

Chapter Sixteen

TRIAL BY JULIE

Thursday 20th April

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James had finished all he wanted of his salad roll – which was not very much - when Kevin joined him with his meal on a tray. ‘That’s quite a pile you’ve got there. Feeling hungry today are we?’

Kevin looked at his meal and then at James’ half eaten roll. ‘Well, you certainly aren’t. Are you off your tucker?’

James shrugged. ‘Just not hungry.’

Kevin started making inroads into his meal. ‘Maybe you’re coming down with something.’

James rejected the suggestion. ‘Nah, I never get sick.’

Then, without looking up Kevin added, ‘Or is ‘nut-case’ getting you down?’

James thought about that. ‘Not as much as it is Mary. She jumps every time the phone rings. I tend to forget about him when I’m working.’

Kevin looked at him with narrowed eyes. ‘And what about your quest?’

‘I haven’t made much progress on that.’ James pushed his uneaten food even further away. ‘I’ve reached a certain conclusion and seem to be stuck there.’

‘Hey.’ Kevin lifted his fork and pointed. ‘Your faithful support group meets this weekend. Maybe that will get you unstuck.’

‘If only.’ James sighed and then raised one hand. ‘Oh I really appreciate the support but I don’t know what we could talk about. I really don’t know where to go

next. Maybe the scholars are right - maybe there's no way of reconciling the two different beliefs about Ultimate Reality.'

Kevin stopped eating for a moment. 'You do sound a bit down. Is that the conclusion you've reached?'

James shook his head. 'No, not really. My conclusion is that there are definitely at least two contradictory understandings of Ultimate Reality in the major world religions.'

Kevin nodded and resumed eating. 'How did you come to that conclusion?'

'It was thanks to Mary actually. She suggested doing a poll of the world's religions.'

'Oh yes.' Kevin's eyes lit up. 'You mentioned that in your article. You're going to find the most popular view.'

James nodded. 'I've already done it. Overall, there are about as many 'votes' for the supremacy of the one as of the other.'

Kevin frowned. 'How could that be?'

James picked up a serviette, leant forward and drew a seesaw. 'On one end sits theism - the worship of a personal God, and on the other end sits mysticism of infinity - the contemplation of an Impersonal Absolute. In most Western religions, the personal aspect is high in the air and the impersonal aspect is low on the ground. In Hinduism the seesaw is much closer to the horizontal with each end being given support by different groups. In Buddhism the seesaw tips the other way and the impersonal aspect predominates, sometimes to the exclusion of the personal altogether.'

Kevin blew out his cheeks. 'Well, as you say, there certainly seems to be two contradictory views of Ultimate Reality. You know in another place and time you would be put on trial and accused of heresy.'

James gave a sigh. 'Probably.'

Suddenly Kevin's face lit up. 'Now that's an idea for Saturday afternoon.'

James gave a puzzled frown. 'What are you on about?'

Kevin pointed at James. 'Your support group. Why don't we have a mock trial? I'll be the church prosecutor. You can be the accused. Mary can be the Counsel for the defence. She'll be on your side.'

'Thank goodness someone is.' James laughed. 'And what about Julie?'

'We-ell, she can be the judge and jury.'

James straightened up. 'Do you think it'd work?'

'If you show a bit of enthusiasm it could. If you give us a bit of your material we can build a case against you. Come on, this'll be good for you. It will put you on your mettle and make you justify your position against some opposition. You never know. Something might just break for you.'

James thought about Julie and brightened a little. 'In that stimulating company it might just work.'

'There you are. You're feeling better already. Let's map it out now.' Kevin finished his meal and they discussed the mock trial and some of the charges that could be used.

* * *

Saturday 22nd April

Carindale

'Ladies and gentlemen of the court, all please rise for Judge Julie,' said Kevin rising and enjoying himself immensely. Julie made a face at her husband and seated herself at the head of the McGregor's dining room table on which Mary had arranged assorted nibblies and the crockery and cutlery that gave promise of a coffee break to

come. The four friends had spent some time after the Hilliards arrived getting their roles sorted out and agreeing on the purpose of the afternoon.

Julie Hilliard hit the table with a spoon and declared with a superior demeanour, 'The court is now in session. What is the case before us Mr Crown Prosecutor?'

Kevin sat in his chair, which was situated at the side of the table and at the end nearest his wife with sheets of paper in front of him. He looked around the group, first at James seated at the end of the table facing Julie, then at Mary seated opposite him but closer to her husband in keeping with her supportive role, then back at Julie. Using a false official type of voice he intoned, 'Your honour, the Crown representing the church authorities wishes to bring a number of charges against the defendant Mr James McGregor.'

'Bring the first charge,' ordered Julie.

'Yes, your honour. The first of many is the charge of believing and teaching polytheism. Polytheism, your honour, is the worship of many ...'

'I know what polytheism is Mr Prosecutor. Please proceed.' Julie wasn't going to let him be condescending to her, mock court or not.

'Yes, your honour.' Kevin bowed slightly with an impish grin. 'I have in my hand articles written by the defendant Mr. McGregor, showing beyond any reasonable doubt that he gives credence and validity to the worship of many different gods particularly in the religion known as Hinduism.'

Julie raised her eyebrows. 'How do you plead Mr McGregor?'

'Not guilty your honour,' James said without any facial expression.

Mary leaned close to James and whispered, 'Let me handle this one dear.' She declared, 'Your honour, my client is not guilty of this scurrilous charge. In all his articles he has always taught that all ideas about God, by whatever name He may be called, are mere reflections of the one reality behind all the different descriptions of

Him.’ Mary realised they were all looking at her in surprise and turned to James to hide her embarrassment. ‘Isn’t that right dear?’

James leant towards her and they kissed gently. ‘Quite right my pet. I couldn’t have said it better myself.’

‘Objection your honour,’ said Kevin with wide-eyed, feigned innocence. ‘The counsel for the defence is being affectionate with the defendant.’

Julie glared at Mary and James while trying unsuccessfully to keep the smile off her face and said in a deep voice, ‘Objection sustained. The counsel for the defence will refrain from kissing the defendant in public or be held in contempt.’

At that, all four burst out laughing. When she had recovered sufficiently to speak, Mary suggested that they have ten minutes recess for afternoon tea.

Julie agreed, banged her spoon on the table and declared, ‘Court stands adjourned.’

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Over afternoon tea break, Kevin and James confessed that they had set up the girls by planning the previous segment. All had gone according to plan until Mary had leaped to James’ defence. ‘You rotters. I thought I was saving you and you two had it all set up.’ Mary protested. ‘What had you planned to say?’

‘Same as you dear,’ James said with mock surprise and then smiled sweetly, ‘but it sounded better coming from you.’

‘I’m not going to say another word.’ Mary was obviously a little peeved.

Julie nodded her sympathy with her and asked sternly, ‘Do you fellows have any other little surprises for us?’

‘No. No more.’ Kevin placed his hand on his heart to indicate his sincerity. ‘James is not even sure what the other charges are going to be. He may really need your help Mary’

'I'm not sure I'll give it,' replied Mary with eyebrows raised and then a grin to show that she would.

'Well, are we ready to resume?' As Mary cleared away the afternoon tea things, Julie looked severely at the two men. 'And can you men be a bit more serious?'

Kevin bowed his head humbly. 'We'll try your honour.'

'Very well.' Julie sat erect. 'What is the next serious charge?'

'The next charge your honour, and this is very serious, is a charge of heresy against reformed, Protestant belief in salvation by faith.' Kevin turned to face the accused. 'James McGregor is accused of supporting a mysticism that is a type of self-help or do-it-yourself religion. In other words your honour, salvation by works.'

'How do you plead to this charge, Mr McGregor?'

James thought for a moment. This had obviously come as a surprise to him. He was not prepared with a ready answer although the same problem had occurred to him. Julie asked again, more gently, 'James, don't these mystics think they are gaining their salvation through their practice of meditation, by their own efforts as it were?'

'That's a good question your honour.' James looked into the distance and frowned. 'And I may be guilty.'

'James,' protested Mary indignantly. 'Shouldn't you consult with your Counsel before you admit guilt and give in without a fight?'

James came back to earth and looked at his wife. 'Sorry dear. I probably should've, but many Protestant clergy and scholars are opposed to mysticism on those very grounds. They say it is a way of attaining a vision simply through the works of contemplation, instead of receiving it by grace.'

'And you agree with them?' asked Mary. Kevin and Julie waited with bated breath. This wasn't the way the trial was supposed to go.

‘No. Come to think of it I don’t.’ James straightened as if he had received some inspiration. ‘That tends to be our belief about them but the reality is really a bit different. Even our own belief is partially incorrect. In Christianity we are exhorted to ask, to seek, to knock and also to hunger and thirst after righteousness, if we want to find faith and salvation.’

‘OK.’ Julie raised a finger. ‘As a former catholic I can relate to that but ultimately we are saved by grace aren’t we? Can the mystics say that?’

James looked directly at Julie. ‘Strangely enough, they do have a place for grace. We might believe that they attain their vision automatically through contemplation but that’s not quite true. One mystical writer argues that this particular distinction between eastern mysticism and Christian mysticism simply does not exist.’

Kevin cut in, ‘Can you expand on that statement?’

‘Yes, I can.’ James turned towards Kevin. He was grateful to Dr Gill for referring him to Evelyn Underhill. ‘According to one author, ‘the mystic’s experience seems to be given rather than attained. One of the mystics she quotes says, ‘he whom God chooses to unite with Himself ... he and no other can contemplate God.’

Kevin continued his prosecution, ‘But isn’t it only a personal God that can ‘choose’ anyone? How can an Impersonal Absolute exercise grace?’

James nodded in agreement. ‘I agree that it’s almost a personal characteristic but apparently it does seem to exercise grace.’ He raised one hand as he remembered something from Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. ‘One of the early mystics mentions some kind of movement of the ‘One’ towards the seeker. So you see, your honour, the mystical experience is not simply an automatic result of practising a technique.’

Julie replied seriously, ‘I can see that now. It probably just sounds that way because all the emphasis on postures and training of the mind.’

‘I agree, your honour.’ James’ eyes suddenly opened wider. ‘But that reminds me. There is another type of mysticism called ‘nature mysticism’ and it doesn’t involve any training of the mind.’

‘How many more types?’ Kevin asked with raised eyebrows.

‘Oh a few more.’ James folded his arms and sat back feeling more positive. ‘But I only mention this one because it’s relevant to the accusation, your honour. In this type of mysticism the experience is usually a spontaneous one, occurring with the eyes open, and not the result of following any particular technique. St. Francis of Assisi had that kind of experience.’

‘What sort of experience are we talking about here James, er Mr McGregor?’ Julie gave a deprecating laugh at her slip.

James continued. ‘With your permission your honour, I would like to read something from Caroline Jones’ book, ‘An Authentic Life’. I would regard her mystical experience as a good example of ‘Nature’ mysticism.’¹

Julie inclined her head. ‘By all means.’

James shuffled through his notes, found what he was after and read, ‘And suddenly I stopped thinking about anything and became engrossed in the rain and the leaves. ... My awareness flowed out of me and into everything around me and back again like the figure-of-eight symbol of eternity. A veil had lifted between my everyday reality and some other dimension without boundaries.’¹

Mary spoke up enthusiastically in support. ‘That doesn’t sound like she achieved the vision as a result of her own efforts.’

‘That’s true, your honour,’ said James. ‘It is the same experience of total unity described by the ‘mystics of infinity’ - the sense of unity with all creation - but the nature mystics do not attain that vision through techniques at all.’

‘No they don’t seem to.’ Julie spoke with finality. ‘And I believe we’ve heard enough for me to be able to dismiss the charge. The distinction between salvation by grace through faith in Christianity, and salvation by works in mysticism is not proven. The next charge Mr Prosecutor?’

* * *

‘The next charge relates to the biblical view of time. The defendant is accused of believing and promoting non-biblical views of time.’

‘And what exactly is the biblical view of time, Mr Prosecutor?’ Julie looked at her husband with a deceptively innocent expression.

Kevin had to think for a moment. ‘The Hebrew-Christian view your honour is the linear, horizontal view in which time moves like an arrow towards the end-time – the resurrection and the judgment day. But the defendant is always talking about the time-less nature of mystical experience.’

Julie turned to James and said pompously. ‘How do you plead Mr McGregor?’

James suppressed a smile as he replied rather slowly, ‘Not guilty your honour.’

‘I should think so,’ said Mary with some relief. She was taking this mock trial rather seriously. ‘James has never said that all mystical experience is time-less.’

‘No, your honour,’ agreed James, ‘but lately I have been coming to the conclusion that it is.’

‘James,’ protested Mary, most offended. ‘How can I help you if you keep agreeing with the prosecutor? You told me that most Christian mystics accept our Western view of time and history.’

‘Sorry, Mary.’ James looked contritely at his wife. ‘I don’t mean to be difficult but this exercise will not help me find the truth if I don’t speak the truth as I now understand it. Don’t worry. I have an ‘ace up my sleeve.’ James reached over and patted her arm reassuringly.

'I certainly hope so.' But she still looked sceptical.

James turned back to Julie. 'Your honour, Mary is quite right. At first I did say that most Christian mystics don't have a problem with our Western view of time and history. However, I have come to the conclusion that many Western mystics are influenced by orthodox beliefs. They often admit to a timeless type of experience at the time, but then they are prone to re-interpret it after the event in terms of linear, horizontal time.'

'So, Mr McGregor' said Julie in mock exasperation, 'Christian mystics do regard their contemplative experience as timeless.'

'I believe they do your honour.' James inclined his head and thought of his discussion with the young Orthodox priest. 'Sometimes they call it a foretaste of communion with God at the end of time but I see this as merely a 'linear' way of interpreting a timeless event.'

Julie tried to sum up, 'So you now believe that all the Mystics of the Negative Way have this timeless element in their experience but some Western mystics reinterpret that element because of their tradition's beliefs about linear time?'

'Yes, your honour.' James nodded smiling. 'That's exactly what I'm trying to say.'

Kevin quickly moved to capitalise on this admission. 'Your honour, we learnt in College that the biblical linear view of time is part of the revelation.'

Julie turned quickly to James. 'Do you agree with that statement Mr McGregor?'

'Your honour, I agree that that is what we were taught.' Mary groaned. James ignored her and continued, 'because those theological lecturers had not kept up with the latest scholarship. Naturally they wouldn't have had much sympathy for mysticism and its 'timeless' aspect.' Kevin looked at James in surprise at this unexpected support

for his argument. But James continued, 'For example, one scholar of that school of thought writes that a mysticism that is 'timeless' and 'non-historical' can't possibly be considered Christian.' Mary shifted position and looked pained.

'Mr McGregor,' said Julie gently. 'If the linear view of time is Biblical shouldn't we accept that as truth?'

James looked at Mary with a grin and produced his 'trump card'. 'It might be Biblical, you honour, but is it part of the revelation - the Word of God? These modern theologians, and possibly the Crown Prosecutor, are all assuming that the Biblical philosophy of time and history is an essential part of the Christian revelation when it may simply be part of the Hebraic cultural baggage.'

In her surprise, Julie forgot her role. 'What do you mean, James?'

'People say that the linear view of time must be right because it's in the Bible.' James raised his finger. 'However, according to a more recent New Testament scholar named James Barr, the Hebrew concept of time and history is not part of the Biblical revelation at all but simply the Hebrew way of looking at total reality - its world-view you might say.' Mary looked at James in admiration as he pulled out his 'ace up his sleeve' and she started to smile.

Julie summarised, 'So, in other words, the prophets and apostles received God's Word but expressed it in terms of their own world-view?'

'That's right your honour and if that is true, then we have no more right to claim 'linear' time as the correct one than the mystics have for their 'timeless' view.' James sat back and permitted himself a little smile of triumph.

Julie looked at Kevin. 'Do you concede the point, Mr Prosecutor?'

'Yes, your honour.' Kevin grinned. 'I don't agree with them either. I was just testing the defendant.'

His wife hit him over the head with a tablemat as they all rose for a break before dinner. Julie then turned to Mary, 'Could I give the baby sitter a ring and see if everything's OK?'

'Of course.' Mary pointed. 'You can use the phone in the kitchen.'

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1. Op.Cit. ABC Books Sydney, 1998, P 138.