

Chapter Seventeen

BRICK WALL

Saturday 22nd April

Carindale

‘The entrees should be ready very soon,’ announced Mary to the other three seated in the lounge. Julie had brought the entrees; Mary had precooked the main meal and had stored both in the fridge when the Hilliards had arrived in mid-afternoon. Now the entree dishes were being heated up in the McGregor’s oven.

As soon as Mary was seated, James leant forward in his chair. ‘I want to thank you all for this afternoon, especially you Julie.’ James shook his head in wonderment. ‘You’re a natural. Where’d you learn to act like that?’

Julie flushed charmingly at the compliment and waved her hand deprecatingly. ‘Oh, I did a bit of amateur theatricals in my youth, and Kevin and I both did a bit of acting while we were out west.’

Kevin smiled and nodded, ‘Yes, and the rest she got from watching courtroom dramas on TV. I think she learned a bit too well for my liking.’

James stared at Kevin. ‘What are you complaining about? You didn’t pull any punches. For a while there I thought it really was the Inquisition.’

Kevin bowed slightly as if it were a compliment. ‘As long as it was of some help to you.’

‘Oh, it helped all right, and you did a great job of setting it up.’ James turned to Julie. ‘I told Kevin, I’ve been feeling pretty depressed about my assignment.’

‘Depressed about your quest?’ quipped Kevin.

James frowned at Kevin and then brightened. 'But you've all managed to get my brain cells working again. By the way, Kevin, did you have any more charges to bring against little ol' me?' said James affecting an American southern accent.

'James,' objected Mary. 'Haven't you been through the mill enough?'

James smiled at her concern and winked at her. 'I guess I'm just a beggar for punishment.'

'Only one more actually.' Kevin cut in. 'Do you want to hear it?'

'Yes, please.' James looked sideways at Mary and lifted his arm as if to ward off a blow.

Kevin answered. 'OK. You asked for it. Don't say I didn't warn you. I was going to charge you with promoting two contradictory beliefs about God.' James stared at him. Kevin misunderstood the look. 'I told you it wasn't very good.'

'On the contrary,' objected James. 'It's spot on. I'm glad you didn't get to it because, at the moment, I would've had no answer and had to plead guilty.'

'Oh no, not again,' groaned Mary.

James turned towards her and spread his hands. 'No. He's right. That's my problem. That's where I'm at - exactly where Berger and all the other writers are - nowhere. Peter Berger decided that the gulf cannot be crossed and the seeker after truth must choose one or the other as a matter of faith.' James' frustration was showing. 'A personal God and an Impersonal Absolute are totally contradictory. The understanding that comes through the mysticism of the negative way is impersonal, atheistic and monistic. The understanding that comes through devotional piety is personal, theistic and dualistic. '

'Oh no,' groaned Kevin. 'Now he's all depressed again.'

James swung round on Kevin. 'Not depressed Kevin. Just realistic and almost ready to give up. How can both be true? They *are* irreconcilable opposites -

diametrically opposed.’ James shuffled through his papers and found what he wanted. ‘Look. I didn’t want to tell you this before because I wanted to give this afternoon every chance to get somewhere, which it did up to a point. But there seems to be no way to reconcile them. I think Yandell is right. Listen to this:

‘No one can consistently worship with Isaiah in the temple and then meditate with Shankara in the grove. Either, as a first step towards consistency, one personalises Brahman or depersonalises God, and so begins to transform one tradition into another, or one rejects at least one tradition.’¹

James waited while the quote sunk in. Kevin was the first to speak. ‘That’s sounds pretty pessimistic to me James. Aren’t you trying to discover a way to reconcile them just because it’s never been done before?’

James looked down and thought: *Maybe it’s never been done before because it can’t be done.*

‘James!’ Julie leant forward and tried to get James’s attention. ‘James! Listen. Which tradition would be more likely to give you a clue - those who only know one way, like Protestant theism or Buddhist mysticism, or...?’ She left the rest of the question hanging in the air.

James’ eyes glinted as he started to see where Julie was heading. ‘Well, Eastern orthodox knows both ways.’

Julie lowered her voice as she made an alternative suggestion. ‘What about those two Western mystical strands I researched for you - the Negative Way and the Positive way?’

Mary straightened up and asked incredulously, ‘You expect James to get a balanced answer from mystics?’

James gently placed his hand on Mary’s arm. ‘That’s not as silly as it sounds. The mystics of the Positive Way only use the mystical path as an aid to worship, so

they might be as good as any other theists for that purpose...and they understand mysticism.’ James gave a little sigh and looked back at Julie. ‘I suppose it’s worth a try. I haven’t got any other ideas. Thanks Julie.’

Mary was concerned about James’ defeatism, so out of character. ‘OK, the entrees should be ready so let’s eat.’

* * *

Sunday 23rd April

Mary woke with a start to find that James was not in bed with her. The sun was shining but it was still a bit early for either of them to be up on a Sunday morning. She waited a moment and then got up, put on a light dressing gown and went looking for him.

She found him in his study running off a copy of a file from his computer. He had searched his large file of quotes from various authors and selected a number that were relevant to his purpose and copied them to a new file. It was this new file that he was printing.

‘What are you doing, dear?’ she asked anxiously. ‘How long have you been up?’

‘Oh, about an hour. I had a headache and couldn’t sleep so I got up, took a couple of tablets and finished up in here trying out Julie’s suggestion.’

Mary felt his forehead, which was a little warm.

James turned his head quickly and looked at her. ‘Why are you doing that?’

She withdrew her hand. ‘I thought you might have a temperature. Do you have any other symptoms?’

‘Just a bit of a sore throat.’ James waved his hand dismissively. ‘It’ll go. I’ll be all right.’

She lay her hand on his shoulder affectionately. 'Are you well enough to go to church?'

'Of course. Anyway, the tablets have taken effect and I'm feeling better now.' James gestured towards the computer printout. 'I've started this exercise that Julie suggested. Do you want to hear what I've found so far?'

'The answer you're looking for I hope.' Mary settled herself on a chair beside his desk.

James turned towards her with the printed sheet in his hand. 'Not quite but I found a number of mystical theologians who accept both aspects of Ultimate Reality. One of them is a Catholic Jesuit called Karl Rahner.'² He illustrated a balance with his hands. 'He tries to combine the two types of mysticism - the one that meditates on positive images and symbols and the one that empties the mind completely.'

Mary frowned. 'The one with positive images represents our traditional worship?'

'For this purpose yes.' James sighed as he looked at the sheet. 'Unfortunately, it's not a perfect balance because he emphasises first one aspect and then the other.'

'On the one hand he says that the negative way highlights the ever-greater 'God' beyond all representation, but then, on the other hand, he says that the personal God will 'one day reveal Himself even to the pure mystic.'

Mary shrugged. 'But by exalting first one aspect and then the other he at least keeps a balance.'

'True. Better than most traditions.' James agreed reluctantly. 'But then he shows his bias when he says that the positive way of images and symbols is more in keeping with Christianity's historical character.'

She sat back despondently. 'So, at the last minute he tips the see-saw towards theism?'

‘Correct.’ James smiled at her appropriate use of her analogy. ‘Another mystical theologian who accepts the two aspects is Evelyn Underhill. She clearly distinguishes between the two mystical paths and compares them.’

Mary’s eyes lit up and she raised a finger. ‘That’s just what you need, isn’t it.’

James was encouraged by her enthusiasm. ‘It’s getting close. But she is very ambivalent. She says that the ‘dark transcendence’ reported by the mystics of the negative way - which she calls the Dionysian type - is nearest the truth of all our understandings of God. But then she says that that understanding is not very helpful for ordinary everyday life in the world.’³

Mary laughed. ‘So she admits the validity of one side but she doesn’t like it.’

He felt his spirits lift at her insight. ‘It seems a bit that way.’

She frowned. ‘But why isn’t that understanding helpful for everyday life?’

‘Possibly because, she says here, the idea of personality evaporates and loving communion is at an end.’

Mary nodded slowly. ‘That is interesting.’

‘It is. But it’s also inconsistent.’ James lifted one finger. ‘Even though she believes the impersonal aspect of Ultimate Reality is nearer to the ultimate truth metaphysically, she also believes it has serious deficiencies and prefers the interpersonal communion provided by the positive way.’

Mary shook her head. ‘And you say that’s inconsistent?’

‘Yes, because, as you said, she agrees with one but prefers the other.’

‘Oh! Yes.’ Mary narrowed her eyes. ‘That *is* strange.’

‘Then she quotes Blake’s little poem which shows the same bias.’ James read from the printed quotes.

“God appears and God is light,

To those poor souls who dwell by night;

But doth a human form display

To those who dwell in the realms of day.”³

Mary tried to sum up using both hands to illustrate. ‘So in her mind both understandings are authentic but she likes the personal more than the impersonal?’

‘It would seem so.’ Then James looked hard at the poem on the printed sheets. ‘Wait a minute. According to Blake’s poem, God chooses to appear to the different types of mystics in two different ways - in the form of light and in human form. There’s a clue there somewhere.’

‘I didn’t see that.’ She looked sad. ‘I was thinking more about the ‘poor souls who dwell by night’.’

‘Yes. That’s his bias against the negative way coming out.’ James looked down at his printed notes again. ‘Now, another writer Dean Inge has a more helpful idea on how the two aspects relate to each other. He says, ‘...the God of religion is rather the revelation than the revealer. The source of revelation cannot be revealed; the ground of knowledge cannot be known.’³

Mary shook her head. ‘That’s a bit deep.’

So James tried again. ‘Well, he’s saying that our personal God is revealed to us by the Impersonal Absolute. He is personal because he has an environment on which he acts. The Absolute is evidently super-personal.’

Mary nodded slowly. ‘That’s a bit better. But is that idea perfectly balanced?’

James shook his head. ‘I don’t think so.’ James quoted again: ‘The Absolute is super-personal. It is above and behind the personal God.’

Mary agreed. ‘Hmm. I suppose he does exalt the mystical.’

‘I’m sure he does, and if we accept both aspects of ultimate truth as valid, there is one thing I am sure of. There should be an equality of the two not a subordination of one to the other.’

She pointed to his printed notes. 'But at least all these writers are struggling with the problem of combining the two aspects, aren't they?'

'They certainly are and I suppose I shouldn't be so negative. Julie's idea was a good one. They supply helpful ideas for describing the relationship of the two aspects to each other, but all I can see in my present state of mind is that they don't make them equal.'

Mary got to her feet. 'Perhaps you should email that to Julie or give Kevin a copy.'

'Good idea.' James turned to his computer.

Mary put out her hand. 'Not now. Later. If we're going to church, we'd better have some breakfast. What do you feel like?'

James reluctantly turned away from the computer. 'Not much. Just some toast and coffee.'

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Monday 24th April

Daily Mail, Bowen Hills

The Religion Report

Last week I said I would use the analogy of a seesaw to ascertain whether the personal God or the Impersonal Absolute is the most common understanding of Ultimate Reality in the world religions. I carried out that exercise and discovered that, on the basis of one vote per tradition, it came out fairly even.

That might disturb both those who believe the personal God should be the dominant belief and those who favour the

mystical understanding. However, it backs up my new opinion that both the personal and the impersonal understandings are valid and of equal importance.

Unfortunately I have not been able to discover how these two opposites can both be true.

In the last couple of days I have examined the writings of some leading Christian mystics who believe in both aspects and have tried to relate them to each other. I was disappointed to find no agreement on the subject. Even those who try to keep the two in balance finish up showing a preference for one or the other.

I seem to have run into a brick wall. Is God both personal and impersonal at the same time or is He/It somehow above both? If anyone has any ideas as to what the next step could be, I would be pleased to hear from you.

Other items of interest in the religious media this week include ...

‘So, that’s it? You’re giving up?’ asked Peter Preston.

James smothered a sneeze and blew his nose. ‘It seems like it. I’m sorry Chief. I just don’t know where to go next.’

‘Haven’t the scholars come up with any way that people can believe in contradictory aspects of God?’ The editor seemed to be showing a little anxiety about the situation.

James decided that his assignment just had to be something personal with the Chief. He didn’t appear to have noticed James’ cold. However, the ‘quest’ had

become a matter of personal pride with James also. He hated to admit defeat in anything but he couldn't see any alternative, and in his present state he didn't feel like trying.

'Well?' asked Peter again.

'None that satisfied me but last night I read a few ideas we might find helpful.'

Peter leant forward. 'Let's hear them.'

James pulled out a somewhat crumpled set of notes. 'The first comes from Meister Eckhart. He says that God becomes and dis-becomes, coming out of the God-head and dissolving within it.'⁵

Peter screwed up his face. 'God 'becomes and dis-becomes'?'

James nodded. 'Yes. 'Coming out of the God-head and dissolving within it'.'

'A bit mind-boggling. I don't like that one. What else?'

James consulted his notes again. 'One from Rudolf Otto. He uses the analogy of a geographical feature. He suggests that the personal aspect of 'God' is 'that side of His nature that is turned manward - it is like a 'Cape of Good Hope', jutting out from a mountain range which, as it recedes, is lost to view ... only to be expressed by the suspension of speech and the inspiration of sacred song.''⁶

'Very poetical.' Peter nodded his approval.

James lifted one hand. 'But his analogy doesn't keep a balance. To me it looks like a subordination of the personal to the impersonal? You know, the personal is close while the impersonal is partly out of sight and out of reach - except to mystics we presume.'

'I suppose you're right,' Peter agreed reluctantly, 'but it was good though, wasn't it?'

'I thought so too. Nearly as good as the third one.'

'And what's the third one?' Peter leant forward eagerly.

‘It comes from a scholar by the name of E.L. Allen, a British scholar.’ James read again from his notes. ‘In trying to reconcile theism and monism he suggests that each can be seen as a particular case within the other, just as Newtonian physics has been seen as a particular case within the Theory of Relativity.’⁷

Peter shook his head. ‘I’m no scientist.’

‘Well, for example, he says the static world-view of mystical monism is a cross section of the dynamic world-view of monotheism.’

‘I like that analogy.’ Peter smiled as he nodded slowly. ‘It’s a bit like when you pause a videotape or DVD and get a still picture.’ The chief was an avid movie buff.

‘A still picture?’ James repeated, a little confused.

‘Exactly.’ Peter looked smug. ‘A static cross section.’

James saw the connection. ‘That’s right.’ *And time-less too. Maybe this analogy of the dynamic-static dichotomy is better than I thought.* But James was not ready to abandon his pessimistic mood. ‘Still, to Western ears, the concept of ‘dynamic’ will always appear to be superior to the concept of ‘static’, don’t you think?’

Peter leant forward and pointed at James. ‘Maybe it is superior. Maybe Buddhist monism is inferior to our theism, even if it is an authentic experience as you have convinced me.’ The look on James’ face showed that he was not as happy with that conclusion as his boss was but Peter Preston was content to conclude the assignment. ‘Look. If that’s as far as you can go, I - er – we’ll just have to live with that. I’ll release you from your assignment. You’ve done well and you can keep the extra hours. Now I want you to go home and try and get rid of that flu, and stop spreading germs around the office.’ So PP had noticed his condition after all but had been too caught up in the topic to stop and mention it.

‘OK. Thanks Chief. I’d better do that. Mary thinks I’m home in bed.’

‘And so you should be.’

* * *

As James made his way back to his office to pack up to go home, Janelle, the receptionist stopped him. 'James, I'm so sorry to add to your troubles you when you're not well but you should know.'

'Know what?' said James, speaking with difficulty on account of his blocked nose.

'He's rung again asking for you - just now - I told him you were not available. Then he wanted the direct number of your desk. When I wouldn't give it to him he hung up on me. I'm sure it was him.'

'Thank you Janelle.' It was starting again. Maybe it was just as well he wouldn't be writing any more provocative articles, or so he thought.

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1. K. Yandell, Religious Experience and Rational Appraisal, Religious Studies 10, 1974, P. 173-4.
1. H. Egan, Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism, 'Theological Studies' Sept. 1978, P. 106-7.
2. E. Underhill, Op.Cit., Methuen, London, 1960, P. 354-6
3. R. Inge, Mysticism in Religion, Hutchinson's University Library, London, 1947.
4. P. Berger, The Heretical Imperative, Anchor Press/Double Day, N.Y., 1979, P. 176.
5. R. Otto, The Idea of the Holy, O.U.P., London, 1923, P.203.
6. E.L. Allen, Christianity Among the Religions, Geo. Allen and Unwin, 1960, P. 150-151.