

Chapter Eleven

A REAL TURN UP FOR THE BOOKS

Thursday 6th April

University of Queensland, St Lucia

Before James could take a bite of his roll, Kevin asked, 'Well. How did you go with Phillip? Did you beard the lion in his den or did you go in like a lion and come out like a lamb?' Pretending not to be waiting for the answer, he then proceeded to attack his plate of steak and chips.

James said, feigning a casual manner, 'Neither of the above. I was very tactful and diplomatic and we had a mature exchange of views.'

Kevin pretended to choke on his steak and slapped his thigh. 'So, you did come out with your tail between your legs?'

James paused with his roll in mid air and gave a wry smile. 'OK, I admit it. It was a bit that way but he was very nice about it. He didn't take offence. He actually agreed with me.'

'He what?' Kevin stopped eating altogether.

'He did.' James picked up his roll again. 'He agreed with me that he was biased but he said he was aware of his bias and I wasn't aware of mine.'

'Ouch. I bet that hurt.'

'It did at first but I guess I needed it.' James nodded. 'He was right.'

Kevin laughed. 'You sound like the comedian who gets slapped and says, 'Thanks, I needed that.' Then he said more seriously, 'So what did you learn?'

James looked to the ceiling momentarily. 'I learned that I was a biased theist and I had been refusing to see that some mystics actually do experience Ultimate Reality in a non-personal way.'

'Well, you've gained a new insight,' Kevin said with obvious approval.

James agreed. 'Yes. I now accept these mystics' experiences as authentic. They're not weirdos.'

'Even if they sit cross legged on mountain tops contemplating their navel?' Kevin could not stay serious for long.

'Oh, they're not all like that.' James waved his hand dismissively. 'Especially the Western mystics.'

Kevin lowered his cutlery and looked at James. 'You know, your quest is more interesting than my lectures. I never know what you're going to come up with next. I always look forward to 'the next thrilling instalment in 'The Search for the Holy Grail of Ultimate Reality', same time, same canteen, next week'.'

'Oh come off it Kevin.' James frowned but he was secretly pleased by the dramatic description of his quest. It somehow inspired him to persevere.

Kevin resumed eating. 'Anyway, I'll be interested to see how you get out of this one. Your quest gets you into more strife than Flash Gordon, as my mother used to say.'

'Flash Gordon, the movie?'

'More like the original Flash Gordon, the comic strip hero.' Kevin was reminiscing. 'She used to read it to me as a child when I was sick.'

'Your science fiction interest started early.' James pointed his free hand at Kevin. 'But tell me, why will I be in strife?'

Kevin couldn't believe how naïve James was. 'You don't know? The mystics' rejection of a personal God. It won't go down well with the Church.' Kevin tossed his

head in a self-deprecating gesture. 'It doesn't worry me because as I said, my theology leaks like a sieve anyway but, hey, you're the one trying to find a unity behind everything. How do you reconcile their ideas with a personal God?'

James put his elbows on the table and answered thoughtfully. 'I have no idea, and Phillip said it's never been done before.'

'Ah!' said Kevin waving a finger. 'There's a challenge for you and your quest.'

James smiled his agreement and then said. 'There's a Mystical strand in all religions you know?'

Kevin raised his eyebrows.

'Well, just about all of them,' Then James looked sad as he added, 'except our branch of Christianity.'

Kevin pretended to be affronted. 'You mean we've got no mystics in there representing us?'

'Very few. I've come across some individuals and of course the Quakers.'

'Thank God for the Quakers.' Kevin finished his meal and asked. 'Why are Protestant mystics so thin on the ground?'

James shrugged. 'Probably because mysticism is more philosophical than biblical so our reformed tradition has never been interested.'

Kevin shook his head sadly and went off to get a beaker of water and two glasses from the counter.

When he returned, James said, 'I've learned something else too.'

'What's that?' Kevin poured a glass for himself and James.

'To read the set texts.' James took a sip of water. 'If only I had read the article by Ninian Smart set for my essay on mystical theology, I'd have saved myself a bit of embarrassment.'¹

'Oh?' Kevin queried.

‘Because it explains why so many Western mystics seem to be theists when they aren’t.’

‘And why is that?’

‘Well, according to Ninian Smart a mystical experience might be a totally impersonal unity experience and then, when it’s described by someone else, it gets changed into a traditional personal experience of God.’

Kevin was incredulous. ‘But that’s falsifying the evidence. How could they do that?’

‘Easily. I’ll give you an example.’ James leant forward to make his point. ‘If the mystic has an experience of total unity with ‘God’ or whatever, there is no distinction, no separation between God and the person. OK?’

Kevin tossed his head. ‘If you say so.’

‘All right. Now one of the Moslem Sufi mystics claimed to have attained such a state of identification that he believed he had become divine. Then, along comes this writer, orthodox Muslim theologian, Al-Ghazali, and reinterprets his experience to make it more personal.’²

‘The rotten sod.’ Kevin screwed up his face. ‘How did he do that?’

‘He said, ‘when their *drunkenness* abates ... they know that this was not actual identity’. How about that?’ James drank a mouthful from his glass and sat back.

‘Sounds like a politician.’ Then Kevin raised a finger. ‘Now, just a minute. I see how a third person in authority could change the evidence to make it more orthodox but what about the mystics themselves? Don’t they tell it like it is?’

Now it was James’ turn to raise a finger. ‘Ah! Not necessarily. You know those medieval mystics like St Theresa who got me in with their talk of a union of love with God?’ Kevin nodded. ‘Well, William Johnston says that their original experience was one of emptiness and unity until they re-interpreted it with the love language.’³

‘Why would they do that?’ Than they both said together, ‘For fear of the authorities.’

James added, ‘Right. Phillip thinks it could be because they are likely to be disciplined or even excommunicated, as Meister Eckhart was.’

‘Do you agree with that?’ Kevin asked suspiciously.

‘Well, it sounds logical.’ James protested. ‘There was always this strong pressure to conform to theistic orthodoxy.’

‘Well, I don’t agree.’ Kevin folded his arms. ‘It sounds too logical - too cynical. I can’t see why they would all distort their descriptions deliberately just to conform.’

James threw it back to Kevin. ‘All right then. How would you explain it?’

Kevin leaned forward on the table. ‘Ask yourself, if you had worshipped a loving, personal God all your life and you suddenly had this unity experience or - what did you call it - total identification with something, what would you think?’

James shrugged. ‘I’d probably think it was a closer view of the same God I’d always known.’

‘There you are. Isn’t that just as likely - unconsciously of course?’ Kevin smirked.

James thought it over. ‘Yes it is. You’re spot on. As Phillip would say, you used the objective critical method.’ James eyes lit up. ‘Now I recall something Smart said that I didn’t understand at the time. He said, when mystics who believe in a personal Lord, describe their mystical experiences in theistic terms, they may well be identifying what they find within themselves with the personal God they worship outside themselves.’⁴

‘Well, what do you know? Even the ‘smart’ guy agrees with me.’ Kevin squared his shoulders with mock pride. ‘What would you do without me?’

'I've no idea but I'd better fly. I have to lead the tutorial this afternoon and I'm late - again. See you later. And thanks for your help.' James made for the door.

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When James walked into the seminar room another student had taken his place as the first presenter. Dr Conrad Rossiter acknowledged his arrival with a nod but with no trace of annoyance and motioned him to a vacant chair at the front. James took his seat and tried to concentrate on the speaker but it was very difficult. He looked around the group and saw that about half of them were either asleep or not listening. He looked back at the student who was supposed to be leading the tutorial and noticed that he was reading from his printed notes with his head down. He was making no attempt to involve the group or to encourage questions. However, his material must have been very good because the coordinator was listening intently.

Half an hour later, the speaker looked up over his glasses and blinked at the group and then sat down. Dr Rossiter smiled at him and congratulated him on his research. Then he turned to James, 'Could you cut your presentation down to twenty minutes please James. We need to catch up.'

James felt annoyed that the previous speaker was allowed to go ten minutes overtime at his expense and that he was going to have to do something to get the attention of the group who were not only suffering from the after lunch drowsiness but seemed to have lost interest in the whole proceedings. He gathered his material and his overhead transparencies and, as he walked to the rostrum, he had an idea for introducing his tutorial.

'Anyone see the article in the paper about the Hollywood stars and their latest hobby - Jewish Cabbalism?' There were a few nods. He went on, 'Well, that's what I have to talk about today.'

'Hollywood stars?' asked a student at the back, brightening immediately.

James had their full attention. 'Unfortunately, no. But you will find Jewish mysticism even more titillating.' This brought some general laughter, some of it sarcastic. He continued with his presentation of the characteristics of the Jewish Cabbalah including its interest in astrology, its search for hidden, secret meanings in the Jewish Scriptures, its use of allegorical and symbolic interpretations, and finally its mystical insights using the thought forms of Neo-Platonism.

James was quite comfortable by now with the tendency of mystics to resort to impersonal descriptions of their experience but he had to bring the group gradually to that realisation. He explained how the Christian mystics were inclined to depersonalise God until He was eventually regarded as the impersonal Godhead.⁵ He then brought the group to the point where they were ready to receive some of the names that were not real names at all. He put them up on the screen with an overhead transparency and continued.

'Cabbalism uses some very interesting impersonal names for God. For example, the favourite ones of the early Spanish Cabbalists were phrases like 'the Root of all Roots', 'Great Reality', 'Indifferent Unity' and also, the strange name 'Ensof'.' He indicated the last name on his transparency with his pointer. 'I found this last name fascinating because it signifies 'the infinite' - not 'He who is infinite' but 'that which is infinite'.'

We see here the idea of a 'hidden God', a different aspect of God from the personal God of orthodox Jewish faith. According to Scholem, there is an aspect of 'God' which is beyond rationality and which becomes paradoxical the moment it is put into words. It is ineffable.' James paused and looked expectantly at the group.

'OK.' said one obliging female student, 'What is ineffable?'

'It means unable to be explained, unable to be put into words. For example, an anonymous Cabbalist writer of the 13th Century says that the living God, the God of

religion, has many names but the God who is hidden in His own self - that aspect experienced by many mystics - can only be named with the help of words which are not real names at all.' He paused for a moment. 'Any questions at this point?'

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The previous speaker whose name was Lachlan raised a finger and spoke ponderously. 'I would like to know how the mystics of Judaism could possibly have had these ideas about God. Surely they are so contrary to the orthodox theistic understanding of their leaders that they would face expulsion or even death?'

'Yes, Lachlan, they certainly could. It is fascinating to see how the mystics of Judaism sought to solve this problem. They came up with a very interesting compromise. Their clever idea was that the impersonal aspect of God is simply God before the creation of the world, as He was in Himself. So, they declared that the aim of their mystical experience was to return to the moment before Creation began, and...'

Lachlan interrupted sarcastically. 'So they discovered the secret of time-travel?'

James didn't let Lachlan rattle him. 'I prefer to call it a time-less experience and I've found that this time-less element keeps coming up in most mysticism. Anyway, using this pre-time concept they were able to avoid the accusation of abandoning the personal God of Judaism and yet they could still be true to the impersonal nature of their mystical experience.'

James saw the coordinator looking at his watch and hoped that he was going to be let off the hook but Lachlan wanted to continue showing off his knowledge and to see if he could catch James out. 'I understand that mystics sometimes claim to have experienced divinity during their mystical trance. Do you think they do?'

James was ready for him. 'It's impossible to tell. They certainly believe that they achieve complete identity with God during their mystical contemplation. They

have the experience of complete loss of the self and the discovery that it is only God who remains. Therefore, when they emerge from their trance they will be tempted to say, in effect, 'I am God.'

'Isn't that blasphemy, especially in Judaism?'

When would the Coordinator pull the plug on him and his tormentor? 'Yes, and mystics have put their lives in danger when they say things like that but doesn't that show you that there must be something different about their experience?'

'I am sorry James and Lachlan. We have to finish there.'

'*I'm not at all sorry,*' thought James to himself. He had been fast running out of answers.

'Thank you James. Well presented.' Dr Rossiter said as he handed back James' spare copy of his seminar paper. James glanced down at it and was a little disappointed to see a five circled as his mark out of seven. As he resumed his seat he caught a glimpse of Lachlan's paper strategically placed so he could see the seven circled on the front page. Obviously presentation was not taken into account by the marking system, but James was just glad it was over.

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'Well James, how was your tutorial on Jewish Mysticism received?' Phillip Gill smiled expectantly at James.

'Quite well *I* thought...'
James looked up sharply, 'but how did you know I was on this week?'

'Conrad Rossiter asked me last week if I thought you were ready to tackle a topic on mysticism yet and I said you were more than ready.'

'Thank you...I think.'
James wasn't sure that he appreciated his academic progress being discussed among the staff but he was pleased with his supervisor's confidence in him. 'Once I'd read that article of Ninian Smart's on interpretation of

mystical experience I had no problem with the Cabbalah and their non-personal understanding of 'God.'

'Good for you.' Phillip grinned and nodded. 'And what do you believe now is the mystical understanding of Ultimate Reality?'

James looked puzzled at the question. The answer seemed obvious to him. 'As I said, I'm convinced. All mystical experiences are basically impersonal and re-interpreted in other ways afterwards.'

Phillip frowned. 'Are you now saying that there are no genuine theistic mystical experiences?'

'It seems that way to me.' James was suddenly confused just when he thought he had it all figured out.'

Phillip narrowed his eyes as he looked at him over his coffee mug. 'Are you sure about that?'

James was taken aback. 'Why? What's wrong with that conclusion? I thought you'd agree with that.'

Phillip shook his head slowly. 'Remember I said if you were aware of your bias you could compensate for it?'

'I remember.'

'Well, it's also possible to overcompensate.'

James mulled that one over for a moment. Had he really gone from one extreme to the other? He cast his mind back to the meditation workshop where he could have had an experience of unity with all creation, if he had gone the whole way like one of the other participants, but he got worried and pulled out of the process by resorting to filling his mind with images of Christ. Was that not a mystical experience of a personal nature?

James then expressed his new doubt. 'So you think that some mystical experience can be personal after all?'

'Why don't you find out?' Phillip threw out the challenge. 'What you've been looking at so far is the mysticism of the Negative Way or Mysticism of Infinity. Now look up the other type. It's called the Positive Way or Mysticism of Personality, and it's been present in the Christian mystical tradition from the very beginning.'

'Thanks. I will.' *I need some time to adjust to this. This is a real turn up for the books.* 'I'd better go.'

Phillip Gill saw him out the door. 'See you next week James and good hunting.'

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1. N. Smart, Interpretation of Mystical Experience, 'Religious Studies', Vol. 1, 1965
2. Ibid p85.
3. 'The Inner Eye of Love', Op. Cit., P18-19, 67-8.
4. N. Smart, Op. Cit., p 83-4.
5. G.G.Scholem, Jewish Mysticism, Schocken Books, New York, 1961, p. 216-7.