

Chapter Thirteen

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

Sunday 9th April

Carindale

‘Where are you Mary?’ called James as he awoke from an afternoon nap and discovered that Mary was already up. He emerged from his bedroom and had a luxurious stretch. Then he wandered into the kitchen and called again.

This time a voice came from their third bedroom, which they used as a storeroom for unpacked boxes pending a shift into a home of their own whenever that might be. ‘I’m out here.’

James walked down the hallway and found Mary kneeling among unpacked boxes going through lecture notes. ‘I’m just digging out some of my old lecture notes on philosophy,’ she said turning her head to look at him. After last night’s performance by Julie, she had felt vaguely uncomfortable and decided she should try and help James a bit more than she had. ‘I’m having another look for that Neo-Platonic thing you asked me about.’

James sat on an upturned box and said, ‘That’s nice of you. Have you found anything?’

‘Yes, quite a bit.’ She stood up with some typed lecture notes in her hand. ‘It’s all coming back to me now. This is the part about the ‘ladder’ or chain of beings from the ‘One’ at the summit to the realm of the ‘Many’ in the world. Remember?’

James nodded. ‘I remember you saying that.’

‘Well, human beings could become divine by a process of ascending to the ‘One’.’ Mary sat on another box near him and handed him one of the lecture notes. ‘See here. Apparently the soul is immortal so it can participate in the world of the divine. This sounds like your Mr Eckhart’s idea that God can be found in the depths of the soul.’

‘It’s Meister Eckhart actually.’ James said pedantically as he scanned the page. ‘Did you find out how they ascend to the ‘One’?’

‘Yes, here it is.’ She turned to another page and read to him. ‘Through purging themselves of evil (that’s called purification), through illumination and finally, through total union with the One.’

‘There it is again.’ James’ face lit up. ‘Total identification with ‘God’ and an impersonal term called the ‘One’. You’re right. Meister Eckhart certainly stands in that tradition.’ James touched her hand, ‘but Meister Eckhart makes it sound more personal than your Neo-Platonism. One of his teachings was that God created humankind and dwells in the soul, but humans are only dimly aware of the divine presence within.’

Mary raised her eyebrows. ‘Is that what turned the authorities against him?’

James shrugged. ‘I’m not sure. Maybe they picked out all the parts they objected to, but I think the impersonal aspect in his teaching does loom larger than the personal.’ James turned towards her. ‘For example, he uses impersonal words like ‘goodness’, ‘justice’, and ‘wisdom’ to describe God instead of adjectives like ‘good’, ‘just’, and ‘wise’. He reckons those words only drag God down to human stature. I think he really means personal stature.’

Mary frowned. ‘Were those words enough to condemn him?’

James shook his head. 'I don't think he should have been condemned at all, but it's those words that convince me his mystical experience is impersonal, especially when he wouldn't modify them under threat of excommunication.'

James stood up and put his hand out to help Mary up. 'Thank you dear. That clears up a few things. How about we get out of this cluttered room and have a cup of coffee to celebrate.'

Mary crinkled her eyes up at him. 'You'll use any excuse for a cup of coffee.'

'Right again my sweet.' James put his arm around her and shepherded her out of the room. They had just returned to the kitchen when the phone rang. Mary froze and James answered it. 'It's Julie to talk to you,' he said and Mary sighed with relief.

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Monday 10th April

Daily Mail, Bowen Hills

Since James had started on this 'holy quest' as Kevin had called it, strange coincidences had been happening all the time. Today was no exception. He happened to be in his office at work when the Industrial Chaplain turned up to conduct staff devotions. When that happened he liked to attend, whether he could spare the time or not. He was rarely disappointed in the quality of the devotions but today it was special. She used a chapter from a book called 'Stories for Sharing' that spoke of an old Hindu legend about the hiding of divinity.¹

'There was a time,' she said, 'when all human beings were gods, but they so abused their divinity that Brahma, the chief god, decided to take it away from them and hide it where they would never find it. Where to hide it became the big question.'

'After lesser gods had given all their advice, Brahma decided to hide it deep down in every person, for no one would think of looking there...'

James was stunned. He would never have been game to use that mystical theme in conservative church circles but in this more secular gathering it was well received. Not only was it based on the polytheism of India, which he was studying, but also it illustrated the very basis of the kind of mysticism that he was exploring. After the devotions he thanked the young Chaplain for her words, exchanged greetings with some of the other staff members and went back to his desk.

There he picked up the rough draft of his article for this week's column and read it through again. The article was supposed to be on the unity behind the various personal gods of Hinduism - a topic he had left unresolved weeks ago. To ascertain the nature of this unity he had successfully used his reflections model as Mary had suggested on Saturday night. It so happened that the worshippers of each of the major Gods tended to ascribe to their God many of the characteristics of the other Gods. This made it much easier to propose that Hindus actually worshipped different manifestations of the same God. He wasn't completely happy with the article but decided to send it in anyway. He was finding it hard to concentrate on a theistic topic because, thanks to the Chaplain, his mind was back onto mysticism. Thus inspired he decided to drive over to St Lucia and head for the solitude of his private post-grad's cubicle in the main university library.

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University of Queensland, St Lucia

James sat back and looked at the two piles of books on the desk with some satisfaction. He was quite alone in his cubicle and he had just finished scanning well over a dozen books on the mystical traditions of Christianity. The smaller left hand pile all had slips of paper protruding from them each of which marked pages with excellent relevant quotes that he would need. It was just below the maximum number

of books he was allowed to take out and at home he would scan the passages into his computer and coalesce them into one large word-processor file. Then he could use the 'Find' facility on the Word programme to crosscheck similarities among all the main mystical writers. Feeling that he had made some worthwhile progress he gathered up the books he was taking out. He was ready to go home and apply himself to finishing off the article on the worship of personal Hindu gods.

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Tuesday 11th April

'Come in James.' Dr Jaclyn Sahid looked up from her desk. James entered and took the seat offered to him. She was not in the Sari that she had worn yesterday for her weekly lecture on Islam but still looked very attractive in a casual skirt and blouse. James could imagine what complimentary comments Kevin would make if he saw her now. 'I am pleased you took up my offer to visit,' she continued, 'how can I help you?'

James spoke hesitantly. 'Jaclyn, you mentioned the Sufi mystics yesterday but I need to know more about their brand of mysticism.'

Jaclyn smiled as she leaned back and crossed her long legs. 'Well, it so happens that the Sufi mystics are a special interest of mine, but I won't be covering them in great detail in this course.' Then her smile disappeared. 'Why are you so interested?'

James was a bit taken aback by her direct question and struggled to choose the right words. 'Well, I have to do this essay on the mystical theology of the West and I have discovered that Jewish mystics were always under pressure to keep their theology orthodox. I wondered if the same applied to Sufi mystics.'

Jaclyn nodded slowly. 'Yes. They had similar problems but first, tell me how the Jewish mystics handled the problem.'

James wondered what was the point of the question but explained briefly the theory of the Jewish mystics of the middle ages - how they believed that their mystical experience returned them to the moment before Creation began and hence the impersonal aspect of God was regarded as being the personal God as he was before the creation of the world.

Jaelyn smiled in agreement. 'Well, the Islamic mystical tradition is similar. In fact it has many parallels with the Cabbalists of Judaism and that's why I asked you the question. Like Judaism, Islam is strongly monotheistic and, like the Cabbalists, the Sufi mystics are very conscious that their impersonal understandings of 'God' run counter to the main stream of orthodoxy.'

James brightened up. 'So you would agree that the Sufi's primary understanding of Ultimate Reality is impersonal?'

Dr Sahid smiled. 'Yes, I believe so. Sufi mysticism has all the characteristics of other Western mystical traditions - including total identification with divinity.'

James took some notes. 'Ninian Smart says we should get the original words of the mystics. How would they describe their own experience?'

Jaelyn slowly nodded her head. 'OK, one of my favourites is Sahl at-Tustari of the ninth century. He believed that the core of his mystical experience was when he penetrated to the immediate awareness of God within his innermost being.' She reached up and took down a book from her shelf. 'Why don't you take a note of this book by Peter Berger? He has something on at-Tustari and also quite a lot on the conflict between the personal and impersonal in world religions. That's what you're really interested in isn't it?'

James stared at her in surprise and wondered if the lecturing staff had nothing better to do than talk about his quest. 'I guess so.'

Dr Sahid handed him her copy of a book called ‘The Other Side of God’² and seemed to read his thoughts. ‘Don’t feel bad James. The lecturers are human and always appreciative of a student who takes his studies seriously, no matter what the motivation.’

Somewhat mollified James asked, ‘Did at-Tustari also try to be loyal to his orthodox beliefs?’

‘Yes and this is where it starts to get very interesting.’ She raised one well manicured finger. ‘At-Tustari still believed that God is transcendent. But I believe that the transcendence part does not come from his mystical experience but his experience as a Muslim worshipper.’

James considered her words. ‘And how does he distinguish between the two?’

Jaclyn pointed to the book in his hands. ‘I don’t know how At-Tustari does it but Peter Berger uses the terms ‘interiority’ and ‘confrontational’ to compare the two and I find those terms useful. He distinguishes between the interior orientation of the mystical way and the confrontational orientation of the theistic worship experience.’

While James wrote down the title and the author for future reference, Jaclyn rose to her feet. ‘I’m due for a Chamomile. Would you like one?’

James declined politely and took the opportunity in her absence to scan the contents of her book. It seemed to him that Berger had covered the mystical strand in just about every religion.

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When the lecturer returned James looked up. ‘So, Jaclyn, is At-Tustari a pure mystic of the negative way or not?’

Jaclyn smiled as she sat and sipped her tea. ‘Not necessarily. He did teach that a person is ‘absorbed by the Transcendent’ at the peak of mystical experience.’

James pointed a finger. 'That sounds to me like complete identification with the divine.'

Jaclyn held up her hand. 'Yes but, on the other hand, he insisted that a person couldn't actually participate in divine Being.'

James smirked. 'So the fear of being branded a heretic held him back from the brink. He 'chickened out'?'

Jaclyn angled her head in reluctant agreement. 'You could probably interpret it that way.'

James pushed her book back to her and spread his hands. 'So, what's so special about him?'

Jaclyn leant forward, picked up the book and opened it to a page she had marked. 'I'll give you a potted summary. His interpretation of mystical experience is an ingenious solution a little like that of your Jewish mystics. He says that, in their mystical experience, Sufi mystics enter a timeless moment, an eternal 'now' and to enter this timeless moment they are transported out of the normal time-frame.'

James had read this before with the Jewish mystics. 'Back before creation?'

Again Jaclyn held up her hand to forestall him. 'Yes. He called it the 'Day of Covenant' but not only that. They may also be transported forward to a post-existence 'Day of Resurrection'. This is where he departs from the Jewish model.' She leaned forward and showed him the chapter on 'The Islamic Case' and a diagram she drew on a piece of scrap paper.



James took it and examined it curiously. After a while a smile spread over his face. 'This is a rather interesting model of time and space.' He was wondering whether it could help him to reconcile the personal and the impersonal understandings of Ultimate Reality. Phillip had told him that no scholarly work had yet succeeded in reconciling the two understandings.

Jaclyn smiled smugly. 'I thought you might feel that way. Aren't you trying to find a common reality behind the world religions?'

James narrowed his eyes in annoyance. 'Something like that.'

'Well, I think this Sufi mystic has much more of a balance between the two aspects of reality.' James realised she was only trying to help him in his quest. Jaclyn continued. 'According to his interpretation, the encounter with the impersonal 'God' takes place either before or after the time-bound history of human-kind.'

James nodded slowly with increased understanding. 'So, this synthesis means that orthodox Muslims can commune with the personal God within ordinary history?'

'Exactly.' Jaclyn straightened up in her chair. 'Very clever of him, don't you think?'

'It certainly is.' James raised his hand. Something had caught his attention. 'Now, can I go back to something you said just now about entering a timeless

moment, being transported out of the normal time frame? Do you think that's significant?"

'I believe it is. My research shows that timelessness is a characteristic of most mysticism.' Jaclyn pointed to her book on the desk in front of her. 'You check it out for yourself.'

'OK. I will.' James remembered his own experience of time distortion and decided to search all his quotes and references to time in the mysticism of the negative way. Later he would regret not doing it sooner. 'But the Hebrew-Christian view is that time is linear - moving towards the end-time?'

'Right. Based on the Bible.' She placed a hand on a bible on the side of her desk. 'But some Eastern traditions like the ancient Greeks and the Hindus had and have a circular view of time. In the circular view the end is the same as the beginning. In the Western view, history is moving towards an end that will be different from the beginning. This allows for a belief in progress and community reform and the possibility of a person growing in maturity.'

'What about at-Tustari's theory of time? Where does he fit?'

Jaclyn's expression showed that she was glad they had arrived at the crux of the matter. 'Between the two. In Berger you'll read that he breaks open the circle of time into a 'U' shaped diagram.'

'Or' objected James, 'he bends up linear time at the ends into a 'U' shape.'

Jaclyn spread her hands. 'Also correct. Either way he represents a middle ground between Western and Eastern views of time.'

James thought of a related problem. He had noticed that some mystics didn't seem to believe that time had any reality at all. He said, 'Jaclyn, one way or another, it seems to me that 'time is of the essence' in any comparison of theism and mysticism.'

‘You could be right.’ She nodded and her eyes strayed as she gave that some thought. ‘It might even put mysticism above theism.’

James was disturbed by that remark but decided not to follow it up at the moment. Instead he stood up. ‘Thank you Jaclyn. Look forward to seeing you next week.’ Then he thought that remark might be ambiguous so he added, ‘I always enjoy your lectures.’

‘Thank you James.’ He was rewarded with a nice but puzzled smile.

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Thursday 13th April

‘James, over here.’ Kevin called to James as he navigated through the tables searching for Kevin. When James was seated Kevin went on. ‘Sorry I can’t stay today. I have to leave in a minute for an appointment, but here’s that stuff on different types of mysticism that Julie promised you. She spent most of Sunday writing this out for you.’

‘Well, thank her very much for me.’ James stopped eating while he tried to see the screed.

Kevin read from the document. ‘This part is about the Mystics of Infinity. Their most controversial characteristic is their claim to have achieved total, immediate union with Absolute Reality - sometimes called an undifferentiated unity. They believe they have passed into a state of absolute ontological union with the Absolute.’

James paused with his salad roll in one hand and tried to get hold of the document with his other hand. ‘Yes, I’ve come to realise that.’

‘Yes. You have.’ Kevin pointed to Julie’s screed, which he still held, despite James’ eager efforts to get hold of it. ‘But wait till you read this next bit about the

Mysticism of Personality. They don't have complete unity or identification with God. They talk about differentiated unity.'

James raised an eyebrow. 'I wonder if that's just to keep them orthodox?'

'Julie thinks not.' Kevin finally relinquished the document reluctantly. He would have loved to have stayed and discussed it with James. 'Here. Read the rest for yourself. I have to go.'

James called after him as he left. 'Tell Julie I appreciate it.'

'Will do.' Kevin waved over his shoulder. 'Take care.'

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1. Op. Cit. Charles Arcodia (Pub. E.J.Dwyer (Aust.) 1991 p. 98.
2. Peter L. Berger, The Other Side of God. A Polarity in World Religions, Anchor Books, Anchor Press/Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1981.