culmination of Scripture. A mystery indeed, which does not make it less real, but hard to describe …

EM: In the meditation *Abide* – "Abide in Me, and I in You (Jn 15:4)," you write about important facets of trust and obedience (Murray 1897:7). What stands out for me, is your comments on the use of the particle "in":

> There is no deeper word in Scripture. God is in all. God dwells in Christ. Christ lives in God. We are in Christ. Christ is in us: our life taken up into His; His life received into ours; in a divine reality that words cannot express, we are in Him and He in us. And the words, "Abide in me and I in you," just tell us to believe it, this divine mystery, and to count upon our God the Husbandman, and Christ the Vine, to make it divinely true […] Let us in the faith of His working abide and rest in Him, ever turning heart and hope to Him alone. And let us count upon Him to fulfil in us the mystery: "Ye in me, and I in

you" … *No thinking or teaching or praying can grasp it; it is a divine mystery of love* [italics added – EM].

Household Imagery in the Fourth Gospel

EM: In commemoration of the legacy of your extended family – after 200 years since your father came from Scotland to South Africa to serve as a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church (Du Plessis 1919:12–21) – I want to share some recent trends in Johannine scholarship with you. You will be interested that focusing on tabernacle and temple imagery in the FG became a popular theme during the past decades.[1] It seems that through these images, the Johannine community/-ies witnessed their "seeing" God's presence in their midst.[2]

You were influenced by women such as Mary Lyon, Catherine of Sienna, and Teresa of Ávila, and they inspired you to invest time and energy into empowering women, which was unique for your time (cf. Du Plessis 1919:271–286; 394–413; Brümmer 2013:27). It will not surprise you that some of the leading Johannine scholars today are women.

In two recent monographs, the Australian Johannine scholar Mary L. Coloe (2001, 2007) presents her remarkable innovative research on temple/ household imagery in John's Gospel. Without "spiritualising" the Gospel – as has often happened during the history of its reception (Carter, 2008:3–7) – Coloe reads John through a specific theological-spiritual lens (cf. Schneiders, 2003:48–62). She concludes that the Gospel emphasising God's dwelling place is to offer hope to the Johannine communities in time following the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE (200:3–14, 213–221; Mouton 2016:94).

OA: It concerns me that my perspective of a personal love relation with God (cf. Murray, 1962:137–142) may no longer be seen as valid and

1 1 Cf. Koester (1989); Gorman (1997); Coloe (2001, 2007); Kerr (2002); Hoskins (2006); Steegen (2014); Caneday (2016); Hays 2016, 308–335.

2 Cf. John 1:14, 18, 1:50–51; 2:11; 11:40.

interpreted as merely "spiritualising the FG" (cf. Brümmer 2013:22–28, 81–103).

EM: "Spiritualising" in this instance refers to a one-sided interpretation of a biblical text. It focuses partially on the text's faith perspective on God without necessarily taking its broader socio-historical context into account. For example, the suggested (though not concrete) socio-political context of the FG is the Roman Empire of the first century CE (Carter 2008). The author reinterprets imperial images (such as "father," "lord," "household," "wellbeing") from the perspective of God's presence and care in Jesus of Nazareth (cf. n.4). Present-day readers/audiences of the FG are challenged to do *likewise*, not necessarily the same – by reinterpreting the dynamics of the process reflected in the text *analogously*. By this I mean that we are invited by the very nature and purpose of the FG to read contextually – from the perspective of our own time and place, yes, but *in conversation with the response of Johannine communities to their contexts*. From this we are called to draw conclusions about God's involvement in our world. Our (21st century) readings will, therefore, be in continuation *and* discontinuation with the witness of the FG. That's why your reading of John intrigues me so much. You seem to have been acutely conscious of the context of power abuse, war, and poverty during your lifetime. Given your nuanced understanding of the relation between history and faith reflected in biblical writings (Brümmer 2013:19–28, 83–89, 224, 247, 264–268, 277), I am curious to know how you brought your context in conversation with John 15. My curiosity is *inter alia* informed by the work of two contemporaries during your lifetime, the Anglican bishop John W. Colenso of Natal (1814–1883) and Professor Johannes du Plessis (1868–1935), lecturer in New Testament and Missiology at the Theological Seminary in Stellenbosch from 1916 to 1932. Both worked with a critical-constructive awareness of the historical worlds represented in, and assumed by, the biblical documents (Jonker 2019:35–98; Brümmer 2013, 221–239) – an awareness that has been refined in biblical scholarship since then.

OA: Can you give an example of such an approach?

EM: I referred to Mary Coloe's work. In her first book, *God Dwells with Us: Temple Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (2001), she explores the development of the Johannine communities' awareness of identity through its use of symbolic language – from its roots as the tabernacle and temple being God's dwelling place (2:16) to God's incarnate λόγος dwelling in Jesus (1:14). The narrative, she argues (2001:3), creates a symbolic world in which the disciples are given "a clear sense of identity and a way of sustaining faith in the absence of Jesus." The Johannine communities ultimately embody God's alternative temple/household as a source of hope in the world (14:2) – a new Israel in which the risen Jesus lives through the Spirit (Coloe 2001:157–221; cf. Hoskins 2006:108–146; Mouton 2016:94–95).

In her second monograph, *Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality* (2007), Coloe elaborates on the first by focusing on developments in the community between Jesus' first reference to "my Father's house" as a building, a cultic institution (2:16) and his second reference in 14:2 to "his Father's house" as a symbol of community, intimacy, and mutuality (2007:157–178).[3] The disciples continue to experience God's presence after Jesus' departure, seeing themselves as God's dwelling place/household. For Coloe (2007:ix), the phrase "my Father's household" in 14:2 expresses the reciprocity inherent in the invitation: "make your home in me, as I make mine in you" in 15:4. "Together these two images," she argues, "offer the distinctly Johannine perspective on salvation as a communion of life formed by the mutual indwelling of God and the believer" (2007:148; cf. 145–166). Reminiscent of your perspectives on John 15, the book witnesses to her belief "that underlying the Gospel of John is a profound experience, a mysticism of divine mutual indwelling" (2007:ix; Mouton 2016:95).[4] It is as if she was influenced by you (cf. Du Plessis 1919:462–473).

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3 As mentioned, the socio-political context within which the Johannine circle makes these claims is that of the Roman Empire, with the emperor as its "father" (Carter, 2008:235–255; cf. Van Tilborg, 1996:27–29, 38–48, 53–55; Neyrey, 2009:viii–xiii; Menken, 2012:88–90, 98). For a discussion of the patriarchal structure and dynamic of ancient and early Christian households, see Mouton (2014:174).

4 Cf. Schneiders, 2003:53–62; Steegen, 2014:76–83.

Sacred life and mutual "indwelling" in God's household

EM: For the Johannine communities, every aspect of life – time, place, people – seems to be oriented and connected to the presence of God, Jesus, and the Spirit, and therefore regarded as holy.[5] It reminds one of how people perceive your writing (cf. De Villiers 2015). For the narrator, harmonious, abundant life (10:10) is defined as a faith relationship with Jesus of Nazareth and God's Spirit (7:37–39; 14:26; 20:30–31; cf. Mouton 2016:96).

> In Exodus (26:1–37; 36:8–38) we read about Israel's tabernacle, where the visible glory of God's presence resided. Coloe (2001:31–39) argues this glory found in the tabernacle (and temple) took up residence in the person of Jesus, in whom the glory can now be "seen" (1:14–18; cf. Lee 2002:34–36). The rest of the Gospel narrates how Jesus revealed and embodied the word – full of grace and truth (1:14) – in ways that would bring surprisingly, shockingly new light to people's understanding of God.[6]

OA: It is remarkable to see how temple imagery, distinctive of the "household" dynamic of the Gospel, is reflected throughout the narrative in Jesus' interaction with people – especially in John 13–17. Jesus' invitation to his disciples to remain in him, in his love and in his Spirit after his departure (cf. 14:15–29; 16:4b–15; 1 Jn. 3:24; 4:13) affirms that he has metaphorically become the new tabernacle/temple where God's presence would be experienced.[7] A reality to be fulfilled with Jesus' return sometime in the future (14:3, 18, 28). The nature and purpose of the Spirit is to teach and remind the disciples of all that Jesus had said and done (14:26; 15:26; 16:13), including the words about his

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5 Cf. Jn. 1:4; 4:14, 26; 7:37–39; 11:25–26; 14:6; 17:20–26; Mouton, 2016:96–97.

6 Cf. Schneiders, 2003:9–15, 53–54; Matera, 2007:259–317.

7 It is rhetorically significant that the verb μένω (to remain, abide, dwell, wait, endure) – characteristic of the Johannine literature (Brown, 1983:259–274; Dillow, 2001:48–50; Neyrey, 2009:74–78, 396–409, 469–470) – "features most prominently in the farewell discourse and final chapters of the Gospel" (Rambo, 2010:102; cf. Coloe, 2001:146–160). According to Rambo (2010:99–105), it lies at the core of Jesus' teaching to his disciples in John 15:1–17. "In the midst of his departing words, Jesus speaks about remaining" (Rambo, 2010:102).

death, resurrection, and exaltation. As in the case of Jesus' discourses and miraculous signs, his followers would need time to become aware, gain insight and perspective on the paradox and mystery of "seeing," discerning, and recognising God's work in the world (cf. 13:36–38; 18:15–27; 20:19–21:19). Ironically, insight (often) comes after a person's departure or death. For the disciples, Jesus' "absence" probably made them only then fully aware of the implications of his earthly ministry and their own calling.

> It is significant to take note of the way in which Jesus prepared the disciples for his invitation, "Abide in me as I abide in you" in John 15:1–3. Jesus starts the parable of the vine by referring to the pruning or cleansing of the vine branches. It seems to me that it is not the removal of weeds or thorns or anything from without that may hinder the growth. It is the pruning of the long shoots of the previous season. Removing something from within, that was produced by life in the vine itself. The more vigorous the growth has been, the greater the need for pruning. It is the healthy wood of the vine that has to be cut away (Murray 1897:5–6).

EM: How was the rich yet often ambivalent variety of statements in John 13–17 supposed to lead Jesus' followers to a new intimate relationship with him? How could his words, "It is to your advantage that I go away," make sense to them?

OA: Mysterious and paradoxical as it may seem, Jesus' temporary departure occurred on behalf of his followers – for their sake of wellbeing and wholeness (holiness). The consequence of Jesus being away is not permanent separation but the reunification of God's household. At the same time, they are not "waiting" passively upon his return, but the time is filled with the presence of God's Spirit. The Spirit amplifies Jesus' presence in time and place and empowers them to continue his mission. The "tabernacling" presence of God (1:14) is accomplished by "another Paraclete" (14:16). For his disciples, Jesus' departure highlights their calling as God's ("new") representatives in the world (20:21).

EM: This reminds me of the work of two North American theologians on the FG – Sandra M. Schneiders (2003:202–223), Professor Emerita in the Jesuit School of Theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, and Shelly Rambo, a systematic theologian from Boston University School of Theology. To quote Rambo (2010:102):

> Jesus is leaving, but they will not, in a sense, be homeless. But that place is not, as it turns out, some place far away. Instead, in the course of his talk, he tells them that they will *be* that residence; they become the site in which God will come to dwell.

Mentoring in God's Household

OA: Remaining in God's presence, remaining in fellowship with Jesus through the Spirit-Paraclete would necessarily lead to a new ethos – of loving God and one another.[8] In fact, Jesus promises that – after his departure – those who believe in him "will also do the works that I do and […] will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father" (14:12; cf. 1:50). It is in his role as resurrected, glorified Lord that he would pave "the way" for his followers to live God's life of love, light, and truth in the world (14:6). It introduced a new phase in God's commitment to the world (3:16–17), and their commitment to God, one another, and the world (cf. 20:21–23).

EM: It is remarkable how the Johannine communities saw Jesus' incarnation as a renewal of God's covenant with Israel, realising a new household ethos (cf. Coloe 2001:213–221; Neyrey 2009:75–76). Paradoxical narratives such as a compassionate, suffering, crucified yet liberating, healing Messiah would challenge Jesus' early followers to change their perception of God in the light of Jesus' σάρξ, his *vulnerability* and *mortality*. Jesus' response to his time was seeing distressed people, *having compassion* for them, touching them – all against the socio-cultural and political status quo (Jn. 4:1–26; 6:1–15; 7:53–8:11; 9:1–41, etc.; cf. Mouton 2016:105–106).

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8 Cf. 13:34; 14:15, 21, 23–24, 28; 15:9–10; cf. 1 John 2:3–11; 3:11–24; 4:7, 21.

All of this serves as an example (13:15) to his followers to encourage them to do likewise: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. *Just as I have loved you*, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:34–35; cf. 15:4, 9–10, 12).

Your theology which is determined by your contemplative reading of Scripture appeals to me. How, do you think, are these notions from the FG meant to transform our ethos as Christian communities (today)? How can we as individuals and contemporary Christian communities *remain/dwell* in Jesus, his Spirit, holiness, and love?

OA: Living disciplined, faithful (personal) spiritual lives you will also confirm and strengthen the corporate life of the church (cf. Murray 1982). For example:

- *We know Christian Spirituality is about a living relationship with God in Jesus Christ through the indwelling of the Spirit. It is basically about resting in Christ and depending on Christ, like the branches and the vine* (Murray 1962:132–134; 1982:20–24, 154–158; 1988:28–32, 54).[9]
- *The Spirit empowers us, enlightens our minds, and moulds us into the image of Jesus. This fellowship of God in us and we in God is an inexhaustible source of strength* (Murray 1977:1–8, 13–46; 1988:52–59).[10]
- *The bible as life-giving source for our spirituality invites us to become good listeners to God's Word, to dwell in it, reflect on it, consider it, to meditate on it* (Murray 1977:11–13). *For this to happen, we need the*

9 EM: Pieter de Villiers (South African NT scholar) refers to your spirituality in these intimate, relational terms (De Villiers, 2015:649–653). Which reminds me of how two female South African theologians define Christian Spirituality: "It is an invitation to life […] a call to rediscover our humanity in the presence of God and the Christian community in order to live as credible witnesses of God […] in the context of a challenging and, often, broken world" (Kourie & Kretzschmar 2000:5). Reminiscent of what C. K. Chesterton remarked about Francis of Assisi's spirituality: "It is not a thing like a theory but a thing like a love affair" (Brümmer 2013:15).

10 EM: You will appreciate what Jürgen Moltmann (1997:69), a German theologian renowned for his "theology of hope," has to say in this regard: "In the experiences of the Spirit we perceive a much more intimate relationship […] than the relation between father or mother and child. It is the intimate fellowship of mutual indwelling: God in us and we in God."

precious gift of silence. As you know, the mere idea of being silent is for many people unthinkable, even threatening.[11]

- *The contemplation on Scripture necessarily leads us into prayer* (cf. Murray 1977:8–11, 43–46; 1982:159–163; 1988:42–51, 71–85).[12]
- *And finally, prayer embodies the intimate relation and interdependence between personal commitment and the corporate witness of the church in the world* (cf. Murray, 1988:18–59).[13]

Conclusion

EM: I am fascinated by the Fourth Evangelist's narration of how Jesus reversed, reordered, and upset the familiar, conventional preconceptions of God and humanity, by practising an ethos of compassion and mercy.

Before Jesus' crucifixion, during his last meal with his disciples, he prepares them for his physical absence when he will return to the Father. Jesus assures them that he will be present in new ways. His invitation and pledge to them are filled with mystery and paradox: "Make your home in me, as I make mine in you" (15:4; Coloe 2001:vii) and "We will make our home with them" (14:23), but it will be to their advantage that he will go away (16:7). Jesus invites the community of believers to follow him, them being a living house(hold), a sanctuary

11 EM: You will appreciate this quote from the Trappist monk Thomas Keating: "Silence is God's first language; everything else is a poor translation." Which reminds me of what another German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1996:85) said about silence, in the context of Nazi Germany during WWII: "There is a wonderful power in being silent – the power of clarification, purification, and focus on what is essential."

12 EM: Reminiscent of Bonhoeffer (1996:89–90): "Prayer means nothing else but the readiness to appropriate the Word […] to let it speak to me in my personal situation, in my particular tasks, decisions, sins, and temptations […] intercessory prayer means nothing other than bringing one another into the presence of God."

13 EM: Bonhoeffer (1996:82–83) phrases the nature of this relationship as follows: "Whoever cannot be alone should beware of community. Whoever cannot stand being in community should beware of being alone […] Both belong together. Only in the community do we learn to be properly alone; and only in being alone do we learn to live properly in the community."

where God's holiness and love will be experienced (cf. Murray 1888:87–115; Mouton 2016:108).

OA: The question remains: Where do Christian believers "live"? Where do they think their thoughts and dream their dreams? What kind of "home-makers" are they?

It is about belonging. Belonging to and remaining in the Holy One sent from God. It is about homecoming, warmth and light, mindfulness and hospitality, food, and shelter. It is about wholeness and life in abundance, as represented by the intimate relationship between the vine and branches. The narrative continues to invite Christian communities to do likewise: to be a home for alienated, grieving, despairing, displaced, and "homeless" people – a symbol of God's sacred, life-giving love in the world.

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