

Chapter Twelve

WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOR?

Saturday 8th April

Chapel Hill

‘OK everybody. Sarah and Sharon are in bed. They should be asleep soon so we can start. Sit wherever you like.’ Julie Hilliard gestured to the chairs in the dining room and returned to the kitchen to emerge with a tray of four prawn cocktails for the entree. She was a fair bit younger than Kevin, with a generous figure, fair hair and sparkling blue eyes.

James had been delighted that Julie had rung to invite them over to their new home in Chapel Hill for dinner. He thought it was about time the four of them met socially.

Kevin said grace and then filled all their glasses with sparkling apple juice. There were appreciative sounds and complimentary comments about the prawn cocktails. Julie listened for sounds from the children’s bedroom and said apologetically. ‘The twins can be quite a handful at bedtime. Just wait till you have a family.’

Mary was a bit taken aback. ‘We may be waiting a while Julie. We’d like to wait till James gets settled in full-time work.’

Julie looked at James with wide-eyed innocence. ‘And would that be in Journalism or in parish ministry?’

‘Julie,’ Kevin interrupted. ‘I told you that was a sore point.’ Then he looked at Mary and James. ‘Please excuse my wife. She can be very direct.’

‘That’s quite OK Kevin.’ James looked back at Julie. ‘Kevin often ribs me about that. I think he’s made it his aim in life to get me back in the ministry.’

‘Does he have much chance James?’

‘At this stage Julie, Buckley’s chance.’ James shot a sideways glance at Kevin, ‘but that won’t stop him from trying.’

Mary changed the subject. ‘Kevin how is your job with the Christian Education Department?’

‘It’s fine, thanks Mary,’ said Kevin with a frown that belied the truth of his comment. ‘It has the advantage of variety - you know, moving from parish to parish, but...it’s a bit frustrating having to leave a project to the local minister to complete and not being able to follow things up yourself.’

Mary noticed his ambivalence. ‘Did you apply for this position?’

Kevin pushed his empty entrée plate away and wiped his mouth with his serviette before answering. ‘Well, I was asked to put in for it. I was a high school teacher before entering the ministry and I like teaching but I think I did more actual teaching in the parish than I do in this job.’

‘So you enjoyed the parish out west then?’ Mary persisted.

‘Very much.’ Kevin agreed.

Julie interrupted. ‘Except for the heat and dust.’

Kevin gave a wry smile. ‘Well, I must admit that I’m not missing that aspect and I’m enjoying being back in the city.’

Julie cleared the table and asked Kevin to help her bring in the main course - a baked dinner. From the servery Kevin called out to Mary, ‘Tell us about your job Mary. You work in an accountants’ office I believe?’

‘Yes, that’s right. I’m a junior tax-consultant. I enjoy meeting new people all the time, especially clients who return year after year and ask for me.’

'That's good.' Kevin nodded.

'This roast meat is beautiful Julie,' said James, 'Where did you learn to cook like this? I don't get food like this at home,' James paused and grinned mischievously when Mary glared at him, and then he continued, '...when I'm cooking.' The others laughed, as the momentary tension broke.

'Oh, Julie does all the cooking in our house,' said Kevin looking fondly at Julie, 'and she is such a good cook.'

Julie scoffed and looked at the others. 'He keeps telling me that, just so I'll keep doing all the cooking.'

'What did you do before you became a full-time home maker, Julie?' James wanted to know.

'I worked in Aged Care as a Personal Care Assistant.' Julie added, 'But out west I did casual work at the hospital as an AIN.'

'AIN?' queried James.

'Assistant in Nursing.' She nodded to James and then looked around the group. 'Now who would like dessert - Pavlova and ice cream?' Mary declined, but the men responded eagerly.

During dessert, the conversation continued to centre on sharing past experiences and getting to know one another, and James and Mary told the Hilliards about their threatening phone calls. James' quest was not mentioned nor was he asked about it, which he thought was a little strange as Kevin always showed such a big interest. When they had finished dessert, Kevin got to his feet. 'Well, everyone, let's adjourn to the lounge for coffee or tea. What will you have?'

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When they had all expressed their wishes for coffee they moved to the lounge where Kevin continued, 'I must confess, we had two motives for getting us together.

One was we wanted all of us to get to know each other a bit better. The other motive was to help a friend in need. James has been working on a very difficult assignment for his boss and I have been trying to help him by listening to him every Thursday lunch hour at Uni. Lately, I have been feeling very inadequate to help him. When I said this to Julie she suggested we get together for dinner and see if we can't help him as a group more than we can individually. So James here we are, a willing audience asking you to share with us where you are up to, that is, if you are happy to talk about it.'

'Happy?' said James with eyebrows raised, 'I'd be delighted. I get a lot more help from you than you think, Kevin, but I must admit I feel so overwhelmed by all the different opinions that I think I'm suffering information overload. Maybe talking about it will help me clarify a few things.'

'All right then. If you want more coffee just ask.' Kevin waved his hand towards the servery and then looked at Mary. 'Mary, you happy about this?'

Mary looked at Kevin with a surprised smile. 'Of course. I appreciate your thoughtfulness and your support for James.'

James said enthusiastically, 'Right then. Where do you want me to start?'

Kevin took on the role of chairman and answered for the others, 'Right at the beginning. I'm sure we're all aware of some of your findings, so if you fill in the gaps we'll all be up to speed.'

'OK then.' James thought back to the beginning. 'It all started when the boss asked me to find out if there was any common reality behind all the major world religions. "Don't they all worship the same God?" he asked me but, for some reason he seems to be particularly interested in Buddhism which, ironically, doesn't believe in a personal God.'

‘That’s why we have to use the term ‘Ultimate Reality’, Kevin explained for the ladies’ benefit but neither of them seemed to need the explanation. ‘Go on, James.’

‘Well, I started off looking at the conservative view that Christianity had all the truth and no other religions had any.’

Julie cut in. ‘But you soon found some good arguments against that one, didn’t you?’ She picked up and waved a bunch of articles cut out of the paper.

‘You’ve been keeping copies of my column?’ said James in amazement.

‘Of course. From the very first one of your new series in February.’ She smiled smugly. ‘So, what happened next?’

‘Then I found the more inclusive approach which sees people of other faiths...’

‘...as anonymous Christians,’ interrupted Mary. James looked at her pleasantly surprised. She responded brightly, ‘Well, that’s what you said at that ecumenical service.’

‘Right.’ James smiled. This was going well. ‘Anonymous Christian’ or ‘members by desire’ Karl Rahner calls them.¹ But after that service I was taken to task by a retired missionary for still being too narrow, and Phillip Gill got me looking at the much broader idea of Pluralism, which was actually more compatible with my idea of a ‘reflections’ model. Do you want me to explain that?’

Julie answered, ‘I think you explained it well enough in one of your articles, James. All religious traditions are partial reflections of the truth they represent. Right?’

‘Yes,’ interrupted Mary, not wanting to be outdone by Julie who seemed to have done her homework well. ‘And that’s true of our tradition too because we all see truth ‘in a mirror dimly’.’

James nodded at Mary. 'Correct. And that's partly because we only see in our own Scriptures what we expect to see, what we've been conditioned to see by our assumptions and our cultural biases.'

'So,' Kevin summed it up, 'not only do our traditions see truth partially as in a poor quality mirror, but our view of that tradition is also distorted by our own biased spectacles. So we have two reasons to be a bit more humble about own tradition.'

'That about sums it up.' James pointed appreciatively at Kevin. 'And, as you said once, we will never look honestly at other religions until we can look critically at our own.'

'I said that?' said Kevin with his hand on his heart.

'You did,' James nodded, 'and so we have to be prepared, using Mary's phrase, to 'get behind the literal meaning' of all texts, doctrines and creeds.'

Mary gave a little bow, pleased with the acknowledgment. 'Go on James before I get a swelled head.'

'So, this Pluralism seems to assume that there could be a common reality behind all religions.'

'James,' Mary leaned forward, 'tell them about the solar system analogy.'

'OK' James inclined his head, 'but it's not my analogy. It comes from John Hick and he calls it 'the universe of faiths'. We tend to think of the universe of faiths as revolving around Christianity with the other religions positioned according to their similarities with Christianity. But Hick's idea is that God takes the position of the Sun as the centre of the universe of faiths with all religions, including Christianity, revolving round it. It makes no assumptions about Christianity being superior.'²

'So this Pluralism gives you a common reality behind the religions?' asked Kevin with a smile knowing that it did nothing of the sort.

James returned the smile. 'As you well know, Kevin, it doesn't do that at all but it assumes it and lays the foundation for authentic inter-faith dialogue.' James looked back at Kevin as he said the last phrase.

'Oh, that phrase is music to my ears. Good old 'inter-faith dialogue'.' Kevin turned to the wives. 'I read in last year's missionary magazine that our Church is now officially adopting inter-faith dialogue as a less aggressive means of evangelism.'

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'So where do you go next to find this common reality?' asked Julie, bringing them back to the point at issue.

'Good question' said James with a nod. 'Phillip suggested I compare the testimony - the personal spiritual experience - of the different religions. So I went to a Jewish-Muslim-Christian symposium.'

'Which you used in your article on personal experience,' said Julie with her finger upraised.

'Exactly, but I also got help from writers who had been comparing spiritual experiences for years - men like Rudolf Otto. Otto describes the kind of awesome, overwhelming sense of smallness and unworthiness you get from an encounter with the living God.'

Kevin nodded approvingly. 'Sound reformed theology. Good old Otto.'

James continued. 'But Ninian Smart says you have to identify the focus of faith that transcends our expressions of it.'

'But that's the rub, isn't it,' Kevin objected. 'How can you identify the focus of faith behind our expressions?' asked Kevin.

Julie leant forward holding her coffee. 'Isn't it enough to know that it's the same God called by different names?'

James raised a finger as he remembered a text from the Hindu Scriptures. 'Ah! The Hindus say, "Truth is one; the sages call it differently." What do you think of that?'

'I love it,' replied Julie.

Kevin swung towards James. 'Hey! What about those Hindu beliefs you studied? Would they help us?'

James shook his head. 'Hinduism has so many different gods. Do you know that different Hindus worship different personal gods without any sense of confusion or contradiction? As far as tolerance goes, they practise what they preach, at least among themselves.'

Mary asked, 'Couldn't you use your reflections model to get behind those different descriptions in Hinduism?'

James looked at Mary and then pretended to hit himself in the head for not thinking of it himself. He looked at the others and pointed to Mary in admiration.

The Hilliards both laughed and Mary gestured towards James. 'See. He needs me. He thinks on a global scale and overlooks the obvious right under his nose.'

James gave a wry smile. 'That's me,' he admitted.

'James,' Julie leant forward and spoke very gently, 'I am wondering to myself why you do not seem to have investigated Buddhism when your boss is so obviously interested in it.' She smiled innocently.

James returned her gaze for a moment, unable to see any mischief in her eyes and then looked down. Why indeed. What could he say? She was right and he was foolish not to have seen it. He had become focussed too much on the literal task he had been given.

Slowly he replied, 'Julie, your intuition about his underlying motive is probably correct but he hasn't come right out and admitted it. Anyway, eastern religions are very difficult for western minds and I guess I was avoiding it for a while.'

'But you did receive something on Buddhism in lectures recently didn't you,' asked Mary.

Uh oh! True confession time. 'Yes Mary. The guest lecturer was Phillip Gill himself and it was a bit of a disaster for me. Remember my great theory that a personal God was behind every tradition and that mysticism was only an aid to devotion?'

Julie answered for her. 'Yes James. That was in your first article about mysticism.' She waved one of her copies, 'but you changed your mind the week after.'

James raised one hand. 'Yes but, in the first instance I only heard in that lecture what I wanted to hear in order to back up my own prejudices about mysticism and use it as ammunition in my 'confrontation' with Phillip.'

Kevin looked at the ladies. 'I think we all know how that turned out James. We can spare you the embarrassment of going over it again if you like.'

'Thanks Kevin. I appreciate that.' James straightened suddenly. 'But the outcome of it all at that stage was that Ultimate Reality for mystics is a 'unity with the universe' type experience, and not personal. I then accepted that this unity type experience was authentic, especially after I read Smart's article on mystical interpretation - you remember?'

Kevin nodded, 'I remember the 'smart' guy and his cynicism.'

James leant forward and raised a finger. 'Well, if he was correct, the Catholic mystics who said they were worshipping a personal God were having unity experiences and then reinterpreting them as personal because of their Church's beliefs.'

Although, as you said Kevin, they would probably do it unconsciously rather than deliberately.’

Kevin asked suspiciously, ‘I suppose Phillip the Buddhist was pleased with your conclusion that all mystical experience is impersonal?’

‘No. He wasn’t.’ James turned suddenly to Kevin. ‘That really surprised me. He sent me away to look at a different kind of mysticism - one that leads to an experience of a personal God.’

Julie sat forward and said sweetly. ‘He wants you to look at both Kataphatic and Apophatic Mysticism, doesn’t he?’ Then she sat back and let her eyes wander to the ceiling. She was obviously enjoying her moment immensely.

James and Mary looked at each other in astonishment and then James looked at Kevin but Kevin had a smug, proud expression on his face. ‘Julie was a Catholic before we married and learnt all about Catholic mysticism in confirmation class.’

‘Not all,’ said Julie. ‘Apparently there is a wide range of mystical experience from Kataphatic or personal at one end to Apophatic or impersonal on the other. The Kataphatic is also sometimes called The Mysticism of Personality and the Apophatic is also called The Mysticism of Infinity.’

James shook his head in amazement. ‘Julie, are you trying to tell me you learned all that when you were confirmed at - what - fifteen years of age?’

‘Thirteen actually,’ replied Julie a little embarrassed. ‘No, I have to confess, not all of it. I needed a refresher course so, after you wrote your second article on mysticism, I went to see Father O’Shea the priest at Kenmore. He lectures at Banyo Catholic Theological College. There’s a lot more I could tell you if you’re interested.’

James looked at Julie with his mouth open. ‘Of course I’m interested. Julie, that’s fantastic.’

Julie flushed. 'I'm not just a cook and homemaker you know. I have wider interests.'

'Obviously.' James blew out his cheeks. 'But when can I hear more?'

Julie smiled mysteriously and raised a restraining hand. 'Patience James. Let me sort out my rough notes and I'll give you a summary.'

Mary was very quiet as she observed James' evident delight.

Kevin smiled proudly as he sat forward in his chair. 'I think we've done enough for one night. Would you like to meet again?'

'Yes please. Preferably sooner rather than later and at our house next time.' James looked at Kevin and Julie gratefully. 'I don't know how to thank you both for tonight.'

Kevin spread his arms. 'Hey, what are friends for? Besides, we'd like to know the answer too.'

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1. Op. Cit. 'European Protestant and catholic Approaches to the World's Religions: Complements and Contrasts', J.E.S
2. . 12, 1975 p25
3. Christianity and Other Religions, J. Hick and B. Hebblethwaite, Collins, 1980.