

Chapter Fifteen

THE SEESAW THAT SHE SAW

Saturday 15th April

Orthodox Church, South Brisbane

The sanctuary of the Greek Orthodox Church on the south side was empty but full of atmosphere. James stood inside the great double doors gazing with awe and wonder at the furnishings and the icons. He could imagine the atmosphere when a service was in progress with the choir chanting, the incense spreading around the nave and the communion elements being served. During his theological training he learned that the Russian emissary had been sent by the Czar to investigate the religions of Europe. He reported back that the Orthodox branch of Christianity looked good, sounded good, tasted good and smelt good or words to that effect. He could believe it even standing in the empty church.

‘Mr James McGregor?’ The Greek accented voice came from a clean-shaven young priest dressed in his full, colourful regalia.

James turned. ‘Yes, ‘James’ will be fine. Good afternoon, er Kali Spera?’ He tentatively used one of the few Greek phrases he knew.

‘Kali Spera is correct,’ replied the priest, ‘I am Dimitri Theophonos. Call me Dimitri. We younger priests aren’t as formal as some, please excuse my robes but I have a wedding in an hour and I didn’t want to cut you short.’

James raised one hand. ‘That’s quite all right, Dimitri. Actually it’s quite helpful to see you in your robes.’

Dimitri ushered James to a small vestry where a wedding register was open on the table. 'How do you know Greek?'

'Oh I don't really know Greek, only Classical and New Testament Greek. But if I remember rightly I learned a few modern Greek phrases at a Greek fruit shop in the Melbourne city markets.'

'Your accent is quite good.' Dimitri settled back in the main chair behind the table and pointed James to another nearby. 'Well James, what would you like to know? After you rang to make the appointment I didn't know whether to bring a lot of books or not.'

'No no.' James shook his head slowly. 'I can read books for myself. I would just like your opinion on the mystical strand within your Church.'

Dimitri smiled a little and replied, 'We don't really have a mystical strand within our tradition.' Then he paused to let the words sink in.

James looked confused. 'But I thought...'

Dimitri laughed at his confusion and interrupted him. 'But that is only because we are a mystical Church, through and through.'

'Oh I see,' said James relaxing.

'If you want to read up on us you could look at Lossky's books. His description is very authentic.¹

James took a note of the author's name and then said, 'So mystics who claim total union with divinity would not be in conflict with orthodox theology?'

Dimitri sat back and folded his hands across his stomach. 'Probably not because, in our theology, there is no conflict between the experience of the mystics and the doctrines affirmed by the church. Eastern theology has always favoured the idea of salvation by being deified or united with the Godhead. Also, our theologians tend to regard the Apophatic or negative way as superior to the Kataphatic or positive way.'

That's why I said the Orthodox tradition is a mystical tradition. The Mysticism of Infinity is a characteristic of the whole tradition of the Eastern Church.'

'So the Orthodox Church has an impersonal understanding of God?'

Dimitri hesitated. 'Ye-es, but not exclusively.'

James narrowed his eyes in anticipation. 'How do you mean?'

'We don't believe in a completely undifferentiated unity of the human and the divine.' Dimitri leaned forward and put his elbows on his desk. 'As Lossky says, the theology of the Orthodox Church is based on an experience of divine nothingness but not to the extent that the distinction between the human person and God is lost.'

James thought they were trying to have 'two bob each way'. 'Forgive me if I seem blunt Dimitri, but this question is very crucial to my study of mysticism. Would you say that your church has pulled back from the edge of complete identification for some reason?'

Dimitri stiffened. 'I would hope that if we do so it is because it is right. We have to be true to our tradition which goes all the way back to the apostles.'

James realised then that no one would ever admit to being influenced by any ulterior motive so he changed tack, 'So even though you acknowledge the impersonal aspect, you still worship a personal God?'

'Yes.' Dimitri smiled. 'We have both, but we distinguish between the impersonal God-head and the personal aspect.'

James' eyes widened. This was getting to the heart of the matter for his assignment. 'How do you do that?'

Dimitri responded to James' interest and warmed to his subject. 'Well, one way is by using the terms 'unknowable essence' and 'knowable energies or operations'. The 'unknowable essence' is the impersonal aspect. The 'knowable energies' is the

personal aspect with which we can have a relationship.’ Dimitri raised his eyebrows. ‘Does that help you?’

‘Yes, indeed.’ James nodded slowly. ‘Because with you the same God is clearly depicted in the two different aspects. In much Western Christian mysticism the impersonal aspect is simply subordinated to the personal, or denied completely’.

It was Dimitri’s turn to be surprised. ‘Is that so?’

‘According to my research so far anyway.’ James frowned a little. ‘Your mystical strand sounds more Eastern.’

Dimitri smiled and nodded. ‘Greek culture has always had an affinity with the East, but we are still Western in our eschatological view of time. For us deification is still in the future. That’s why we say it can’t be achieved in this life but only in the age to come after the resurrection.’

James’ eyes glistened. ‘That’s very interesting to me. So your mystics don’t emerge from their mystical trances proclaiming instant divinity for themselves?’

‘Not in public they don’t,’ Dimitri smiled and so did James. Dimitri continued, ‘we regard any mystical experience of divinity as a foretaste of the end-time.’ Dimitri looked at his watch. ‘So, how do we compare with other Churches you’ve studied?’

‘Well, yours is the only Christian church – the only Western religion in fact – that I’ve come across so far that regards the negative way as superior to the positive way.’

‘Very interesting.’ Dimitri stood up to signal his need to attend to his other duties. ‘Now, is there anything else you need?’

James took the hint, stood up and shook hands with the priest. ‘No Dimitri, it’s been very good of you to make time available to talk to me, especially when you’ve got a wedding about to start.’ He held up one hand as he moved away. ‘I’ll see myself out and have another look at your beautiful church on the way.’

'Peace be with you, James.'

James left Dimitri in the vestry adjusting his robes. As he walked slowly through the nave he remembered his Old Testament lecturer talking about the way Jewish and Muslim temples were never used for any other purpose - as modern Christian churches often were for financial and pragmatic reasons - and how they always had an awe inspiring and holy atmosphere about them.

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Sunday 16th April

Society of Friends Meeting Hall, Kelvin Grove

James was beginning to regret that he had invited Mary to come with him to this Quaker Meeting for Worship. Glancing sideways at her, he couldn't tell whether she was enjoying it or not. So far most of the time had been spent in absolute silence and stillness. The morning had started off well. One of the members had met them at the door and introduced herself as Myra. James and Mary had reciprocated.

Then having ascertained that this was their first visit Myra had given them a pamphlet of introduction. James had asked, 'Do you have any other pamphlets we could take away with us? I'm doing a survey on different forms of mysticism.' He thought it was best to be up front about his motives to avoid any misunderstanding.

'Certainly. Here, take any of those.' She pointed to a book rack in the porch. Then they were shown to a seat in a circle of chairs.

The hour was now almost up and only twice had anyone shared a thought or an experience with the group but James had the feeling that they may only have done that out of consideration for Mary and himself as newcomers or outsiders. He had tried to meditate but he had not been able to repeat the mystical experience he had had at the seminar. Perhaps it was because he knew he was there to observe.

Finally Myra shook hands with her neighbours and everyone else followed suit. Then James and Mary were identified as visitors and asked to introduce themselves. After that some announcements were made including the need for First Day School teachers. James noted with interest the use of the phrase First Day instead of Sunday. Then everyone moved to the door where there was a contribution box available that took the place of 'passing the plate'. As Mary was placing some money in the box Myra came up to them and said, 'The first time at one of our Meetings for Worship can be difficult for some.'

Mary nodded in agreement. 'It certainly is different from what we are used to. Are you the minister, Myra?'

Myra shook her head firmly. 'Oh no. I'm the Clerk of Meeting. We don't have paid, full-time ministers. We each take responsibility for running the Meetings.' She pointed to a book on a nearby table. 'Would you like to sign the Visitors' Book?'

As James signed for both of them he asked, 'Are all Quaker groups the same?'

Myra smiled. 'We prefer to call ourselves the Society of Friends, rather than Quakers. Quakers used to be a derogatory term because some of our ancestors used to 'quake' or shake when the Spirit moved them.'

James nodded and then looked around at members milling around after the 'meeting'. 'What happens now Myra? Is it all over for the morning?'

'Not at all. In some ways, that was just the beginning. Now we catch up with each other, arrange committee meetings and have a bit of morning tea.' Myra started to move and encouraged them to follow her. 'Would you like to come for some refreshments?'

'Thank you,' said Mary. As they stood in line together at the counter where tea and coffee were being served, James asked, 'Myra, would you call yourselves a mystical church?'

Myra looked sideways at James. 'Most definitely. Some of our overseas branches have evolved into merely evangelical churches, but not in Australia.' That was what James had been trying to find out. They collected their coffee and moved away from the counter.

James took a sip and then asked, 'Do you worship a personal God?'

'Oh yes but, as you'll see from the pamphlets, we see ourselves belonging to the same tradition as Zen Buddhism, Moslem Sufis, and the Jewish Cabbalah. We focus on the active presence of the 'beyond that is within' and for us, the Beyond is Christ, the Seed, the Spirit, and the Light.'

James noted the impersonal names for God, apart from 'Christ'. 'Thank you, Myra. It has been most 'enlightening'.'

'Clever.' Myra smiled at the pun. 'You are most welcome to come back any time. I trust all will go well with your survey. Here's my phone number if you'd like any more information.' James took the card, bowed his thanks. Then she introduced them to another couple, left them with them and moved off to speak to other members.

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When they had finished their drinks and their conversation, James took Mary's arm and they strolled slowly to the car park. 'I seem to have been affected by the peacefulness of the meeting.'

Mary looked at him sharply. 'Well, I certainly have. It was a great experience.'

James relaxed a little. 'I was worried you might have been bored or too distracted.'

'Not at all.' They separated as they approached the car. Mary stood beside her door waiting for the car to be unlocked. 'It was good for me. The tension of waiting for that next call from 'nut-case' was really getting to me. What about you?' When James unlocked the doors she opened her door. As soon as she got into the car she put

the pamphlets on her lap to read on the way home. James started the motor and drove out onto the road. 'I just couldn't get the same experience as I had at the seminar. Maybe I'm not cut out to meditate in a big group.'

'Well, Myra said it could be hard for some the first time. I tried to use your method of emptying my mind but I gave up on that and just sat there soaking up the group atmosphere. It was great. I was also quite moved by the contributions of those two members.'

'OK That's good. I was worrying about you for nothing.'

After a while Mary asked, 'Do you think they are really mystical in their beliefs? Myra talked about Christ and the Spirit.'

'Yes but she also said, 'Seed and Light, and even Spirit can be taken as impersonal. What does that pamphlet say?'

'Give me a moment to read it.' She read in silence for a while and then said, 'They talk about their inner life.'²

'That's a give-away.' James interrupted.

'Maybe.' Mary looked down again. 'Here they say, 'They find words alone inadequate to describe religious truth and so they don't have creeds or dogmas.'

James nodded knowingly keeping his eyes on the road. 'That's the mystical ineffability characteristic.'

Mary resumed reading. 'They assume that 'the human and the divine are parts of a single continuum. The human being is naturally endowed with a measure of divinity'.'

James lifted one finger off the wheel. 'So they have an interior quest, an ineffable experience, an impersonal understanding of 'the Divine' and a natural inner divine nature from birth.'

Mary glanced at him sideways. 'Do you think this article proves they are a mystical church?'

James frowned as he considered 'I think their understanding of Ultimate Reality is not exactly personal, but I don't think Myra would agree with that.'

'That's right.' Mary nodded slowly. 'She said 'Yes' when you asked her if God was personal.' She looked down again. 'Here. How do you like this? 'Each of the world religions, if searched to its core, reveals a mystical dimension.'''

'Personally I don't like it,' James grunted. 'But I've found it's not unusual for mystical strands to see themselves as the true core of religion and the mystics as the spiritual elite.'

Mary pondered that for a moment and then said, 'You know, your findings are like a confounded seesaw.'

'What do you mean?' he asked suspiciously.

'Well, just look at it.' She spread her hands. 'In the Quakers, the impersonal mystical emphasis is uppermost and, according to you, the personal is not basic, - just like your Greek Orthodox Church yesterday. In Julie's Catholicism, the personal is uppermost and the impersonal is frowned upon. In our branch of Protestantism, the impersonal doesn't get a look in. It is firmly on the ground. You tell me if that's not a see-saw?'

'Hmm.' James nodded thoughtfully and then laughed. 'That's quite a good image. The seesaw that she saw.'

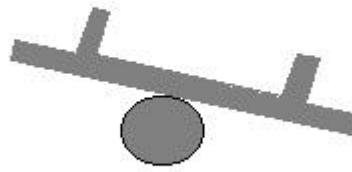
'I'm serious.' She used the remote to open the garage doors. 'If you do a poll of your world religions and see which emphasis gets the most votes, which one would win on a popularity scale?'

'I don't know.' James drove into their garage. 'But it's a good thought. Maybe I should have another look at them.'

As he brought the car to a full stop, she reached over and squeezed his hand.

‘Why don’t you do that dear and see what you come up with?’

Impersonal
Mystical
Emphasis



Personal
Theistic
Emphasis

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Tuesday 18th April

Carindale

The Religion Report

Last week in this column we examined the worship of personal Gods within Hinduism. This week we will look at the mystical side.

There is a mystical strand in Hinduism that has a place for one or more of the personal gods mentioned last week but they see them as only an inferior step on the road to the impersonal Brahman, which is the ultimate reality - the One.

This is very similar to a branch of Buddhism where there are a number of personal saviours for devotees to worship but the supreme reality above them is the impersonal Nirvana or ‘nothingness’. However, in the original branch of Buddhism, there are no personal avatars or gods of any kind, only the impersonal Nirvana.

In all of these three traditions, the Ultimate Reality is an impersonal absolute. This gives strong support for the statement I made a couple of weeks ago that there exists in many of the world religions an impersonal reality with which many claim to have achieved total, complete union or identification.

For next week I will tell you whether the personal God or the Impersonal Absolute is the most common understanding of Ultimate Reality in the world religions...

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It was Sunday evening and Mary put down the copy of James' article and looked at James. 'Are you really going to use my idea?'

James shrugged. 'I've already done the exercise you suggested.'

'You have?' Her eyes widened in surprise. 'Already?'

'Oh it didn't take that long,' James said dismissively. 'I had all the material. I just had to review it.'

'Well? What was the verdict?' She asked eagerly. 'Don't keep me in suspense. Who or what won the popularity vote?'

He responded slowly. 'We-ell, it depends how you weight the votes but the way I did it, it come out about even.'

Mary's shoulders slumped. 'Bang goes my idea of using the poll to decide the issue.'

'Not really.' James was enjoying teasing her. 'It provides some evidence that both understandings are authentic.'

She was horrified. 'How can that be?'

‘At the moment I have no idea.’ James raised his eyebrows. ‘And neither does anyone else I know of.’

Mary read the article again and then said, ‘So in Hinduism they can believe in both personal gods and the impersonal but the impersonal comes out on top?’

He pointed to the article. ‘In that strand yes, but not always. Ramanuja represents a different tradition from Shankara. He accepts the experience of total absorption into an impersonal Brahman as a valid experience but not as high as loving devotion to a personal God.’

Mary was getting frustrated. ‘But that’s the exact opposite of this strand.’

James smiled at her frustration. ‘Precisely.’

She handed the article back to him. ‘So, you’re saying that both strands accept both understandings but each exalts a different understanding?’

‘That’s how I see it.’

Mary shook her head in disbelief. ‘And you say it’s like that on the world scale?’

James nodded. ‘That’s why I’ve decided that both the personal and the impersonal understandings of Ultimate Reality are equally valid even though I don’t know how that can be.’

‘Well, that’s a start. Come on. Let’s go to bed. I hope we don’t get any interruptions tonight. Let’s leave the phone off the hook.’

‘Good idea.’ James stood up to follow her. ‘Let him ring some other time.’

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1. V. Lossky, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church, James Clarke and Co. Ltd., Cambridge London, 1957.
2. ‘Friends Journal’, November 15, 1984.