

## **Chapter Eight**

### **EXPERIENCE IS THE KEY**

**Monday 20th March**

#### **Carindale**

After the police had been contacted and the weekend had brought no further incident, Mary and James started to relax a little and life returned almost to normal but James tried to make sure he was home whenever Mary left for work or arrived home. Late on Monday evening Mary came into the study dressed for bed and put her arm around James' shoulders. 'Are you coming to bed, dear? It's getting late.'

James slowly shook his head. 'I'm stuck. It's due tomorrow and I'm stuck.'

Mary looked down at James. 'Maybe your mind's on you-know-who.'

'Maybe, but since the police took over I feel a bit more secure.' He twisted his head and looked up at his wife. 'What about you?'

'Oh, I still jump every time the phone rings. I can't help it. I get uptight when I remember we can't hang up on him.'

James pulled her round and sat her on his knee. 'That's right. We have to keep him talking, but I said I would take the call.'

'When you're here. It's when you're not that I worry.'

She turned her head to look at the computer. 'Anyway, while I'm here I may as well have a look at it. Why don't you run off what you've done?' She always preferred a hard copy rather than reading it on the screen.

James turned on the printer and used the arrow on the print icon. While waiting for it to run off he said, 'I thought I had so much good material after that symposium but it's just not coming together. Maybe it gave me too much material and I don't

know which part to exclude.’ The printer stopped and he handed her the half page of typing. She stood up to read.

### *The Religion Report*

*The Jewish and Islamic speakers had had their turn to speak at the university symposium on Western religions. Some basic Christian beliefs had been questioned in an aggressive and challenging style.*

*When the Christian speaker took the microphone she made no attempt to defend her Christian beliefs but shared her personal spiritual experience. She testified that, after hearing the Gospel preached 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 writer wonders if a changed life is evidence of a spiritual experience.*

*For example, Leo Tolstoy once wrote, ‘Faith came to me and all my life was suddenly changed. I ceased to desire that which I previously had desired and took to desiring those things that I had never really desired before.’*

‘This’s not bad as it is. You shouldn’t need to add much to it.’ Mary looked up from the page. ‘Was your experience like that?’

‘ Not quite as dramatic but I was certainly changed by it.’

She put one arm around his shoulders. ‘And what about those who grow up in the church as I did? I can’t ever remember not believing in God. How do I know whether my life was changed by an experience I never had?’

James looked up at her. 'But you have had an ongoing personal relationship with God all your life, haven't you?'

When Mary nodded, 'I suppose so.'

James continued. 'So maybe it's like marriage.' His eyes twinkled at her. 'It's not so much the first encounter that's important thing but the quality of the ongoing relationship.'

Mary smiled and kissed him on the cheek. 'Well can't you use any of those ideas to fill out your article?'

His face brightened and he turned back to the computer. 'I certainly can ...' and then James saw the disappointed look on Mary's face and added, 'ah... first thing tomorrow morning.'

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## **Thursday 23rd March**

### **University of Queensland, St Lucia**

It was lunchtime at the departmental canteen and James was late as usual. He looked around for Kevin while he collected his tray and spotted him at a table on his own with his empty plate pushed aside and some papers in front of him. He carried his tray to the table and asked sarcastically, 'Got room for me?'

'Oh! The late James Roy McGregor. There's plenty of room. As you can see I've been having lunch with all my friends.'

James put down his tray and waved a hand over the papers spread around. 'What's all this then?'

'I'm organising a district wide seminar on meditation for next Saturday.' Kevin looked at James expectantly. 'I've got to break even to pay for the guest speaker and I need some more enrolments.'

‘Who’s the speaker?’ asked James with a wry smile. He knew what was coming.

‘The Rev Ravenal Phillips, a minister of the United Church of South India.’

Kevin showed him a brochure.

James glanced at the brochure beside him and raised his eyebrows. ‘You brought him all the way from India?’

‘Not exactly.’ Kevin laughed as he thought of the size of his budget. ‘He’s visiting Australia and available for preaching and retreats.’

James started on his food but said very casually, ‘Would I be eligible?’

Kevin brightened up. ‘Of course. I didn’t think you’d be interested.’

‘Yeah, right?’ James looked sceptical. ‘I bet you set this all up just for my benefit - to get me in.’

Kevin responded with a devilish grin. ‘We-ell, the thought did occur to me...but I am short of applicants and today’s the due date.’

James put down his knife and fork. ‘When is it exactly?’

‘Two o’clock next Saturday afternoon.’ Kevin pointed to the brochure. ‘Here’s the venue, and the fee.’

James resumed eating. ‘Put me down and I’ll pay you later.’ Kevin was obviously pleased. Whether it was because he had ‘got him in’ or because he really needed more applicants, James couldn’t tell.

Kevin wrote down James’ name on the list and changed the subject. ‘How did it feel on Friday to have your peace overtures rejected?’

James looked up in surprise. ‘Excuse me?’

Kevin waved his finger at him. ‘You know. The question you asked the Muslim speaker.’

James narrowed his eyes. ‘How did you know about that?’

Kevin sat back, pleased with himself. ‘I was there wasn’t I? You invited me.’

James was immediately apologetic. 'Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't see you. Why didn't you come and speak to me?'

Kevin waved a hand dismissively. 'Oh! That's all right. I was very late. I only just got there for the start of that Muslim fellow's speech. I had to sit right up the back.'

James was still puzzled. 'What about afterwards?'

'Well, it ran late as you know and I had another job to do.' Kevin grinned mischievously. 'Anyway, you were too engrossed in conversation with that gorgeous redhead to notice me. Who was she anyway?'

James tossed his head. 'O come off it Kevin. That was Jaclyn Sahid, my lecturer on Islam...and I suppose she is very nice.'

Kevin abruptly pushed his finger forward. 'There you are. I told you. You had that look in your eye.'

'Oh stop it, will you.' James felt a bit of colour coming to his cheeks. 'Jaclyn's a very smart lady and she's offered to help me in my quest.'

'Ah! So its Jaclyn now is it?' Kevin nodded knowingly. 'How cosy.'

'Kevin.' James' eyes narrowed as he raised his finger in rebuke.

Kevin could see it was time to change the subject. 'OK, back to business. I've been looking forward to asking you this question: How were you going to answer that Moslem bloke when he cut you off? He said, 'You Christians worship Jesus Christ and we worship Allah alone'. I would have been very interested to hear your reply.'

James put down his cutlery and dabbed his face with his serviette. 'We-ell, I was going to say that we don't worship Jesus Christ instead of God. We really worship God through Jesus Christ.'

Kevin raised one lip. 'I'm not sure that would have impressed him.'

James waved his hand in protest. 'I was just trying to say that the God *we* come to know through Christ is identical with the God *they* call Allah.'

Kevin smiled sympathetically. '*I* know what you meant but you have to admit it is not easy for *Muslims* to understand, especially if we say Christ is the only way.'

James sighed sadly. 'That's true. It's the divinity and uniqueness of Christ that's the stumbling block in any dialogue with other religions.'

Kevin suggested helpfully. 'Well, do you remember the Myth of God Incarnate authors who said the incarnation was just a myth or a metaphor?'<sup>2</sup>

'Yes. I studied it last year.' James wore a puzzled frown, 'but how do you know about that?'

'Oh! I got hold of a copy while I was out west.' Kevin tossed his hand dismissively. He couldn't let James think that he had let his study slide altogether. 'It said the incarnation shouldn't be taken literally. What if they were partly right?'

James' eyes glinted. 'You mean a reflection of the truth. Of course. That *would* make a difference.'

Kevin was pleased with James' reaction. 'It would make your job easier. If you have to take the incarnation literally, how could you possibly say we're all worshipping the same God?'

James put his hand to his chin reflectively. 'Hmm! It would look like blasphemy to them. It has to be a reflection of the truth.' James looked up at Kevin. 'But that only makes me even more certain that the personal experience of the believer is the key, not the doctrines taught by religious leaders about that experience.'

'OK, but where do you get evidence of that?' Kevin folded his arms and sat back in counselling mode. 'The Christian speaker seemed to be the only one to give a testimony.'

James raised a finger in objection. 'Not exactly. Before you came, the Jewish Rabbi quoted Moses and Isaiah as examples of personal encounters with the living God.'

Kevin nodded and then asked, 'But what about the Muslim speaker?'

James agreed. *That* was a bit disappointing, but according to Monday's lecture on Islam, Muhammad himself had a personal experience of the Divine when he received the Quran.' Then he hung his head in submission. 'Then again, I have to admit that more Christians seem to have contemporary personal experiences of the Divine than Jews or Muslims.'

Kevin reacted to James' Christian chauvinism. 'Not necessarily. Or maybe Christians just talk about it more. Maybe it's a cultural thing. You don't find many of our high-church brethren publicly declaring their spiritual experiences do you. Openly discussing conversions and answers to prayer might be a Protestant evangelical thing.'

James was nodding slowly. 'That's a good point I hadn't thought of. You could be right. Maybe I have to rely on the work that has already been done in this area.'

'Such as?'

'Rudolf Otto's for one. Phillip put me on to him.' James explained. 'Otto examined the effect of the Divine or 'the holy' on the human believer in all religions.<sup>3</sup> It's called the Phenomenological approach.'

'That's a big word.' Kevin didn't like technical jargon. 'So what do his results tell you?'

James looked it up in his notes. 'That God is awe-fully overwhelming, majestic, dynamically powerful yet uniquely attractive and fascinating.'

Kevin nodded wisely. 'That sounds very transcendent - above and beyond everything.' Then he frowned. 'But Christians also believe that God is 'Immanent' - in Jesus Christ, in the world and in us. Where does that come in?'

'I'm not sure,' James shook his head. 'But the Rabbi said that Jews live their lives in the presence of God. That's fairly 'immanent'.' James looked up. 'And, don't forget, in some Calvinist sections of the Christian Church, the transcendence of God is stressed just as much as it is in Islam.'

Kevin summed up. 'Well, it looks like there's such a lot of variation of beliefs within Christianity that you're better off sticking to personal experience. That's the key alright. Anyway, I have to go and finalise arrangements for this retreat. See you on Saturday.'

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James had really received a lot of help from the first three lectures on 'Concepts of Ultimate Reality'. He hoped that this one on Hinduism would be no exception. The course coordinator, Dr Conrad Rossiter, was a short, middle-aged man with a balding head and a pair of 'granny' glasses down low on his nose. He was handing out the 5,000 word assignment choices for the course. As James's eye skimmed down the list it fell on the last one, which read,

'Examine the mystical theology of Judaism, Islam and Christianity to ascertain if they share a common concept of Ultimate Reality.'

He was attracted to that topic as it seemed relevant to his quest but he usually tried to choose one that had been covered in lectures because it was less work. Unfortunately, he didn't think the lecture on Mysticism was due until later in the series. As he turned to his syllabus to check that belief he noticed that his supervisor, Dr Phillip Gill was the lecturer for that topic. He had just decided to put the decision on hold when the coordinator passed him on his way back to the podium having completed his distribution of the sheets. He leaned over confidentially with a bit of a smirk and whispered. 'Phillip Gill insisted that I put that fourth topic in for you as an extra, so you had better choose it after I've included it for your sake.' Dr Rossiter

moved away. James agreed with him but wondered why his supervisor wanted him to look at mysticism. He supposed all would be revealed in due course.

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Dr Rossiter himself had given the lecture on Hinduism, being the resident expert in the area, and a whole new world had opened up for James. He particularly liked the fact that the Hindus prided themselves in being free of dogmatic assumptions, religious truth not being thought of in dogmatic terms, as in the quote referred to by Phillip Gill, 'dogmas cannot be eternal but only transitory, distorting, and distorted images of a truth that transcends not only them but all verbal definition.'<sup>4</sup> It sounded just like his Reflections Model.

However, James could see that without such an outlook, Hindus could not have held together the wide range of beliefs and practices that were included in their religion. It seemed to James that Hinduism was made up of a collection of religions rather than a single religion. The majority believed in a personal God but some didn't; some worshipped Vishnu or one of his incarnations like Krishna or Rama; some worshipped Shiva; some worshipped the Goddesses or consorts of these Gods, like Kali; some worshipped many Gods, some worshipped one God along with others as manifestations of that God. To find a unity behind all these views would be a real challenge to his reflection model

One Indian scholar, Radhakrishnan, had described it as more a culture than a creed. The lecturer, quoting various Hindu writers, described Hinduism as a religious tradition of the Indian people, a product of 5,000 years of development, starting with the customs and ideas of one or two tribes and steadily absorbing the ideas of all peoples with whom it came in contact right down to the present day and including aspects of Christianity. It is all comprehensive, all absorbing, all tolerant, and all compliant. Every one can find something in it to meet their needs - the practical, the

moral, the devotional, the imaginative, the ascetic, the sensuous and the sensual, the philosophical and the speculative. It has its spiritual and its material aspects, its rational and irrational, its subjective and objective, and even its pure and impure aspects.

In all this confusing variety it was gratifying to find that the real religion for the great majority of the people and one of the three main strands was a familiar monotheism - the worship of a single, theistic entity. However, it wasn't belief in one God alone as in the West but the worship of one God as supreme over all the other Gods. Along with this belief there went one of the paths to salvation called Bhakti Marga. This was the way of devotion to one of the Gods as supreme reality and absolute Lord - Vishnu, Krishna, Rama, Shiva or Kali but not normally all at once. It was not a religion of works or human striving but a gift of God - a faith expressed in life not in dogma. It reminded James a bit of the orthopraxis of Judaism.

James was delighted to find that there were two opposing theologies in Bhakti Marga with a very familiar Western type dispute. Those who believed in total grace through faith were called the 'cat people' because the mother cat carries the kitten to safety. Those who said that the believer plays some part in his or her own salvation were called the 'monkey people' because the baby monkey clings to the mother as it is carried to safety.

James was drawn immediately to the description given of the Scripture called the Bhagavad-Gita, most loved and read by many including Mahatma Gandhi, which was an early attempt to synthesise various beliefs into a theistic faith and theology. The hero of this epic, Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, seemed to James to be a worthy rival to Christ and was given the title Bhagavan, blessed Lord, hence the name of the epic poem, Bhagavad-Gita, the 'song of the Lord'.

There was no doubt in James' mind that the followers of the way of Bhakti worshipped a personal and loving God through prayer and communal practice even if their prayers had an other-worldly and mystical aspect about them as in a common prayer from the Upanishads:

'Lead me from the unreal to the real; ... from darkness into life; ...from the mortal to the immortal... and fill me with thy compassionate love.'

James filed out past the lecturer, indicating as he left that he would be choosing the last option for his assignment as expected of him. As he made his way to his four o'clock weekly appointment with his supervisor, he realised that there were whole sections of the religion of Hinduism that made absolutely no sense to him. With his first taste of Eastern religion and culture he was beginning to doubt his ability to complete the chief's assignment. Maybe his supervisor could provide him with some encouragement along with the usual cup of coffee.

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1. 'The Basic Facts of our Faith' by J.C.Jamieson, The Board of Christian Education, Presbyterian Church of Australia, Melbourne, 1961, p. 8.
2. J. Hick (Ed) 'The Myth of God Incarnate', S.C.M. Press Ltd, London, 1977.
3. 'The Idea of the Holy'. O.U.P., London, 1923.
4. Zaehner, R. C.: Hinduism, O.U.P., Oxford, 1966, p. 3.