

Chapter Seven

TESTIMONY

Thursday 9th March

University of Queensland, St Lucia

‘Black with no sugar, wasn’t it, James?’ His Supervisor had the coffee ready even as he entered.

‘Yes, thanks, Phillip.’ James settled himself into his usual comfy chair.

‘Now, how is the assignment going?’ Phillip asked as he folded his arms, leaving the coffee untouched on the table.

‘Very well, thank you. I’ve covered Exclusivism, Inclusivism and Pluralism,’ James answered in a rather self-satisfied manner.

Phillip inclined his head. ‘That’s excellent in such a short time. Those are three of the major positions but for a 5000 word assignment you will need to include all the positions in between as well as the fourth major one - relativism which you won’t like.’

James lifted his eyebrows. ‘Why not?’

Phillip smiled. ‘Because it assumes there is no absolute reality behind any religion.’

‘You’re right,’ James nodded. ‘I don’t like it at all.’

‘But you need to include it for the sake of completeness.’ Phillip lifted his mug to take a sip. ‘So where are we at with your boss’s assignment?’

James shook his head slowly. ‘I’m stuck. Bugged down.’

‘How can that be? I thought you had a real break through with pluralism - tailor-made for your Reflections Model.’

James nodded. ‘True, but pluralism doesn’t help me to find the Divine behind these religions’

‘Unfortunately, it doesn’t,’ Phillip agreed. ‘But it assumes it and lays a good foundation for dialogue.’

James spread his hands. ‘So where do I go from here? How do you get behind their beliefs to the true nature of Ultimate Reality?’ James was pleased with his easy use of the new term. ‘How do you get from the planets to the Sun?’

The professor smiled at the reference to the Copernican Theory and put down his mug. ‘Maybe testimony?’

James frowned as he queried the word. ‘Testimony?’

‘ Yes. Testimony.’ Phillip looked up. ‘Other people’s descriptions of their spiritual experience of the Divine.’

James frowned. ‘How do I find those?’

‘That’s up to you, but I suggest that when you are reading you look out for any descriptions of personal experience that is common to, say, the great religions of the West - Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Also keep an eye out for any opportunity to interview or dialogue with actual followers of these religions. There are plenty of them on campus - especially in this department.’

James didn’t know anyone but he could think of someone who would - his lecturer in Islam, Jaclyn Sahid.

The professor continued. ‘In most western religious traditions and some eastern ones, the followers have a personal relationship with a deity or deities.’

‘But you don’t believe in a personal God.’ James was puzzled.

Phillip sat back and said with a serious face, 'You will never understand my mystical tradition until you first understand the theistic tradition that you belong to.'

James thought this made good sense. He believed that the God he worshipped was personal but he was a little reluctant to talk about it the way some Christians did, as if God or Jesus were their own personal possession.

He lifted a finger as he recalled, 'In the College I remember some theologians used to call it an experience of the 'Wholly Other', because God is holy and totally different from us and we are sinful creatures.'

Phillip reached up and pulled a book from his bookcase. 'Why don't you look up this book of Rudolf Otto's, 'The Idea of the Holy'? It's a classic. He describes the experience common to all theistic religions as 'mysterium, tremendum et fascinans'.¹

James noted the author's name for future reference and asked. 'Which means...?'

Phillip answered without consulting the book, 'Awe-fully overwhelming, majestic, dynamically powerful yet uniquely attractive and fascinating.'

James was impressed and inquired, 'Do any other scholars support the idea of a common element behind the religions?'

Phillip nodded in agreement. 'There are some others who believe there is a common element behind them - Ninian Smart for one. He's into reconciling Christianity with other religions. He suggests the first step in the process is to realise that the focus of faith transcends the ideas we use to try and express it.'²

James thought out loud while writing down the author's name. 'I wonder how other religions would react to that idea?'

'Depends on the *tradition*,' said Phillip using his preferred description. 'There is a Hindu belief that dogmas are just distorted images of a truth that transcends all dogmas. Using their idea we could say that the same divine reality lies behind the

concepts of Allah, Yahweh, Vishnu, Shiva, and God or Christ. They could all be worshipping the same God but calling Him by different names. As the Hindu Scriptures say, 'Truth is one; the sages call it differently'.

James blew out his cheeks. 'Phillip, I think you have given me more than enough for one day. I must go and look up some of these authors and get started.'

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Monday 13th March

'Well, that concludes a brief history of Muhammad's early life and his religious experience. After the break, we will look at the Quran and Muhammad's first converts.' Dressed in a graceful Pakistani style wrap-around sari, James' lecturer on Islam seemed to James to be almost too glamorous for an academic with her slim figure and shoulder length red hair. During the half-time break in the afternoon lecture, she would mix informally with the students thus giving them a chance to ask her questions personally. James took the opportunity on this occasion to ask her opinion on the subject of Christian mission and inter-faith dialogue.

Jaclyn Sahid gave James' question her full attention and then looked down before answering. 'James, most Moslem countries discourage Christian missionaries from entering their country for evangelistic purposes. They have to have some other skill or qualification to contribute and only then are they allowed to enter.' Then she added with a lovely smile that made James' heart miss a beat. 'But if they are discreet there may be opportunities to assist in the local Christian churches. Dialogue between Christians and Moslems is not easy. In Pakistan the constitution guarantees religious freedom but it's still a Moslem nation and anything resembling proselytising is frowned upon.'

'How does your husband see the relationship between our two religions? Does he not want to convert Christians to Islam?' It was widely known among the students that she was a Christian married to a Pakistani Moslem.

With a smile she said, 'Very tactfully put. You mean did he try to convert me?'

James flushed and cast his eyes down. Dr Sahid continued.

'The answer is that he knew better than to try. Anyway, he wouldn't because he believes that God sent Muhammad to the Arabs and Jesus Christ to the West. Therefore we should all be mutually tolerant and keep to our own religion.'

'But as a Christian, surely you don't believe that?'

'No, but it is better for our relationship than an intolerant, dogmatic attitude. He doesn't try to convert me and I don't try to convert him. I just witness by my actions.' She lifted one finger. 'Did you know that Muhammad regarded Christians and Jews as 'peoples of the book' and 'closest in love' to Muslims?'

'No, I didn't.'

James wanted to hear more of this but his lecturer raised one hand. 'We'll be covering that next week.'

James then realised that other students were waiting their turn to speak to her but, following the advice of his supervisor, he needed to ask one more question. 'Do you think that Muslims have a personal relationship with Allah as we do with Jesus Christ?'

'It's probably more like the Jewish relationship with Yahweh. But if you want to compare religious beliefs and experiences, why don't you come to the Jewish-Islamic-Christian Symposium at lunch-time on Friday.'

'Where is it being held?' James said eagerly.

'At International House.' She turned to the next student but looked back at him over her shoulder. 'The details are on the departmental notice board.'

James acknowledged with a nod and made a mental note to attend the symposium, and to invite Kevin if he was free.

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Friday, 17th March.

International House, University Campus

Unable to see Kevin anywhere, James chose a seat at the front of the hall at International House. IH specialised in accepting students from overseas and had a very multicultural flavour. Representing the oldest of the three religions, the Jewish speaker, Rabbi Solomon Benjamin, was asked to lead off. He was wearing a lounge suit in keeping with the informality of the occasion except that he kept his head covered which, he explained, was a mark of reverence towards God in whose presence all life is lived. It soon became obvious to James that the Jews were strictly monotheistic. Their primary creed was the 'Shema' meaning 'hear' as in: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One.'

He also gathered that they were far more interested in the revelation of God or Yahweh through the Torah - the books of the Law, and the Mishnah - the codification of the interpretation of that law - than they were in explaining their beliefs about God. In fact, 'orthopraxis', correct practice, seemed to take precedence over 'orthodoxy', correct beliefs.

Then, all of a sudden, the Rabbi made reference to the personal experience of the prophets of old, taken from their Talmud - their Holy Scriptures - which had much in common with Christianity's Old Testament: the call of Moses at the burning bush and also the vision of Isaiah in the temple. Of course, James thought, Jews and Christians shared a common heritage of spiritual experience in the stories of the

Prophets. The Rabbi then quoted the familiar words of Isaiah Chapter 6 where Isaiah 'saw the Lord.... high and lifted up.'

James remembered that, in the story, there was a lot of incense and smoke filling the temple and Isaiah was convinced that he had had a vision of the Lord upon the throne of God high in the centre of the temple. James filed these experiences away in his memory as examples of an encounter with the living God that Christianity and Judaism had in common.

The speaker then went on to describe the typical life of a Jewish family with its emphasis on the prayer ritual of three times a day, either in the home or in the synagogue, and on the habit of worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath - the sixth day - but usually only by the male members of the family. As to how many of the faithful had personal experience of Yahweh through these rituals, there seemed to James to be no way of knowing.

In the brief question time allowed after each speech, one of the audience stood up and asked about the Jewish writer, Martin Buber, and his concept of the 'I-Thou' relationship, which is the personal face-to-face relationship we have with people and with God as opposed to an 'I-it' relationship which we have with things. James was familiar with the name and the concept as they had studied Martin Buber in College, but the Rabbi did not seem as interested in Jewish philosophy as he was in orthodox practice. James was interested to hear him answer in terms of obedience in the presence of God. The Chairperson terminated the question time and called for the representative of Islam, Abdul Ahmed, President of the University Islamic Society.

The speaker began in a similar fashion to the Rabbi and emphasised the monotheism of Islam by reciting the first pillar of Islam, the 'Shahada' or testimony of faith: 'I bear witness that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.' As the speaker went on to exalt the Quran as the perfect revelation from God, it

reminded James of the way Christians usually regarded Jesus Christ. It seemed to him that for Muslims the Quran was to be compared more with the divine Son of God rather than with the Christian Scriptures. However, he had to admit that, in the early days of his Christian life, he used to exalt the Bible almost to the level of divinity with its supposed qualities of inerrancy and infallibility.

Abdul Ahmed then startled all present by denying the Divinity of Christ. He proceeded to support his argument from a handout that was being circulated and with quotes from some leading Anglican Bishops of England who had allegedly denied the divinity of Christ. He then proceeded to deny the historical fact of his death. James was not the only member of the audience to be surprised by his confrontational attitude and his attack on basic doctrines of Christianity, which was quite different from what he had experienced with other Moslems.

James forced himself to listen intently and eventually realised why the speaker was taking this line. The Jewish rabbi had predictably rejected Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah, claiming the Messiah was still to come. On the other hand, the Muslim speaker had to deny the Christian version of the person of Jesus Christ because it contradicted the Quran's version of the story. This was that Jesus, ('on whom be peace' he said) was a sinless prophet of Allah who did not die but was taken straight to heaven. Abdul Ahmed had to defend the Quran's version at all costs because, for him, it was the infallible, inerrant revelation from God.

Trying to ignore the noisy response of the audience, James listened carefully and noted again the emphasis on ritual prayer, five times a day, and worship in the mosque again mainly for men. James had visited Muslim temples while on a holiday tour in Asia where worshippers packed the temple and chanted prayers to Allah. He had seen Muslims at airports roll out their prayer mats and pray towards Mecca.

James was puzzled. In Christianity, individual conversations with the Divine usually took the form of prayer, and prayer could include asking in one's own words for help or guidance. In fact, apparent answers to prayer were often a great source of reassurance to believers and a means of deepening their personal relationship with God.

However, from what he had heard, prayer for Jews and Muslims was more akin to a set, repetitive ritual both for individuals and for groups. He wondered if they received any response or assurance from Yahweh or Allah in the course of their worship practices, but then he realised that the same question could be asked of the more liturgical branches of the Christian Church. He remembered some words he had read only that week: 'We can never judge how personal any particular religious experience is, but all members of theistic traditions have in common the worship of a personal God or Gods.'

In question time, James tried to bring a note of reconciliation into the proceedings by asking, 'Abdul, thank you for your presentation. I would like to suggest that we worship the same God by different names. What do you think?'

The speaker stared at him in horror and replied, 'I'm sorry but you Christians worship Jesus Christ. For us Muslims that is blasphemy. We worship Allah alone.' The speaker ignored James' attempt to protest and turned to take a question from another member of the audience. However, the Chairperson cut it short and called the Christian speaker to the dais.

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The Christian speaker, Katrina Bavington, did a reasonable job. Being from the conservative Evangelical Union she had no answer to the radical issues raised by Abdul Ahmed but she gave her own personal testimony. She testified that, after hearing the Gospel preached from the Bible and making a decision to follow Christ, a

new dimension had entered her life. She had become a new person and believed that she had come to know God in a personal way.

This note of personal conversion was totally missing from the other two speeches where the personal relationship emphasis, though implied, was tied closely to the ritual of regular prayer and communal worship. After the previous speaker, Katrina's confession that Jesus Christ was her personal Saviour and Lord was not well received by the Muslim students present. The Head of the College who had opened proceedings now closed them by thanking the chairperson, who had had a difficult job, and the three speakers.

James rose to leave and was suddenly aware of Dr Jaclyn Sahid converging with him from the other front row with her hand raised to get his attention. 'Glad you could make it, James. I liked your question and...' she lowered her voice and lent towards him confidentially. 'I must apologise for Abdul and his blunt approach. He is *not* typical of all Muslims.'

James smiled and nodded his head. 'I know that Dr. Sahid. But I think he was just being honest. I can understand where he is coming from.' They moved towards the door together as they spoke.

Dr Sahid turned her head to look at him directly as she walked. 'That's very understanding and tolerant of you. Having their own version of the gospel story in the Quran is a real problem for any attempt at dialogue. That is what you were on about, wasn't it?'

'Yes.' They reached the door and James held it open for her. 'I'm afraid that the uniqueness and divinity of Christ is going to be a stumbling block to finding a common reality behind all the world religions.'

'So that's what you're up to, is it? Well, good luck and feel free to come and see me if I can help at all.'

'Thank you Doctor. I will.'

'Call me Jaclyn,' she smiled over her shoulder as she took her leave.

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Carindale

As James opened the garage door he was thinking about his day and the possibility of an interview with the delightful Jaclyn Sahid. He was quite unprepared for the reception he received from his wife. Mary had heard the door go up and was waiting for him in the internal doorway.

'Oh, where have you been? Why couldn't you get home earlier today of all days?' Mary was obviously distraught.

James kissed her and spoke soothingly. 'Well, I'm here now. What's the matter?'

'That horrible man. You said he wouldn't ring again but he did. He rang here asking for you.' Mary buried her face in James's chest.

James put his arms around her. 'What did he say?'

She lifted her head to reply. 'It was awful. He said something about your articles and heresy, and called you the anti-Christ. Then he said you didn't deserve to live and he was going to get you if you didn't stop writing those articles. Oh, James, what are we going to do?'

James gritted his teeth. 'This time we *will* contact the police and ask them to put a tap on our phone or something. But our address is in the phone book so he could turn up here.'

Mary pulled away. 'In that case, we'd better check all our locks right now.'

James called after her. 'And in future, I'll see you off in the morning and meet you when you arrive home.'

Mary turned on her way to check the locks. 'And what about you? It's you he's after.'

'I'll be all right. I can look after myself,' James said with a confidence he didn't feel.

Mary nodded and turned back to her self-appointed task of checking the doors and locks. She called back over her shoulder, 'You could stop writing those articles.'

James narrowed his eyes, shook his head and called out. 'Then he would've won, wouldn't he?'

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1. O.U.P., London, 1923.
2. N. Smart, 'Truth and Religions', Cahn & Shatz pp291-300. 'Contemporary Philosophy of Religion', O.U.P., 1982.