

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING

Friday 23rd June

University of Queensland, St Lucia

It was 11.30 am six weeks later and Stephanie Preston nee Edie was welcoming the radio audience back after a break for station identification and some appropriate music. ‘Welcome back to ‘Conflicting Concepts in Religion’ with Stephanie Edie. You are listening to the fourth in a series of talks with James McGregor, part-time religious journalist with the Daily Mail and a post-graduate student in Religious Studies. We have been discussing his Dual Paradigm theory of Ultimate Reality in religion as outlined in a series of articles in his weekly column in the Daily Mail. His unique theory endeavours to keep a balance between the personal and impersonal concepts of Ultimate Reality in world religions and seeks a reconciliation of theistic and mystical...’

As James listened to Stephanie’s introduction and brief recapitulation, he thought back to the first session three weeks ago and marvelled at how things had changed since that time. The decision to hold the sessions at the University in a public place like a canteen with audience participation was not unusual for the programme but it was a first for the Religious Studies Department of the University. The first session had not been well attended except for his faithful support group and Peter Preston, who was there in two capacities. Mary had taken early lunch each week to be with him and Julie had found baby sitters for the twins. Kevin, who had managed to

be there each week, had asked a couple of Dorothy Dix questions in order to make James feel more at ease.

James appreciated the support because, although he had no problem preaching to large crowds of people in front of him, he found it quite stressful to be talking to an absent radio audience. The first Friday's session had been preceded by a sleepless night, a tense stomach and a dry throat but those symptoms had decreased considerably after the first day.

Ironically he felt less at ease today because the constitution of the audience had changed dramatically. Over the first couple of weeks, lectures had still been on and the rest of the canteen had been crowded with students having late morning tea breaks or early lunch. They showed some curiosity in the proceedings but were not part of the actual audience. Today, lectures were over but word had spread and most of the crowd were there just for this last session. A student named Lachlan who had plied James with difficult questions at his tutorial on mysticism was still there as on the first day but he was no longer a problem. In the second week he had smugly thrown a few curly ones at James but James was by then far too familiar with his subject matter to be phased by him.

What made James a bit tense was the presence now of all the lecturing staff of the department including Phillip Gill and Jaclyn Sahid, people who had helped him enormously and he didn't want to let them down. They had not been there in the early sessions because of their lecturing commitments but they were there in force today. He had introduced them to his wife and friends and they were all sitting together, but he was worried that they might ask him some genuine questions he couldn't answer.

* * *

He was suddenly aware that Stephanie had finished her introduction. She turned to James and said, 'James, before the break, you were explaining your 'Dual

Paradigm' Theory of Spirituality. You said that the theism that most of us are familiar with tends to be personal, rational and assumes a 'linear' time framework but mysticism, at least the mysticism of infinity, tends to be impersonal, non-rational and is usually associated with a timelessness which you call 'vertical' time. Is that what you said?'

'I hope so,' said James with a grin as he reached for a glass of water. 'It sounds good to me.' James had learned at the first session that he had to forget about the radio audience and act as he would in a normal conversation, so he had taken his cue from Stephanie and used normal hand gestures and facial expressions. This not only ensured that his voice came over well on the air but also catered for the audience who were present.

'James, are there any other conflicting characteristics that separate theism and mysticism?'

James nodded his head. 'Yes, Stephanie. I believe there are at least two others. One author mentions the twin characteristics of 'quietism' and 'activism', and also 'being' and 'becoming'.¹

Stephanie waved a hand. 'Could you explain those two new pairs of characteristics please?'

'Of course.' James took a sip of water. 'Firstly quietism and activism. The word 'quietism' seems to be used for the meditative and contemplative life. Activism is the name given to the desire for altruism, good works and social reform. I've found that the orientation of a person towards theism or mysticism generally determines their preference for activism or contemplation.'

Stephanie turned her hand over. 'On the other hand, their preference for activism or contemplation could also give you a clue as to whether they are really a theist or a mystic?'

James laughed as he sat back. 'Yes Stephanie, but that's not always easy to determine especially for a mystic within a strongly personal tradition like Christianity. St Augustine, for example, was a tireless worker for the Church so his ranking of contemplation over activism was a difficult choice for him.'

'But he did declare that preference?'

'Eventually, yes.'

Stephanie nodded and then asked, 'Now what about the other difference – what was it – 'Being' and?'

James raised a finger. "'Being' and 'Becoming'. That one's also a good indication of a person's world-view. Christians naturally stress the process of 'becoming' - becoming Christlike, growing in grace, being sanctified, because they see time as 'linear'.'

'What about 'Being'?' asked Stephanie.

'“Being’ is the end product of ‘Becoming’ for Christians. For mystics their inner ‘being’, their intrinsic divine state, is in the present. This is because of their ‘vertical’ view of reality.'

'Like the Buddhist who discovers his Buddha nature.'

'Or the Hindu who discovers that his Atman equals Brahman.'

'Right.' Stephanie put a hand to her chin and raised an eyebrow. 'So the mystics emphasise the opposite of the theists?'

James raised a cautionary hand. 'Almost all the time, subject to the influence of their cultural traditions. I invariably found that the mystics did tend to emphasise eternity over time, contemplation over activism, 'being' over 'becoming', and of course the impersonal over the personal.'

Stephanie was puzzled. 'When you used the word mystics just now, you were referring only to the mystics of the negative way?'

‘Yes, that’s right Stephanie, the Mysticism of Infinity.’ James admitted apologetically. ‘It gets cumbersome using the full description all the time. For the purpose of my theory, I regard the mystics of the positive way, the Mystics of Personality, as theists who simply use contemplation as an aid to their personal devotion.’

She spread her hands. ‘And I suppose that theists will emphasise the opposite characteristics?’

‘Yes. Theists tend to emphasise the importance of time, activism, and becoming and, above all, the personal God.’

‘Which pair of opposites do you think are the primary ones?’

James answered. ‘I’ve tried to prove that the vertical time/ linear time dichotomy is primary and all the others flow from these.’

‘So which world-view we favour will depend on ... what exactly, our culture?’

James nodded. ‘Everyone knows that eastern religions have a predilection towards mysticism and timeless time and western culture favours theism and linear time but that doesn’t explain theists in the east and mystics in the west. They go against the trend. So I think it must depend on the particular method of being religious that we choose or are trained in – worship or contemplation.’

Stephanie lifted a finger. ‘So western mystics who would normally see the world through linear time spectacles suddenly *adopt* vertical time during their mystical contemplation?’

‘I believe that they *experience* timeless time during their contemplation,’ James corrected her, ‘and may then adopt it as their world-view as a result of their experience.’ Stephanie went to a break for station identification while James reached for his glass.

* * *

‘James, at this point I think we need to spell out very clearly the implications of what you’ve been saying so there are no misunderstandings. You say that most of the world’s religious traditions belong in one ‘camp’ or the other?’

James nodded. ‘Yes, I do.’

‘But, according to your theory, neither camp is completely correct. Neither side of these dichotomies is more important than the other. Both must be kept in balance.’ She spread her hands. ‘Doesn’t that put you offside with everyone?’

James gave a wry smile. ‘Probably. It’s not easy trying to keep a balance between the two ‘camps’ as you call them.’

‘But the fact remains that these two camps comprise the majority of religious people in the world. Each side will ask you, ‘What evidence do you have that there is any truth at all in the other world-view – that both are equally true?’

James suddenly realised that Stephanie was giving him the opportunity to set out the evidence that she had challenged him about at her home. Fortunately he had done some follow up on that and had thought it through. If only he could remember it all now he was under pressure. ‘What evidence would I give them? I have evidence on a number of levels.’ The slight, fleeting smile on Stephanie’s lips indicated that he had read her question correctly.

James continued. ‘The first level is the metaphysical level regarding the nature of Ultimate Reality – personal or impersonal. The fact that the two worldwide ‘camps’, almost equal in size, contradict each other is surely good evidence. If one of them were correct then the other half of the world would be totally wrong. That’s one reason why I believe that both understandings are true.’

Stephanie nodded and signalled for him to continue.

‘By the way, I have been reliably informed that there is a similar dichotomy in the field of Philosophy between Dualism and Monism, which terms are, I believe,

correspond very closely with the personal and impersonal respectively. Apparently it has divided Philosophy into two camps for over two thousand years.' James caught Mary's eye in the audience and shared a smile.

Stephanie brought him back to the subject. 'What other argument would you give them James?'

'Well, all those other dichotomies we were just talking about - especially time and timelessness. An over-emphasis on one side of any of them leads to a distorted view of faith and life and each side is incomplete without the other.'

'Those are certainly good reasons for keeping a balance. But what if someone from one of these camps is still not convinced?' She wasn't going to let him forget her favourite argument.

'Well,' he said with a mischievous smile. 'Maybe they'll never be convinced. You know, 'A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still''. But when he saw Stephanie's little frown of exasperation he realised that was not what Stephanie wanted to hear so he hurried on. 'But, assuming they are still open to persuasion, there is another argument we could use - the fact that we can switch back and forward between 'linear' time and 'vertical' time and still make sense of beliefs and doctrines. As the saying goes, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'.'

Stephanie nodded in satisfaction. 'Now, James, I'd like you to apply your switching technique to the question of our ultimate destiny. Is there salvation for all or only for some?'

James heard a sharp intake of breath from some members of the audience and knew he was on dangerous ground. 'That is a difficult one, Stephanie. The majority Christian belief has been that some will be saved and some will not, for all eternity.'

'And is there a *minority* Christian belief?'

James' eyes flickered to the audience. 'Another interpretation of Scripture, called 'Universalism'.'

'Is that the one that says one day, somehow, somewhere, everyone will be saved?'

'That's the one. J.A.T. Robinson sets out the doctrine in his little book, 'In the End, God'. He says that from where we stand in time the choices are very real but that ultimately, in God's time, the two streams become one and God will have the last word.'

A hostile murmur from some of the more religiously conservative students in the audience reminded James that Universalism was 'anathema' to Fundamentalists.

In order to lighten the atmosphere and get the audience on side he lifted a finger and told a story. 'Stephanie, before we go on, I remember a minister who was asked after a sermon whether he was a Universalist'. He said, 'I'm not but I think God might be.'

* * *

The audience responded with laughter and Stephanie persevered with her questions. 'Can we 'switch' on these doctrines?'

'On one of them we can. The 'Universalist' doctrine translates well because, in 'vertical' time, all are intrinsically divine, so all must be saved. But the 'some saved, some damned' view doesn't.'

'So 'Switching' doesn't work with the traditional doctrine?'

'No, it doesn't. All the other doctrines we experimented with appear to make sense in both world-views, so when one fails to translate at all, it makes me wonder about the validity of the doctrine.'

The murmur, louder this time, arose from the same quarter as before. Stephanie looked towards the audience and said pointedly, 'We will pause for questions shortly

but first James, could we have one more example - the problem of evil. For the mystics of the negative way, isn't Ultimate Reality beyond good and evil, being without personal attributes at all?

James agreed. 'That's true Stephanie. There seems to be no place for sin and evil in the mystical experience of the negative way - in the 'vertical' time world-view. They think more in terms of 'ignorance' and 'enlightenment.'

Stephanie asked, 'Is that why a mystic like Matthew Fox prefers to talk about 'original blessing' rather than 'original sin'?'

James lifted a finger. 'Yes. A very good point and that is one of his beliefs that his church is probably not happy about.'

'And what about theists?' she reminded him.

'For all Western theists anyway, in 'linear' time, sin and evil are very real. According to traditional Hebrew-Christian understanding for example, humankind is sinful and in need of redemption.'

Stephanie screwed up her face. 'So aren't these views mutually exclusive?'

'Not entirely.' James used his hands to illustrate. 'Here again, the future is the intersection point with mysticism. Christianity teaches that at the end of time or after death, we will be 'glorified' and removed from the very presence of sin and evil. The term 'glorification' could be translated roughly as 'deification' although most Christian churches seem reluctant to use that term.'

'The Eastern Orthodox Christian Church doesn't seem to have any problem with it.' Stephanie reminded him.

'No, it doesn't, and that makes sense because of its mystical emphasis. Anyway, to answer your question about reconciling, remember earlier we identified the divine, 'sin-free' state of the mystics with the future divine 'glorified' state of the Christian?'

Stephanie nodded. 'Yes, I do.'

James spread his hands. 'Well, we can switch on this one in the same way. At that future time in Christianity, evil as a personal individual tendency and a supernatural power loses its influence and its very existence - defeated once and for all by the power of good. The 'vertical' time vision during the mystical trance may well be a foretaste of that wonderful future state where we will experience union with Ultimate Reality and freedom from the very presence of evil.'

Stephanie raised a restraining hand. 'But wait a minute James. That's not as good a translation as the other one because there is nothing at all in 'vertical' time that corresponds to evil in 'linear' time.'

'You have a point, Stephanie. The two views do intersect in the future but reconciliation is not the same as 'translation' in this case. So we have to regard it as one of the important differences that Bede Griffiths was talking about, where each is true but incomplete without the other.'

'You mean like historical progress, when he said one side should take it more seriously and the other side shouldn't emphasise it so much?'

'Exactly.' James appreciated her example. 'In 'linear' time, we do experience separation from our fellows, sin in ourselves and evil in the world. This is real. If this is true for us then it should not be disparaged as an illusion by the mystics; but, on the other hand, maybe the Hebrew-Christian emphasis on sin has been a bit obsessive.'

Another indignant murmur arose from some of the students.

Stephanie frowned. 'How do you mean?'

'Well, in these days of suicidal depression and low self-esteem, maybe too much emphasis on sin and evil is counter-productive. You've read something of Matthew Fox. I think his emphasis on 'original blessing' has a bigger appeal than original sin.'

A muttered sound of approval and some clapping from another quarter greeted that comment.

Stephanie built on the mood. ‘Yes. It seems positive and uplifting to me. So again we need one view to modify the other?’

‘Yes Stephanie, that’s well put, and the best news of all is that the mystical glimpse of the future confirms and strengthens the Christian belief that ultimately evil will not exist at all and that goodness will triumph over evil in ourselves and in all creation.’

‘James that is a marvellous, positive note on which to end our series of interviews. It’s now the last opportunity to take some questions from our audience which seems to have grown over the past few weeks.’

James felt a tightening in the pit of his stomach as he looked over the audience and wondered what was in store for him.

* * *

1. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, SCM Press, London, 1971, p. 151.