

Chapter Two

JUST THE MAN FOR THE JOB

Wednesday 23rd February

Daily Mail, Bowen Hills

The Religion report

‘Why are the world religions so antagonistic to one another?’ This is a question I was asked by a concerned reader who has been disgusted by the deteriorating relationship between the three great western religions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

My concerned reader wonders why the religious groups are not working together against the forces of evil, violence and terrorism. ‘Do they not all worship the same God?’ he asks.

Over the next few months, this column will bring to you facts and opinions comparing different religions. Do all religions really worship the same God? If not, which God is true?

*If you have opinions or information on any of these questions, please email them to us at, dailymail@bigpond.com.au, or post them to the Daily Mail marking all correspondence to *The Religion Report* c/- James McGregor.*

Other items of interest in the religious media include....

Editor-in-Chief Peter Preston stopped reading and looked up at James who was sitting in the chair opposite. He was a distinguished looking fifty-something with the straight back of a former military man. 'Who was your concerned reader, James?'

James smiled wryly. The chief knew it was himself.

His chief nodded, 'I thought so. I'm glad that you decided to accept the assignment, but by writing this article you've committed yourself, wouldn't you say?' When James nodded his agreement, Preston continued, 'But you didn't seem too keen when I first mentioned it.'

'Well, I knew it would require doing research at the University and I had some problems with that.' He explained how he had taken up his Master's Degree again even though he knew his boss hadn't expected him to go that far. 'Also I got some unexpected help from someone who knows you.'

Preston raised his eyebrows. 'Oh?'

'Yes. A lecturer at UQ, Dr Phillip Gill.'

The chief shifted his gaze and seemed a little uncomfortable. At that moment James' suspicions were confirmed. There was more to this than a purely professional assignment. 'Yes, we met when I enrolled in one of his subjects next semester.'

James decided to probe a little further. 'I didn't know you were doing a uni course Chief?'

Peter shook his head. 'I'm not really. He's just letting me sit in on the subject. It doesn't count towards anything.'

Even more curious. 'At least when you do that you don't have to do any assignments or exams.' James suddenly felt that he may have gone too far.

Preston nodded briefly and changed the subject. 'I've been thinking about your assignment. I know I'm asking a lot of you so I'm increasing your paid hours by fifty percent. It won't ease your load but it'll compensate you a bit for your extra time.'

James caught his breath. 'Thanks Chief. I appreciate that.' *The extra money would come in handy but what a way to change the subject, if that's what it was.*

His boss stood up. 'Well, I'd appreciate it if you would give me regular reports on the results of your investigation as soon as you have any – even before you write your article.'

James stood also. 'Will do, Chief, as soon as I discover something I'll let you know, but...' He paused. 'I'm still not sure I'm up to this.'

Preston shook his head. 'Nonsense! You have exactly the right credentials for the job. I'm counting on you.'

There it is again - that personal note. 'I'll do my best but it may take quite some time.'

'That's OK, as long as I get progress reports.' Peter Preston reached for his phone as James left the room.

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New Farm

James looked over the menu at the New Farm Restaurant and visibly quailed at some of the prices. Mary noticed his expression and waved one hand. 'Never mind, dear. You've just had a rise and we don't do this often.'

James nodded agreement but he would still order a less expensive meal as he could enjoy it without a guilty conscience. He had become used to economising since he gave up full-time journalism. But Mary was right. It was good to give themselves a break from cooking or, more likely on this occasion, from take-a-ways, and it would give them a chance to talk. Mary added, 'Besides, I'm bringing in pretty good money now.'

James sat back and looked at her appreciatively. 'And how *was* work today?'

Mary smiled. 'Pretty busy. Most of the partners are finalising business returns before the due date, so I have to answer all the queries from new clients. The worst ones are the ones that want us to include deductions they're not legally entitled to. They're wasting their time because the partners won't give in to them.'

James nodded his approval. 'Good for them.' The waiter suddenly appeared and took their order. When he had left, James asked, 'Do you remember Kevin Hilliard from the College?'

'I think I met him at your graduation party.' She looked up. 'Why?'

'He was at the Uni canteen last week and we had lunch together. We used to sit together in class but he went to a western parish after graduation and we lost touch.'

'What's he doing now?'

'He's working back here in the city, in Christian Education.'

Mary screwed up her face as she tried to remember. 'He was married wasn't he?'

'Yes. You met Julie at the party.'

A wistful look came over Mary's face. 'Do they have any children yet?' she asked without looking directly at James.

'Yair. Twin girls, but he seemed surprised I was married. He always thought I was a confirmed bachelor.'

'I put a stop to all that nonsense, didn't I?' She said, looking at him with a twinkle in her eye.

'You certainly did. '

Mary looked around the restaurant at the patrons. James changed the subject. 'I met my supervisor.'

Mary looked back at him. 'How was he?'

'He's really terrific. He's one of these people who are so interested in you that they forget all about the time.' James paused for a moment. 'He's going to help me with the Chief's assignment.'

Mary's eyebrows rose. 'How?'

'He's going to arrange for me to do assignments that fit in with my investigation. That means I can save time by only doing one lot of research.'

'That *is* good news.'

James looked away. 'He's a Buddhist.'

Mary's eyes widened. 'He's a what?'

'A Buddhist.'

Mary frowned. 'How can he help you with Christian research?'

'I think he will. I like him. He loves animals.'

'Oh! James. You like anyone who loves animals.' She smiled and shook her head. 'I just hope he's sympathetic to the goals of your assignment.'

'He will be, and he should be useful when I get round to looking at the truth behind Buddhism.' He paused again. 'Apparently they don't believe in a personal God.'

Her eyes widened even further. 'Then how do they worship?'

'I don't think they do, not as we know it anyway. I think they meditate or something. But I'll know more as I go along, especially if I do his Buddhism subject next semester. By the way, I found out the boss is sitting in on it too. He wouldn't tell me why. It's a bit weird.'

Mary raised one eyebrow and pulled a face. 'I can't imagine your boss sitting in on a university subject of any kind. You're right. That is weird.' Mary looked past James. 'Ah! Here's our order coming.'

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Thursday 24th February

University of Queensland, St Lucia

James finished a mouthful and looked at Kevin. 'Julie read your column yesterday, and made sure I read it too. You're opening a can of worms with this truth in religions bit.'

James shrugged. 'It's the boss's idea. He's got me working on finding the common truth between Christianity and other religions.'

Kevin whistled. 'Whew! That's some assignment. Especially when you can't even accept all your own Church's doctrines.' He grinned at James. 'I bet you can't even say the creed.'

James gave a twisted grin. 'I will admit there are some parts where I've been known to keep silent.'

Kevin laughed and pointed at him. 'There you are.'

'So, I've got some problems with Christian doctrines. That's one reason I've been worrying about this assignment. I nearly didn't take it.'

Kevin reached out as if to give a reassuring pat on James' shoulder. 'Hey, James, I was only having a go at you. Those doubts of yours make you the ideal person for the job.'

James put down his roll. 'You're the second person to say that to me today and I still don't understand.'

Kevin sat back and folded his arms. 'Well, look at it this way. If you are going to look honestly at other religions then surely you have to be able to look critically at your own.'

‘Ah ha.’ James looked up towards the ceiling. ‘I hadn’t thought of that. I think I see now what the boss was driving at.’

‘Yes. You’re open minded. He wouldn’t want anyone too dogmatic.’

James pointed quickly at Kevin. ‘Actually, that’s one of my beefs - the Church’s confounded dogmatism. We’re right and everyone else is wrong. We were all taught that Christians are the only people who can be saved. But what about all the other religions with their teeming millions?’ James was on his soapbox now. ‘How can anyone believe that all of those devoutly religious people are destined for hell?’

‘Well, I don’t.’ Kevin said indignantly. ‘As it says in Genesis, ‘Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?’’

‘Yes.’ James nodded knowingly. ‘I’ve heard that argument but that one doesn’t satisfy me any more.’

‘Why not?’ asked Kevin in surprise.

‘Because it doesn’t tackle the hard question - what about the passages like the one where Jesus says, ‘No one comes to the Father except through me?’

Kevin shrugged. ‘Oh, I just don’t take them literally.’

‘Then how should we take them?’

Kevin couldn’t think of an answer. ‘All I know is, I agree with JAT Robinson in his book ‘In the End, God.’ Now I’m a Universalist.’

‘So you think all people are eventually saved?’

‘Of course. Don’t you?’ Kevin seemed surprised.

‘I want to but I can’t get past those words of Jesus.’ James looked at Kevin for assurance.

Kevin thought for a moment and then asked, ‘Have you read Raymond Moody’s book, ‘Life after Life’ about near-death experiences?’

‘No. Don’t tell me you’ve had one of those experiences?’ James smiled sceptically.

‘No, I haven’t personally.’ Kevin frowned. ‘But the book lists many people who have had that experience. They all remember rising up out of their body, undergoing a journey through some sort of tunnel or valley and meeting a ‘Being of Light’.’

‘So what does that prove, except that there is life after death for Christians?’ James wanted to know.

Kevin leaned forward to drive home his point. ‘That’s just the point. I wasn’t just Christians. Christians usually saw the light as Christ, the ‘light of the world’ but other people saw it too. Moslems and Jews said it was an Angel.’

James began to ‘see the light’ himself. ‘So followers of all religions had this experience?’

‘Right.’ Kevin smiled with relief at having struck a chord. ‘Not only them but also followers of no religion – unbelievers. So there you are.’ Kevin spread his hands.

James considered this argument. ‘So there has to be a possibility of salvation for all, despite what the church teaches.’

‘Right’. Kevin smiled his satisfaction. ‘Welcome to the Heretic’s Club.’

‘I think I’m already a member.’ James laughed. ‘How did it affect your ministry being a Universalist?’

‘Well, for one thing, it meant that I was able to be much more positive and comforting when I was conducting funerals.’

Funerals for people outside the church had been a problem for James – the few he had conducted during his field placement. ‘How so?’

Kevin raised a finger. ‘Let me tell you a tale. I was once called to the bedside of a dying resident of a nursing home in my parish. The family warned me that he was a

militant atheist. When I was talking to him I told him a light-hearted story about an atheist arriving in heaven and being surprised he was there.

James leaned slightly forward expectantly. 'And what did he say?'

'He said, 'That would be me, Kevin. That would be me.' And when he died the relatives said that it was his dying wish that I conduct the funeral service. Apparently he didn't want any judgmental fundamentalist burying him.'

James nodded slowly. 'Because a fundamentalist couldn't offer any hope of salvation for an unbeliever?'

'Right on.'

'But how does that conviction fit with the teachings of the Church?' James wanted to know.

'Not very well but it fits well with *some* passages of Scripture.'

'Such as?'

'One of my favourites is the verse in Timothy which says something about 'the living God ... is the saviour of all, especially of believers.'

'I like that.' James nodded enthusiastically. 'It's a beautiful paradox and keeps two truths in balance.'

Kevin got up to leave and looked suddenly at James. 'Now that's a deep statement. Why don't you use it in your assignment?'

James looked like a stunned mullet. *What did I say? I'd better write it down.*

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