

Chapter Ten

EATING HUMBLE PIE

Thursday 30th March

University of Queensland, St Lucia

The big advantage of subjects like ‘Concepts of Ultimate Reality’ was that specialists in a particular subject like Hinduism or Buddhism could come in and take one or two lectures giving a summarised version of courses that normally took whole semesters. James had been pleased to see that his own supervisor, Dr Phillip Gill, was listed for the next two weeks to do a segment on Buddhism, and here he was being introduced by the course coordinator Dr Conrad Rossiter. He turned to a new sheet ready to take notes on what he knew would be a very interesting lecture.

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As James walked slowly to his interview with his supervisor giving Phillip time to get back to his room after his lecture, he felt a little smug. He had gathered more evidence of his own opinion that a personal God was the reality behind all religions and he had gleaned it from his supervisor’s own lecture.

Buddhism was very strange to his western ears but Phillip had made it interesting. The brief introduction on the life of Siddhata Gautama the Buddha had not been entirely new to James but the Buddha’s teaching on Nirvana and life after death had been very difficult to grasp. His teaching of the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path had seemed more like a guide for finding salvation or ‘enlightenment’ than a system of beliefs. He had called his doctrine the Dharma, which is a Sanskrit word meaning order, standard, or truth and reminded James of ‘The Force’ in Star Wars.

James was also delighted with the similarity with the words of Jesus in the Buddha's saying that 'Whoever sees the Dharma sees me and whoever sees me sees the Dharma.' It sounded all very esoteric and impersonal until Phillip launched into a description of Mahayana Buddhism, which means the 'greater vehicle' of salvation and the more popular of the two strands of Buddhism. Here James noted how the masses had been hungry for something in the way of personal devotion. So there was a move to come up with an appropriate Buddhist object of devotion.

They were unable to worship the Buddha who had passed into Nirvana and was inaccessible to them so they found the concept of the Bodhisattva or 'enlightened being'. The Bodhisattva voluntarily foregoes entering Nirvana and returns to the world for the sake of others as a kind of saviour or redeemer, the helper of the needy in every situation, a living symbol of compassion. There were a number of such Bodhisattvas and these were worshiped in temples all over Asia and wherever Mahayana Buddhism predominated. James saw the belief in this Christ-like figure as proof positive of his theory that a personal reality was behind every true religion and he now felt more confident to tackle his supervisor on his perceived bias against personalist religion.

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Dr Phillip Gill was looking forward to his 'caffeine-kick' as he carried two coffee mugs into his office. As James watched him put down the mugs he remembered the effort and energy that his supervisor had put into the lecture and wondered if this was the best time to bring up a contentious issue but Phillip Gill was soon back to his usual relaxed and business-like self. He handed James his essay on Christian attitudes to other world religions. It had a six over seven circled on the front. 'Very well done, James. You covered all the main Christian attitudes to world religions but I couldn't give you a seven because you didn't finish off well. I suspect

that you lost a bit of interest in the subject when you widened the scope of your inquiry.'

James nodded sadly. 'You're probably right there, Phillip.' But he was content with his mark.

Phillip picked up his coffee. 'Then how is your inquiry going?'

'Very well, I think,' James said a little too confidently. 'I looked at those Christian mystics you mentioned, and a few others, and I think I can see a personal reality behind their mystical experiences.'

Phillip Gill looked hard at him over the rim of his coffee mug. 'All of them?'

James gave a wry smile. 'We-ell, Meister Eckhart's testimony was certainly a bit different. As you said, he talks about 'desert' and 'deep darkness' but he was excommunicated wasn't he?' James said, a bit more abruptly than he had intended.

Phillip nodded slowly. 'Yes, he was. Does that make him wrong?'

'I suppose not but he seems to be the odd one out.' James felt his confidence fading.

Phillip shook his head firmly. 'No, he is not the only mystic of his type. There were many Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart dating right back to a very early mystic named Dionysius the Areopagite. Look up his book, 'The Mystical Theology'. He provided some of the terminology and a framework for a lot of their ideas.'

James recognised the name. 'Isn't he one of the converts made by Paul in Athens?'

'No! This man wrote his works much later but he or someone else used that famous name to give his work more authority. That's why the author is now referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.' Phillip waited to see that James understood. Then he continued. 'The philosophy he used to formulate his theology is called Neo-Platonism.'

‘Which means a new Platonism?’ said James raising his eyebrows.

‘Yes. A revival of Plato’s philosophy.’ Phillip pointed a finger at James. ‘You should really read Dionysius and some other mystics whose writings are similar to Eckhart’s. You have been very selective in your choice of mystics.’

James could feel his face flushing as he was mildly rebuked. His suspicions of bias surfaced once more but he tried to choose his words carefully. ‘But in your lecture this afternoon, you virtually admitted that the original Buddhism wasn’t satisfying to the masses until they hit on the concept of the Bodhisattvas - the personal saviour type of figure.’

‘You are right. I’m glad you were listening.’ Phillip nodded in approval. ‘There is a place in Mahayana Buddhism for a supreme Lord and personal friend but I also said that the ultimate reality behind and above that, even for Mahayana Buddhism, is still not personal. Next week I’ll deal with the original strand of Buddhism, which is called the Theravada or ‘Teaching of the Elders’. In that strand there is no personal element at all. How are you going to fit that tradition into your theory of a personal common reality?’

Oh dear, thought James. *If I say, ‘Write it off as mistaken’, I insult his own religious tradition. It was time to voice his concern.* ‘Phillip, can I speak honestly, even bluntly?’

‘Of course.’ Phillip put down his mug, sat back and folded his arms. ‘Go ahead.’

James took a deep breath. ‘Well, it seems to me that you might be ‘guiding’ me towards the impersonal understanding of reality because of your own religious bias.’

There. It was out in the open. James watched Dr Gill a little anxiously waiting for his reaction. Whatever he expected, it was not what happened next. Phillip Gill put his head back and laughed and began a slow clap. ‘Well done, James. It is good to see

that you can apply the objective-critical method of analysis. I thought you didn't approve of the method?'

James was nonplussed. 'I don't - if it's applied to the existence of the Divine.'

'I agree,' Phillip smiled again and raised his finger. 'But it is helpful in arriving at other kinds of truth, isn't it? All you need to do now is to apply it to yourself and to the mystics you have chosen.'

James was now totally confused by the turn of events. 'To myself?' he repeated feebly.

'Yes. Why not? Do you think I am the only one affected by biases and presuppositions? What about your personalist bias?'

This was not going according to plan. 'You're saying I am a biased theist?'

Phillip raised his eyebrows. 'Aren't you?'

'I hadn't realised it.' Then James realised what Phillip had said. 'You just admitted that you are affected by your bias.'

'Yes. I did.' Phillip said smugly.

James was surprised by his admission. He spread his hands. 'Then how are we different?'

'I am aware of my bias and try to allow for it.' Phillip looked directly at James. 'I don't think you do.'

'Hmm.' James could feel his face flushing again. 'Well, what about the mystics I chose to look at?' He said, trying to get the focus away from himself.

Phillip leaned forward and rested his chin on one hand. 'Have you asked yourself if any of them had any incentive to come up with a personal understanding of their experience.'

'You mean like, if they didn't, they got excommunicated?'

'Yes, or disciplined in some way.'

‘So,’ James’ eyes narrowed. ‘You’re saying that they might have felt constrained to conform with the orthodox doctrine?’

Phillip tossed his head. ‘Exactly. Now you’ve got it.’

James felt he had been told to take the ‘mote out of his own eye’ in the nicest possible way. Nevertheless, he felt rather humbled by the experience. ‘I suppose I had better take another look at the writings of those mystics.’

‘With a more critical eye? I think that would be wise.’ Phillip stood and said, as he opened the door, ‘See if you can look at Ultimate Reality through another window. Good luck , James.’

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Carindale

James came to open the car door for Mary, as he had done since the threatening phone calls began. He checked the road outside, lowered the garage door and walked her into the house. ‘How was your day?’ he asked.

‘Very busy. What about yours?’

‘Oh! A mixed bag. I’ve only just arrived home.’ James helped her carry her parcels.

‘So, what have you been doing?’

‘Eating humble pie mainly.’

‘Ah!’ Mary turned and looked at him. ‘So you told Dr Gill off and it backfired?’

‘In a way you could say that.’ James opened the internal door for her.

‘Was he angry with you?’

‘No. That was the weird part. He applauded me.’

‘He what?’

‘He laughed and gave me a slow clap.’

Mary looked at him sideways. 'You weren't expecting that.'

'No way. He admitted his bias and then turned it round and applied the same question to me, and to my research.'

'That would've made you feel awful.' Mary offloaded her parcels and sat on the settee in the lounge.

James sat beside her before he answered. 'Yes it did a bit but, as it turned out, it was just what I needed. I had been refusing to accept the possibility that there was any truth behind those mystical traditions that don't experience a personal God.'

'And what about now?' She put her hand on his arm.

'Now, after going over all my notes again, especially those on Meister Eckhart, I can see that their understanding is definitely different from ours.'

'In what way?' She asked anxiously.

'Eckhart's preference for those impersonal names like 'desert' and 'deep darkness' must reflect something of his own mystical experience. I can see that now.'

Mary got up to get them both a drink. 'But you told me he was the odd one out?'

'Yes,' James called after her. 'But I was wrong. Apparently there are Christian mystics like him dating right back to an early mystic named Dionysius the Areopagite and a philosophy called Neo-Platonism.'

Mary filled a glass and handed it to James. 'Well, I know a bit about Plotinus and his Neo-Platonism from Philosophy.'

'How come?' asked James in surprise.

'A philosophy subject I did once.' Mary's expression said that James was not the only student in the family.

'Well, what can you tell me about it?'

Mary brought her own drink back to the settee. 'Only thing I can remember is a 'ladder' or chain of beings from the 'One' at the summit to the realm of the 'Many' in the world.'

'I found the concept of 'the One' in the writings of many mystics. Anything else?'

'It was a long time ago. I'll have to look up my notes if I can find them.' Mary finished off her drink quickly.

'Well, that would give me a start.' He rose reluctantly. 'I suppose I'd better start getting dinner ready while you're looking.'

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Monday 3rd April

Daily Mail, Bowen Hills

The Religion Report

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

When I wrote that article I was of the opinion that the practice was only a useful aid to devotion and one that gave a greater sense of God's personal presence. I was wrong. It can be much more than that. Apparently it is possible to have an experience that is not personal in the traditional sense of the word.

One member of the group said that he had experienced a wonderful feeling of oneness with all creation and an

ecstatic sense of total unity with the divine. I did not believe him then but in my latest research into the writings of mystics down the ages I have found that many of them have made claims to have achieved total, immediate union with Absolute Reality and have described their experience in non-personal terms.

For example, St Augustine said, 'My mind in the flash of a trembling glance came to Absolute Being - That Which Is.' When we consider these examples, I think it becomes obvious that, for some mystics, 'God' is not so much an object of devotion but an atmosphere.

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

Peter Preston looked up from his reading of the article and nodded contentedly. 'I was hoping you'd get to this point eventually.' He settled back in his office chair.

'Why is that Chief?' James' curiosity was aroused as he sat forward in his chair.

'Oh, because....' Preston hesitated for a brief moment before recovering, 'because I'll be doing Buddhism next semester and I understand that they don't believe in a personal God.'

There it was again. The Chief wasn't telling the whole truth but James went along with the deception. 'Do you think that will be a problem for you Chief?'

Preston's eyes avoided James'. 'Well, as an Anglican, it is just so different from my own understanding of God.'

'And mine. That's why I took so long to accept it.' Without some prodding from Phillip Gill he might never have accepted it, but what he said was, 'I had to do a lot of research before I was convinced.'

The chief seemed a bit mollified. ‘Mmm. What else did your research throw up?’

‘I found a book called ‘The Cloud of Unknowing’. It’s almost a textbook for mystics. It calls God ‘the absolute No-thing which is above all existence’.

‘That sounds very impersonal.’ Preston sighed a little.

James could empathise with the chief because he had found it hard to accept the impersonal interpretation of most mystics. ‘Yes. At first I was confused by mystics who interpreted their experiences in terms of a love relationship.’

Preston furrowed his brow. ‘What do you mean?’

‘OK. Some early Christian mystics called God their Bridegroom or personal, intimate Lover of the soul. But now I think this could be just another example of an impersonal experience.’¹

Preston straightened and asked, ‘What makes you say that? That sounds fairly personal to me.’

James spread his hands. ‘Because some Christian mystics use a confusing mixture of personal and impersonal language. For example, they say that the Lover and the beloved become one, or ‘the lovers melt into each other.’²

The chief nodded in agreement. ‘That certainly is confusing. Why do they talk like that?’

James shook his head. ‘I’m working on that. It may have something to do with the fear of being heretical. One modern mystical writer believes that medieval mystics like St. Theresa actually had an impersonal unity experience and then added the love terminology later.’³

The chief’s eyes flashed momentarily. ‘Tell me about this unity experience.’

‘OK.’ James tried to remember his research. ‘According to some it’s a union with God, it brings about the mystic’s ‘deification’ and transforms a person into God by participation.’⁴

Preston blew out his cheeks. ‘That’s pretty deep. I’m no theologian, but isn’t all this deification business contrary to Christian belief?’

James nodded in firm agreement. ‘Yes, Chief, I think this is the main problem that Western religions have with Mysticism. It seems like blasphemy.’ Then James raised a finger. ‘On the other hand, Christianity does teach a belief in deification after death or at the end of time.’

Preston looked unconvinced. ‘But surely people can’t become divine here and now.’

‘I agree that there’s certainly a conflict in the timing.’ But James wanted to keep an open mind on the issue. ‘It seems to me that during their Mystical experience they might be living the risen life promised to us after death.’ James could tell by the chief’s face that he didn’t buy that theory so he gave an alternative. ‘Or maybe they just had a vision of a future reality.’

Preston grunted and changed the subject. ‘OK. I think you’re making headway. Keep on it.’ Preston was about to terminate the discussion but then remembered something. ‘By the way, I got some feedback on your article last week from some New Agers, not all complimentary. Why would they be concerned?’

‘Probably because they have a core belief in unity type experiences. The New Age phenomenon might actually be the old mysticism repackaged.’

‘Hmm. Nothing new under the sun, eh?’ Preston looked down at the article in his hand. ‘This is a good article. It doesn’t do any harm to admit you’re wrong sometimes. I’ll hand it in for you. The New Agers will love it but I’m not sure about the rest of our readers.’ The chief stood up and, as he walked James to the door, he

asked quietly, 'Now, what about that nasty business of yours? How are you bearing up?'

'Not too badly thanks, Chief. I forget about it most of the time but Mary's very tense and anxious. We both wish he'd ring again so we can set him up for the police.'

'By leaving the phone off the hook?'

'At home, yes. Unfortunately that's not so easy at work with a switchboard.'

Preston opened the door for James. 'Well, tell Mary we're thinking of her.'

'Thanks Chief.'

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1. W. Johnston, The Inner Eye of Love, Collins, 1978, P. 18-19, 67-68.
2. E. Underhill, Mysticism, Methuen, London, 1960, P. 346.
3. W. Johnston, Op. Cit., P. 18-19.
4. H. D. Egan Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism, 'Theological Studies', Sept., 1978, P. 442.