

Chapter Five

'THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY'

Sunday 27th February.

Anglican Church, Mt Gravatt

'Let us now worship God with our free-will offering towards ecumenical activities.' The priest gestured towards the empty offering plates. 'After the dedication of the offering I will hand over to our guest preacher who will talk on the renewal of creation.' The special Sunday morning ecumenical service was going well and James watched as the offering stewards moved back down the aisle with the offering plates.

Mary turned to him and whispered, 'Who is this guest preacher?'

'Trevor Keaton.' He answered, leaning towards her, 'He's a former Catholic priest and an expert on the environment.'

'He's a 'greenie'?' she whispered.

'A theological greenie,' he answered as they stood up for the dedication of the offering.

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Trevor Keaton lived up to his reputation and held the congregation's attention with his address on 'The Renewal of Creation'. He drew on the latest scientific discoveries to illustrate the unity of all creation. Then he turned to the Scriptures for further supporting evidence. Suddenly, James, whose mind had been drifting a little because he had heard some of this before, was aware that the preacher was asking the congregation a question about the Bible. 'Who knows the story in the Bible where God makes a covenant or contract with Noah never again to send a flood to destroy the earth?'

Almost all hands went up in the congregation. James wondered what was coming next. ‘Very good. You remember the Lord’s sign - the rainbow in the sky?’ Heads nodded here and there. ‘Now,’ the preacher continued. ‘Who knows where it is in the Bible that God makes a covenant or contract with the animals not to destroy them?’

James felt a measure of annoyance that with all his theological and biblical training he couldn’t answer the question. Then he noticed without turning his head too far that no one else within his range of vision had their hand up either. Along with the rest he gave the preacher his full attention eagerly awaiting the answer, almost expecting the answer that there wasn’t any such passage. After a suitably long dramatic pause, the preacher said, ‘The answer is - in the same passage. We all know the passage but we just don’t see all the sections referring to the creatures because our minds are not attuned to seeing special treatment for animals.’

The preacher went on with his address building up a strong case for better treatment of the environment including animals but James, incredulous, had reached for the pew Bible and opened it to Genesis Chapter 9. Mary glanced sideways at him with a disapproving frown for not paying attention but he couldn’t help himself.

‘ .. I am establishing my covenant with you .. and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you...’

So it went on with at least two more specific references to all living creatures. James was completely stunned, not because his knowledge of the Bible was deficient - although it obviously was - but because it was apparently possible to read the Scriptures and be totally blind to a whole section without being aware of it.

As the congregation stood to sing the final hymn, James continued to analyse his new discovery. It had become clear to him that human beings only see what they expect to see in old familiar passages, unless they are alerted to new truths by people with a different point of view, such as Trevor Keaton. Could it not also work with ideas from people outside of our own religion? James was suddenly aware of the relevance of the words of the hymn they were singing, 'The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from His Word'.

He now realised that followers of any religion will not see some truths in their own scriptures at all, because of their own preconceived ideas – like 'animals are not important'. It was definitely like 'seeing through a glass darkly' only even more distorting than he had realised. Looking through a set of spectacles that cause distortion covers up the blind spots - the ones people can't or won't see. The spectacles represent biases, prejudices, and even contrary beliefs. As one of his professors used to say sarcastically about a difficult passage, 'we Protestants don't read those verses because we see them as Roman Catholic passages'.

On the way to the door to be greeted by those taking part in the service, he felt Mary nudge him in the side and take his hand. 'You've got that far away look again.' she said, 'Another revelation? I could almost see the light bulb flashing above your head.'

James came back to earth and smiled at her. 'Yes. Another nail in the coffin of Fundamentalism. Tell you later.'

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Thursday 2nd March

University of Queensland, St Lucia

It was Thursday of the first week of lectures and James was having his usual lunchtime chat with Kevin. They had been discussing the lectures, their families and things in general when Kevin pushed his empty plate away and looked at James. 'Well?'

James had long since finished his salad roll. 'Well what?'

'Oh! Come on James. You know. What did you think about the article...on Mark 13?'

'Oh! That.' James knew that Kevin would be keen to know his reaction but had refrained from bringing it up himself, mainly out of devilment. He smiled. 'It was excellent. I have to admit I was quite surprised.'

Kevin was relieved. 'Didn't expect the old SDA's to come up with something new, eh?' He smirked.

'It was more than that.' James replied. 'I didn't expect them to have such a high standard of scholarship.'

'Good on you for admitting your prejudices.' Kevin said approvingly. 'So, do you buy their solution to the problem or not?'

James admitted, 'I think their interpretation is spot on. The prophecy in Mark 13 is the same type as the one used in the Old Testament where the destruction of Jerusalem is just a sign that the Day of the Lord is coming.'

Kevin seemed pleased. He leant forward and pointed at James. 'And that fits with the evidence that Jesus did not know the day or the hour.'

'Yes,' agreed James, 'but there's still a problem.'

Kevin looked at James suspiciously. 'What's that?'

James touched his chin. 'Why did the early Church expect His imminent return, if Jesus didn't mean that?'

'Mm. Good point.' Kevin acknowledged. 'Maybe they misunderstood him. You know – heard what they wanted to hear?'

James lifted his hands. 'Maybe they didn't know their own Hebrew Scriptures well enough. Anyway, leaving that aside, the article gives me a model to help me with my assignment.'

Kevin raised his eyebrows and looked questioningly at James.

'I call it 'The Reflection Model'. The fall of Jerusalem is a kind of reflection of the Day of the Lord, right?' James raised one hand.

Kevin thought for a moment. 'I suppose so. So?'

'Well, so is every text, every doctrine, every belief merely a reflection of the truth it represents - sometimes a rather pale reflection.'

Kevin narrowed his eyes. 'Isn't that stretching the meaning of the article a bit?'

James shrugged. 'Probably, but when I get a flash of inspiration I don't question the source too closely. You throw me an idea and I'll twist it to suit myself.'

'Obviously. Talk about a leap of faith.' Kevin shook his head in disbelief. 'Anyway, if it serves to rescue you from your literalism, I'll turn a blind eye to your faulty interpretation.'

James bowed his head slightly. 'Oh you are too kind, good sir.'

'Not at all.' Kevin waved his hand dismissively. 'Anything for a friend in need. Talking of need, don't you need to go to a lecture about now?'

James looked at his watch. 'O my goodness. I'll have to run. I don't want to be late for my first lecture on Concepts of Ultimate Reality.'

'I think you already are. See you James.'

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James was starting to look forward to his weekly interview with his supervisor. In some ways it was the highlight of his week. He always had his sights raised and his horizons widened. This interview was to be no exception. As he accepted the proffered and inevitable mug of coffee he started with a question. 'Phillip, in the lecture I just attended, they kept using the term 'Ultimate Reality' instead of 'God'. Can you tell me why?'

Cradling his own coffee Phillip sat back with a smile that seemed to say, 'I've been waiting for you to ask that question.' What he actually said was, 'Because, the word 'God' denotes a personal being. Remember I told you that some other traditions, like Buddhism, have a different understanding?' James nodded. 'Well, if we are not to rule them out, we need another term. Scholars use the term 'Ultimate Reality'.'

James frowned. 'It's a bigger word than 'God'- and a bit abstract don't you think?'

Phillip inclined his head. 'I agree it is a bit daunting but I don't see any alternative if we're not going to pre-empt the whole issue.'

James asked slowly, 'And what issue would that be?'

'The nature of the Reality behind all religions,' Phillip explained patiently.

But James was still reluctant to abandon the personal term, 'God'. 'Is the personal God issue important in practice or is it just theoretical?'

'It's important to Buddhists.' Phillip pulled down a book from his shelf called 'The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions'. 'At the 1993 Parliament of the World's religions, the whole exercise of trying to arrive at an agreed global ethic almost ground to a halt because of it.'¹

'Why?' James looked puzzled.

Phillip showed him a page of the book. 'Because the representatives of the *Western* religions had no idea that Buddhism did not believe in a personal God. The Buddhists could not accept the name of 'God' being used in such a declaration, so here you see they suggested names like 'Great Being' or 'Higher Spiritual Authority'.

James smiled. 'I like 'Great Being' better than 'Ultimate Reality'.

Phillip shook his head. 'It was still a bit too personal for the Buddhist delegates but I think they were just trying to put forward a compromise.' The supervisor sat back and folded his arms. 'Now tell me, how are you going?'

James then shared with the professor something of his recent ideas for a 'Reflection Model'.

Phillip nodded slowly. 'I like your 'Reflection Model' very much, especially your 'spectacles' idea. It fits in rather well with the differences between Western and Eastern religions.' He leant forward and pointed at James. 'Have you ever thought that in the West we see the truth about Ultimate Reality through the eyes of our own culture - through Western eyes?'

James frowned. 'No. What do you mean by Western eyes?'

Phillip raised one finger. 'I'll give you just one example but there is more than one: Western culture has a more rational approach to things than Eastern culture.'

'By rational you mean we use the power of reason?' James spread his hands, 'So what's wrong with that?'

Phillip shook his head. 'Well, for one thing we in the West try to make all our theology logically consistent while Eastern culture is more comfortable than we are with contradictions and paradoxes.'

James took another sip of coffee while he struggled to understand this sudden expansion of the scope of his 'spectacles' idea.

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‘Paradoxes?’ he queried lamely, seeking further clarification.

Phillip gave an example. ‘In the Eastern religion of Taoism, novices are expected to find answers to riddles or ‘koans’ like, ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’ or, ‘What was your original face, the one you had before you were born?’²

James screwed up his face. ‘But those questions are ridiculous aren’t they?’

‘Yes, they’re ridiculous to Westerners.’ Phillip explained, ‘because there are no logical answers to them. They are designed to free the novices from logical, rational thought. Westerners usually have great difficulty dealing with these ‘koans’ because we see reality through logical, rational ‘spectacles’, to use your phrase.’

‘OK.’ James nodded slowly. ‘So that is what you meant by us looking at things through Western eyes. Does that include the way we look at God - sorry ‘Ultimate Reality’?’

‘Well it certainly affects the way we express our beliefs, but maybe we also look at Ultimate Reality through coloured spectacles without being aware of it.’ Phillip tried a different tack. ‘Or, to change the metaphor, perhaps we see Ultimate Reality in a mirror with a degree of distortion. You know - like those crazy mirrors in fun parlours.’

James nodded. His ‘Reflections’ idea had prepared him for this. ‘So, if what we see is distorted, that means that Westerners will have to give up some of their certainties, doesn’t it?’

Phillip shifted position in his chair. ‘There is a Buddhist saying that goes, ‘Every day the clever man learns something new but day by day the wise man gives up some certainty...’

‘ Ah! ...’ James thought he was finished the quotation but he had only paused.

‘ ..perhaps’.

‘ Excuse me?’

‘ I said, ‘...the wise man gives up some certainty ... perhaps’. Phillip smiled at his own joke.

‘ Oh, I see,’ said James. Apparently, even that statement was uncertain. ‘That’s very clever and very deep. Did you get that from your Buddhist Scriptures?’

‘ No! I was reminded of it on TV recently.’ The young professor had a twinkle in his eye. ‘Re-runs of the old Japanese series called ‘Monkey’. Each episode finishes with a Buddhist saying.’

James laughed. ‘Phillip, are you trying to say it’s all right to be a bit uncertain about our beliefs?’

Phillip wouldn’t be drawn into such a value judgment. He looked at the ceiling as he answered. ‘All I’m saying is - if a person can’t see their own view of Ultimate Reality as a distortion of the truth, then they can’t be open to anyone else’s truth.’

James pondered for a moment. ‘How can we free ourselves from our own culture?’

‘With great difficulty, but we can try looking at Ultimate Reality through a different window - adopt a different world-view - widen our horizons. Other religions may have a different but equally valid view.’

‘Equally valid?’ James felt uncomfortable with that statement. Even his new Inclusivist position didn’t allow for there being any other valid way to God except through the Risen Christ even if ‘unawares’.

Phillip sensed James’ discomfort. ‘I think you had better move on from Inclusivism and start having a look at the Pluralist position because that is really where we are right now.’ He stood to terminate the interview leaving James feeling more frustrated than enlightened.

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Friday 3rd March

Daily Mail, Bowen Hills

'How is the investigation going James?' Peter Preston suddenly appeared alongside James at one of the water coolers placed strategically around the office of the Daily Mail.

'Quite well Chief.' James took a sip of his cup.

His boss helped himself to a cup of water. 'Nothing to report at the moment?'

James waved his free hand nonchalantly. 'Nothing of much interest to you, Chief. Just a new conceptual model to help me analyse different religious beliefs.'

Peter straightened up and looked James in the eye. 'I would be very interested in that. Bring your drink and join me in my office.'

James suddenly realised that he had underestimated his boss's intellectual interest and capability.

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The Chief swayed back in his plush executive chair with his hands behind his head and said, 'Well, tell me about this new conceptual model of yours.'

James proceeded to outline the basics of the discovery he had made. He concluded, 'So now I can look at the beliefs of the different religions, apply the 'Reflections Model' to try and see if it's the same God behind the different beliefs.'

The Editor mumbled almost inaudibly, 'That doesn't help me much.'

James strained forward, 'I beg your pardon, Chief?'

The Chief straightened up and said, 'Oh, I said 'That doesn't help us much' - you know - with religions like Buddhism.'

James was sure he had said, 'help me much'. 'I'm sorry Chief. I forgot about your interest in Buddhism. I should have said, 'see if it's the same *Reality* behind the

different experiences. I'm supposed to use the term Ultimate Reality instead of 'God' for that reason.'

Peter Preston brightened considerably and said, 'I like your idea of reflections. None of us has the full truth, that's for sure.' Preston got to his feet, signalling the end of the interview. 'Well, keep me informed. I am interested in the process you're going through, not just the results.'

James picked up his empty cup as he stood and shrugged his shoulders. 'OK Chief. No problem.'

As he left the chief's office, the receptionist called out to him. 'James, there's a call for you. He sounds agitated. Will I put it through to your office?'

'Yes, please, Janelle.' James settled himself in his chair, picked up the phone and leaned back.

'James McGregor speaking. How can I help you?' As James listened intently, he sat up straight and his face went white. 'Who is this? How dare you.' But the caller had hung up.

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1. Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, A Global Ethic, 'The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions', SCM Press Ltd, 1993, P. 61-5.
2. Fritjof Capra, The Tao of Physics, Shambala Publications, Inc., 1976.