

## **Chapter Nine**

### **WITHOUT THINKING OF A RABBIT**

**Thursday 23rd March**

**University of Queensland, St Lucia**

‘How did you enjoy Conrad’s lecture on Hinduism?’ asked James’ supervisor as he brought in two mugs of coffee.

‘It was fascinating, what I could understand.’ Then James remembered the matter of the last assignment topic. ‘But I was more intrigued by the fourth assignment topic about mysticism.’

‘Oh?’ Phillip Gill was all wide-eyed innocence as he picked up his coffee mug.

‘Aw! Come on Phillip.’ James gave a wry smile. ‘Conrad spilled the beans. He even hinted that I should choose that one if I knew what was good for me.’

Phillip laughed. ‘Conrad likes the cloak and dagger conspiracy business.’ Then he raised one finger. ‘But it was included to help you, not to pressure you.’

James lowered his mug and held it still. ‘How can it help me? I don’t know anything about Western mystical theology.’

‘That’s your problem.’ Phillip pointed at James and explained, ‘You won’t get far in your boss’s assignment until you learn about mysticism.’

‘I remember a lad at University who rather mockingly called my conversion experience a ‘mystical’ experience. Aren’t all personal experiences of the Divine ‘mystical’?’

Phillip angled his head. ‘In a way, yes. It does have that common usage but, in the world-wide academic study of religion, it has a more technical meaning.’

‘Oh?’ James instinctively knew that Phillip’s definition would be crucial.

Phillip leant back holding his mug and chose his words carefully. 'It means the experience of a person who looks for 'The Divine' in the depths of his or her own soul, rather than outside in the temple, the church or the world.'

'But isn't that the same sort of experience as mine?' James objected.

Phillip shook his head firmly. 'Not always, because this mystical practice can sometimes lead to a totally different experience of Ultimate Reality.'

'In what way?' James felt he was getting out of his depth.

'That's what I want you to find out. There's a wide range of possibilities. That's why I suggested that Conrad set the assignment on Western mystical theology.'

James was very puzzled. 'But where are these Western mystics?'

Phillip spread his hands. 'In every Western religion.'

'Including Christianity?' James was still sceptical, not having any awareness of their existence in biblical, Protestant Christianity.

'Certainly.' Phillip leant forward to make his point. 'The Catholic mystical tradition was very strong both before and after the reformation. It includes people like St. Theresa of Avila, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Sienna, and on the continent, Meister Eckhart.'

James wrote furiously to keep up with Phillip's list of mystics. 'But what about the other Christian denominations?'

Phillip cast his eyes over some of his beloved books. 'Most denominations have their mystics.' He took down a couple of books to show James. 'The Anglican Church has a mystical tradition. The Orthodox Church is predominantly a mystical church. The Liberal Catholic Church here in Australia is mystical or Theosophical as they call it.'

'What about reformed churches like mine? I don't think we have any mystics.'

James squinted as he tried to remember one.

‘Most Protestant Churches regard mysticism as unbiblical and therefore to be disregarded completely,’ Phillip Gill said sadly. ‘But In Australia we have the Quakers. They’re a mystical church and still claim to be Protestant.’

James remembered that the assignment was on more than Christian Mysticism. ‘OK but what about Islam and Judaism?’

‘You should take a note of the word ‘Cabala’ - spelt with a K or a C - in Judaism and the word Sufi in Islam.’

‘Well,’ James blew out his cheeks, ‘that is certainly an impressive line up. I had no idea.’ James made an attempt to draw his supervisor out and possibly save himself some time and work. ‘But how can I tell that these mystics have a different experience of Ultimate Reality?’

Dr Gill narrowed his eyes. ‘I don’t think I should be doing your research for you James, but I will give you a hint. You have to look at the way they describe their experience. You need to look at the names they give to what you would call God.’

‘Can you give me an example?’ James asked eagerly.

Phillip smiled at James’ persistence. ‘You will find plenty for yourself if you look up the names I’ve given you. But I’ll give you the example of one mystic. Meister Eckhart uses names like ‘the One’, ‘deep darkness’ and ‘desert’

‘They’re not personal names at all.’

‘Precisely.’ Phillip was pleased with James’ insight.

James searched his memory. ‘I remember something now that we did in the College about negative theology – describing God in terms of what he wasn’t rather than what he was. Any connection?’

‘Yes indeed.’ Phillip rewarded James with a little more help. ‘The mystics say that God can’t be comprehended by the mind at all but only by the heart. They have

great difficulty in trying to describe what it is that they actually do experience. They say their experience is 'ineffable.'

'Ineffable!' James had thought he was catching on. 'And what does that mean?'

'It means unable to be expressed adequately in words. And that is why that negative theology you were taught used negative categories. The mystics struggle with the limitations of human language.'

'I remember that now.' James nodded quickly. 'The lecturer said that what one denies of God is more true than what one says.'

'Exactly. Perhaps you should look up your College notes on the subject.'

'Oh, it was only a very small segment.' James shook his head sadly. 'As you suggested, our church probably regarded mysticism as unbiblical.'

'Well, other branches of the Christian Church would disagree.' Phillip pointed a finger as he rose to his feet. 'Anyway, you said you were looking at the Reality behind all religions. Correct?'

'Yes. That's correct.' James agreed. 'Thanks to my boss.'

Phillip ushered James to the door. 'Well I hope that after you do this particular assignment you will be interested for your own sake. But I must warn you. No scholar has ever succeeded in reconciling the personal understanding of Ultimate Reality with the mystics' particular understanding.'

As James left the department, he felt the pull of the challenge that had been thrown down to him. No one had ever succeeded before. How intriguing. But first he had to find out what it was that needed to be reconciled. If the mystics' experience of Ultimate Reality was not personal then what was it?

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## **Saturday 25th March**

### **Youth Conference Centre, Margate**

The church's conference centre was situated at Margate on the shores of Moreton Bay not far from the city. James drove through the gates of the campsite being used for the afternoon seminar and admired the view of the sea from the car park. He felt a tinge of regret that he would be confined indoors on such a lovely afternoon. He was also starting to regret his decision to attend this seminar because he hadn't made any progress towards his weekly column and thought that the afternoon could have been more profitably spent on his article. He couldn't have been more wrong on both counts.

As he walked into the meeting room of the conference centre he nodded to the few faces that were familiar and was conscious of the large number of unfamiliar ones. As he took a seat at the back, he noticed Kevin on the dais talking to a tall, slim, good-looking, casually dressed clergyman obviously Asian in origin, who had to be the Rev. Ravenal Phillips, a minister of the United Church of South India. When everyone was settled, Kevin stepped up to the microphone and introduced the guest as the facilitator of the seminar which, he said, would be more of a workshop than a seminar, with a lot of involvement from the audience. He then surrendered the microphone.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank you for inviting me here today and for the welcome that Kevin has given on your behalf. By the time we finish at 4.30 I hope that you will all have learned something of the art of meditation, eastern style. Actually we should probably use the word 'contemplation' because it is the word used by the mystics who practise this form of meditation. Meditation has to do with

thinking. Contemplation has more to do with NOT thinking - the absence of thought.'

James was immediately alert with all his senses tingling.

The speaker continued. 'I will give you a few pointers on how to achieve an empty mind, devoid of all thoughts or images. But I warn you it is not easy. It is a bit like trying to count to ten without thinking of a rabbit. You get half way through and you think 'I haven't thought of a rabbit yet. Oh darn. I've thought of a rabbit.'" This joke got quite a good laugh for such an early stage of the proceedings.

James was delighted when it was suggested they all go outside and find a comfortable seat in the grounds. He found a seat somewhat removed from the others and facing the sea. He could use the horizon as the focal point for his gaze and found that quite congenial. The workshop leader had suggested they use a watch to check how long they could last without allowing any thoughts to come into their mind. James was glad he had a watch with a stopwatch facility. At first James could only last about ten seconds before a thought popped into his mind. As the leader had suggested, it was usually something like, 'I wonder how long it has been since I had a thought. Oh darn!' However, he persevered until he could keep thoughts out of his mind for five, ten, fifteen minutes at a time.

Towards the end of the period allowed for the exercise, James started the process once more but after what felt like only five minutes he decided to stop and check his stopwatch. To his utter astonishment, he found that it was showing thirty-five minutes. He could not understand what had happened. He had experienced some kind of time distortion. It was definitely thirty-five minutes but it had only felt like five minutes to him.

He had also attained an extremely relaxed state of mind and body but, apart from the strange sense of time distortion, he felt vaguely dissatisfied with the results of his afternoon. He couldn't see how his contemplation experience fitted in with his

Christian beliefs. He looked at his watch and found that he still had time for one last experiment before the period ended so he put himself into a relaxed state once more.

He now found that the horizon point, the focus of his gaze, tended to disappear as the blue and white of the sky and the blue-green of the sea merged into one indistinguishable blank mass. This time however, after emptying his mind for a short time, he deliberately allowed an image of Christ, in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, to form on the horizon at the focal point of his gaze. Immediately he felt the peace of the presence of God in his heart and mind. At that point, the bell rang to recall them all to the meeting room.

Back in the meeting room there was no sign of the early reticence. Members were only too willing to share their experience for the benefit of others. Some had nothing helpful to share. They had become bored, they didn't have a watch, or they had just enjoyed the beautiful scenery. One member who was sitting on the veranda told how a possum had crawled along the veranda rail and peered intently into her eyes, quite without fear of this strange motionless person. But as soon as she had come out of the 'trance' and looked at the possum, it ran away. This experience made the member feel that she was very close to nature while she was contemplating.

James shared his experience including his reluctance to go any further with the contemplation experience owing to theological concerns. This met with approval from the facilitator but another member confessed that he had not terminated the process as James did and was rewarded with a wonderful feeling of oneness with all creation and an ecstatic sense of total unity with the divine. Somehow, he felt his separate identity was lost and he became everything - part of the ocean, part of the sky, and part of the earth. He wanted to know, where was God?

James leant forward, eager to hear the answer on that one. However, Ravenal Phillips was curiously cautious in his answer. After a moment of thought he said, 'It

might seem as if you lost your identity but really you probably experienced a merging with God in a loving union. Some of the Christian mystics of the middle ages spoke of a 'perfect union of love'. In this way, the leader interpreted the man's mystical experience as a way of love to God, rather than an actual loss of identity.

This seemed to James to be the ideal explanation but the member concerned didn't seem convinced. Others now wanted to make contributions, some agreeing, some disagreeing with the speaker's interpretation, but it was long past the scheduled finishing time and James still had an article to write. So he caught Kevin's eye to signal that he was leaving and slipped quietly out of the hall, his mind filled with new experiences and some unanswered questions.

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## **Carindale**

'Well, did you get your article done?' Mary was cooking the Saturday night hot meal and James was laying the table.

'Not really.' James shook his head sadly. 'I came home before the seminar was finished to make a start on it, but my mind is in too much of a whirl.'

'Why is your mind in a whirl?' Mary asked while lifting a dish out of the oven. 'Are you waiting for another nuisance call?'

'Not really.' James stopped with cutlery in his hands and turned to his wife. 'Now I want him to call. The sooner the better, since the police told us what to do.'

'Yes, and we mustn't forget to leave the phone off the hook for half an hour after the call,' Mary answered without looking at him.

'Right. But he makes me so mad I'm likely to slam the receiver down without thinking.' James continued again with his job. 'But that's not really what's holding me up. I was thinking about that workshop.' James had told Mary a bit about the

afternoon's seminar on contemplation when she arrived home. 'My experience was strange enough but that other man's experience was even stranger. Like some of the mystics I was reading about yesterday in the library. He said he'd become one with all creation but wasn't sure where God fitted in.'

Mary carried the hot dish to the table and looked sideways at James. 'What did the leader say?'

James took a deep breath before he answered. 'He said the man hadn't lost his identity but had merged with God in a union of love.'

'Sounds very sexual.'

'So do some of the experiences of the Catholic mystics like St Theresa of Avila, Origen and St. Bernard. Some talk about 'the spiritual marriage of the soul' and used a few very personal, intimate terms for their experience.'

'Let's say grace. The food's getting cold.' It was James' turn to say grace. Afterwards, as she dished out the food she asked, 'So you agree with the leader's interpretation?'

'Yes, I do.' James waved a fork around with a piece of meat on the end and said rather pompously, 'Like those early mystics, I believe that the mystic has a special kind of personal encounter with God.'

Mary kept eating. 'Then what's your problem?'

'My supervisor seems to be pushing me towards a different interpretation.'

Then she looked up and asked, 'What sort of different interpretation?'

James finished his mouthful and put his cutlery down. 'He told me that mystics had a peculiar understanding of Ultimate Reality but he wouldn't say what it was. He just said that one of the mystics used names like 'deep darkness' and 'desert'. Now I ask you, what sort of names are 'deep darkness' and 'desert'?''

Mary responded quickly, 'Names of things.'

'Exactly.' James began eating again. 'Not personal names.'

Mary looked puzzled. 'How can anyone's experience of God not be personal'?

'Good question. We believe God is a personal God, the Father of Jesus Christ.'

James pointed his empty fork at her. 'But Phillip Gill is a Buddhist, and Buddhists don't believe in a personal God and I think he might be pushing his own barrow.'

Mary shot him an incredulous look and went back to her meal.

James felt compelled to defend his statement. 'No! True. He picks out a so-called Christian mystic like Meister Eckhart who was excommunicated for his heretical views.'

'Poor man.' Mary said sympathetically.

James responded flippantly. 'Oh! He didn't mind. He'd died the week before.'

Mary stopped and looked at James hard. 'Is that a sick joke?'

'No.' James answered brightly. 'He just happened to die before he suffered the indignity of excommunication.'

Mary went back to her food and, after a while she said, 'So you're happy with mystical experience in general as long as it's seen as a relationship with a personal God.'

'That's right.' For James, the matter was settled.

'So what will you do about Professor Gill?' She wanted to know.

James nodded as he chewed a mouthful. 'I just might have to confront him on his bias.'

'I find it hard to believe that a man of his academic standing could allow his own beliefs to affect his teaching.' Mary shook her head slowly and then pointed at James. 'I think you should be very careful how you approach the subject with him. You can be pretty confrontational sometimes.'

'Oh! You know me - a model of tact and diplomacy,' said James with a grin.

'Yes. I know you.' This was not said with a grin.

James started to clear the table. The rule was, whoever didn't cook the meal did the washing up. 'Anyway, I know now what I'm going to do in my column.'

Mary showed surprise. 'What?'

'I'll do an article on Christian meditation - from personal experience.'

### *The Religion Report*

*This column has been examining different kinds of religious experience in order to see if they have anything in common. This week we look at the experience of Christian meditation - eastern style - sometimes called contemplation.*

*This writer attended a seminar/workshop on the subject last Saturday. It was attended by clergy and lay representatives from many churches in the city and surrounding suburbs.*

*Those attending were given some basic training and then told to practise putting the mind into a state of quietness and relaxation. Some of us found that the practice was a very useful aid to devotion giving us a greater sense of God's presence.*

*There is no doubt that this was different from the traditional style of prayer, but the main difference seemed to me to be the emphasis on listening to, or waiting upon, God instead of merely talking to Him. ....*

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