

Chapter Twenty-Eight

‘AND YOU’LL ALL BE IN IT.’

Friday 23rd June

University of Queensland, St Lucia

James looked anxiously at his lecturers but none of them had yet made any move to ask a question, although a number of others had, including one about Universalism from a member of a fundamentalist Christian group. That question had turned into a one-sided tirade from the questioner and Stephanie had ruled it out of order as being a personal statement rather than a question.

The next hand up belonged to a young student James had never seen before. Stephanie waited for the roving mike to reach the would-be questioner, ‘Yes, your name please, sir?’

The questioner stood up holding the microphone. ‘Norman Brook, Arts student.’

‘Yes, Norman and what is your question for James?’

‘I would like to ask, how can you say that theism and mysticism are both true when New Age spirituality is on the rise and religion has been declining for years? Surely that shows that mysticism has more right to be true than belief in a personal God?’

‘Thank you Norman,’ said Stephanie. ‘I thought that one would come up, because there’s been a lot written lately about the rising tide of ‘Spirituality’ and the demise of organised religion. Well, James. Do you have an answer to that question?’

James wasn’t sure but he put down his glass and looked back at the questioner. ‘Norman, *some* of the traditional Christian churches or denominations are declining worldwide, but what about the rising numbers of Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches, especially in third world countries?’

Stephanie pointed at James. ‘And those churches emphasise personal, spiritual experience, don’t they?’

‘That’s true. Thank you, Stephanie. That certainly shows that theism is not dead, even in formal Christian religion. And Norman, what about other theistic religions like Islam? It’s growing not declining. And you’re not taking into account the large theistic traditions within Hinduism.’

James raised a finger as he thought of another answer. ‘All I have ever said is that, world-wide, there seems to be a roughly equal number of religious traditions in each camp. But mystical spirituality and theistic spirituality is a very individualistic thing and can exist outside of any organised religion.’

‘Ah, James.’ Stephanie cut in. ‘You’ve just applied the word ‘spirituality’ to theism.’

‘Yes, I did didn’t I?’ James raised his eyebrows. ‘Well, why should mystics and New Age devotees have a monopoly of the word? I’m sure there are many pious theists in West and East who devote themselves to private prayer and meditation and reading of their own Scriptures whatever they may be, in their worship of a personal God. Is that not individual spirituality?’

‘I’m sure it is.’ Stephanie nodded. ‘To call one spiritual and the other not, could promote the elitism that your theory precludes.’

James nodded in agreement as he picked up his glass.

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Stephanie looked back at the audience. Norman had sat down again rather reluctantly. ‘Thank you Norman for that question. We’ve time for one more. Yes, the young lady over there.’ Stephanie pointed to one of the girls in James’ tutorial group who had always an interest in James’ ideas. ‘Your name please?’

The student stood and waited till she received the microphone. ‘Helen Grant, Religious Studies. James, do you think a synthesis or union of the two points of view could ever be worked out?’

James sat forward and looked at his class mate. ‘I don’t know about a synthesis, Helen, but in time maybe a complete harmonisation could be worked out, similar to what we’ve been trying to do using the ‘switching technique’. One difficulty though in achieving a complete reconciliation is that for a tradition like Hinduism conflicting doctrines are not a problem.’

‘What about the union part of the question?’ Stephanie smiled at the student who resumed her seat.

‘A union between Theism and Mysticism?’ James shook his head. ‘Well, we’ve seen how hard it is for the two strands to co-exist in the one religion without one being subjugated to the other.’

‘What about individuals?’ Stephanie reminded him.

‘I think we’ve shown today how individuals can operate from two world-views - at least in their minds.’

‘By switching back and forward, yes,’ said Stephanie, ‘but do you think it’s practicable for a person to belong physically to a theistic group and a mystical group at the same time?’

James couldn’t help smiling at this Dorothy Dix question from Stephanie but only the Prestons knew why he smiled. ‘I think it might be possible if they kept in contact with both as some couples do who belong to different Christian denominations. But a union or amalgamation of a Theistic tradition and a Mystical tradition seems unlikely to me in the near future. Organisations become resistant to change over time and tend to protect their own way of being religious.’

‘Do you think then that maybe Yandell is right when it comes to groups?’ Stephanie raised one eyebrow. ‘Is it really possible for the same group of people to ‘worship with Isaiah in the temple and meditate with Shankara in the grove’?’

James smiled at Stephanie’s fondness for his favourite quote. ‘I think it would be very confusing for a church denomination or religion to give exactly equal emphasis to the two traditions. The Catholic Church contains both traditions within its bounds but the impersonal is usually subordinated.’

Stephanie raised her eyebrows. ‘What about the Orthodox Church?’

James pursed his lips. He had forgotten about the Orthodox Church. ‘Of course, the Orthodox would have to be the closest to that ideal.’ He had to admit. ‘But I’m still pessimistic.’

Stephanie wasn’t about to give up. ‘But books and articles like yours may help to bring about an equal emphasis one day?’

James sighed. ‘One day maybe, but when I outlined my theory in my column I got a furious reaction from a Jesuit academic mystic on one side and a conservative Christian clergyman on the other.’

Stephanie gave a reassuring smile. ‘James, if those on both extremes oppose you, you must surely be on the right track?’

‘I’d like to think so Stephanie but it doesn’t augur well for possible unions in the near future.’

Stephanie saw by the clock beside her that it was almost time to wind up the session and she wanted to finish on a positive note. ‘Yes, it could be a long time coming but, according to you, all conflict will eventually be non-existent.’

James nodded a little reluctantly and felt a little foolish. ‘Thanks for reminding me Stephanie.’

‘And thank you James, for coming on my programme these last four weeks. You have taken me on some journeys of thought that I’ve never travelled before.’

‘It’s been a pleasure Stephanie,’ answered James, formally but not altogether truthfully, as it had been quite nerve-wracking.

Stephanie spoke to the radio audience. ‘You have been listening to the last of our four interviews with James McGregor, a religious scholar and author of a newspaper column on world religions. We have been looking at the real possibility of a common reality behind all world religions. This is Stephanie Edie inviting you to join me next week for another edition of ‘Conflicting Concepts in Religion’. Goodnight.’

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Stephanie turned off her microphone, looked at the audience and thanked them all for coming. Then she rose from her seat, shook hands with James, and congratulated him on another good interview. The audience broke into spontaneous applause and then began to disperse. Some moved to the counter to order lunch but the majority converged on the front dais in the front where James and Stephanie were standing.

The first person to reach James and shake his hand was Phillip Gill, James' supervisor. 'Congratulations James. Well done. I was very proud of you.'

James' face lit up. 'Well, thank you Phillip. You had an awful lot to do with it.'

Dr Gill looked at his watch. 'I have to go James but I'll see you at our next interview.'

Jaelyn Sahid had been standing directly behind Phillip Gill in the queue that was forming and she now grasped James' hand in both of hers and smiled warmly and proudly. 'O how you've grown in wisdom James, since our early talks. Next semester I hope you'll drop by for another chat, just to catch up.'

'Thank you Jaelyn. I'll look forward to it.' James saw Kevin smirking at the end of the queue and flushed a little. Dr Sahid's long red hair swirled as she turned quickly and walked away.

Dr Rossiter had left the canteen but not before he had caught James' eye and given him the thumbs up sign of approval. The other lecturers had also left along with most of his fellow students. James was surprised and pleased when Helen Grant came forward as Mary and the others made way for her. As she shyly offered her hand James spoke first. 'Thank you Helen for that terrific question. Anyone would think I'd put you up to it.'

Helen smiled but seemed a little miffed. 'No one put me up to it James. I've been reading your articles and I really wanted to know the answer.'

James felt a little embarrassed and said apologetically, 'I'm delighted on both counts Helen and thanks again.'

Mary was next in line and she just gave him a hug. 'How do you feel?'

'Relieved and totally exhausted. That was nerve racking. I could do with a cup of coffee.'

Julie, who was standing behind Mary, heard him and chimed in eagerly, 'I'll get you one. Black with no sugar, right?'

'That'll be just fine, Julie.'

Mary felt uncomfortable about Julie's quick attention to James' needs but probably partly because she hadn't offered first. 'You did well dear. It sounded as if you really knew your stuff.'

‘Thanks.’ James gave her an appreciative squeeze around the waist. ‘Are Stephanie and Peter having lunch with us?’

Mary looked around. ‘Kevin asked Peter but we don’t know about Stephanie.’

James called out to Stephanie who was helping the staff to gather up the equipment, ‘Steph, can you stay and have lunch with us?’

‘Certainly James. Thank you.’ Stephanie replied from across the room. ‘Give me five minutes to get cleared away here.’

‘OK. See you soon.’ James and Mary stepped off the dais. Kevin was arranging the tables so they could all sit together.

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Kevin had organised the seating very carefully and James was seated at one end of the combined tables, the ‘head of the table’ as Kevin called it in honour of James’ celebrity status. Julie and Kevin had taken orders and brought the meals to the tables. Kevin was seated at the other end opposite James. As soon as everyone was settled and eating Kevin looked at James and said, ‘Congratulations James and please accept my apologies for not saying it earlier but I couldn’t get through your fan club. Did anyone ask you for your autograph?’

James almost choked on his first mouthful and cast his eyes to the heavens. ‘No, but thanks for your congratulations. Remember I had a lot of help along the way.’

‘Of course you did. If we hadn’t given you a hard time at the support group meetings you’d have fallen to pieces in the first session.’

Julie on Kevin’s left protested. ‘Don’t be silly Kevin. He didn’t really need us.’

‘Oh yes I did Julie.’ James objected. Those meetings were good practice for these interviews.’ He looked at Stephanie. ‘Stephanie was on my side but that Lachlan could have thrown me completely in the second session.’

‘I thought you handled him very well James,’ Stephanie on his left leant slightly towards him and patted him on the arm. ‘What are you going to do for an encore?’

Kevin saw a chance to pay out on James and interrupted. 'Don't encourage him too much Stephanie. He'll get a swelled head. He's already had his article accepted for publication - only because of the publicity you've given him.'

'Not so Kevin. I'm sure he would've got it on his own merits.' Stephanie put her cutlery down and gave a clap. 'But good for you James. When does it come out?'

'Oh, not until next February, but while we're giving credit I'd like to thank the Chief for giving me the assignment. That's what started it all.'

Peter Preston had been concentrating on his food, listening but saying nothing. It was difficult to break into a group that had got to know one other very well over a period. Nevertheless, he appreciated being drawn into the conversation. 'That's OK James.' He looked around the group, spread his hands and said, 'I like my journalists to be thorough in their investigations but signing up for a Master's Degree was a bit 'above and beyond the call of duty' don't you think?'

Everyone laughed and James made a mock, self-deprecating gesture but Mary reached to her left, laid her hand on James' arm and said, 'James never does anything by halves - unfortunately in some ways.'

'What do you mean, unfortunately?' asked Kevin. 'He's made a real breakthrough in the academic study of world religions. He's gone where no one has gone before.'

'I was referring to his career move.'

Kevin looked at James anxiously and flicked his eyes sideways at James' boss, but James waved his hand reassuringly. 'It's all right Kevin. I've told the Chief. Actually he had been suggesting the idea to me.'

'That was a novel way of getting rid of you,' said Kevin winking at Peter.

'How do you put up with this man, James?' asked Peter, pointing to Kevin.

'With great difficulty Peter,' replied James with a smile.

'What are you all talking about?' asked Stephanie, looking at her husband.

'I'm sorry dear. I haven't had a chance to tell you. James will be leaving my employ to go into a parish.'

‘Yes, Stephanie,’ said Kevin. ‘He has been invited to join the ministry team at St Andrews United Inner-city Church in a few months, isn’t it James?’

‘Yes. From the first of October.’

‘Oh! I’m so pleased for you, James. Are you happy about that Mary?’ asked Stephanie.

‘Oh yes,’ said Mary seemingly resigned to her fate. ‘As soon as he got back into religious studies I knew it was only a matter of time.’ Then she realised the significance of her choice of words. ‘...in more ways than one.’

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Julie leaned towards Mary. ‘At least being in the city you won’t have to give up your job and go out west as I did.’

‘That’s true, but I’ll have to give up my job eventually.’

‘Why?’ asked Julie in surprise. Then realisation dawned and she said, ‘Oh!’.

‘Yes.’ Mary nodded. ‘James’ article is not the only thing due in February,’ she said enigmatically. The others all looked at her expectantly. ‘That’s when the baby’s due.’ She smiled as she saw the pleased reaction of the group.

‘Wonderful,’ thought Julie, sure that the new arrival would bring them closer together and hopefully resolve the tension that seemed to have grown up between them. That made her think of another possible source of tension and she frowned as she looked at James. ‘But James, tell me something. How can you go back to the ministry now, when you were too radical for the Church back then?’

James finished his meal and pushed his plate away. He looked at Julie. ‘That’s a very good question. The Lord works in mysterious ways Julie. I realise now that I was too literal in my understanding of church doctrine. I’m not so intolerant of the church’s foibles now.’

‘But the Church mightn’t be tolerant of yours,’ said Kevin with his finger raised.

‘Good point,’ agreed James, ‘but I know that there are other ministers like you who have similar problems but manage to stay in the ministry.’

Julie looked at James. 'But are you going to preach the sort of Pluralism you expounded on air?'

'In the pulpit I'm prepared to preach the Inclusivism that I find in the Scriptures. Then, when people have got to know me, I'll move on to more radical issues but probably not in the pulpit. Someone once said to me, 'don't knock all the stumps from under their houses at once. One at a time is enough.'

Kevin shook his head. 'I don't know how he'd survive in a conservative country parish, this lad with his way-out ideas but at least he'll be in a city parish. They're usually more open to the latest scholarship.'

Stephanie asked, 'What about your Dual Paradigm Theory, James? Will you have to put that aside too?'

'No Stephanie. Actually, that's one of the main reasons I'm going back - to use it in ordinary preparation for preaching. I want to do some 'switching' and bring some mystical interpretation into my preaching when the passage lends itself to it.'

'Lord help him,' said Kevin. 'He's going to be crucified.'

'That's what worries me,' said Mary, 'but he says, 'that's what they did to the Lord'.'

James leant over and put his hand round Mary's shoulder, 'But I have something Jesus didn't have - a long-suffering and understanding wife.'

Again everyone laughed except Mary who rolled her eyes and made a funny face.

Kevin asked, 'How will you finish your Master's, James?'

'I'll finish this year full-time and then take two years to do the second year. Phillip said there would be no problem there.'

Stephanie was still not satisfied. 'But what about the book I thought you were going to write?'

James thought for a minute and then said. 'I could use the Master's thesis as the basis for a book.'

‘That could be a bit deep for us ordinary folk,’ Mary suggested. ‘I know. Why don’t you write it as a novel – the story of how you discovered the theory?’

‘What a good idea.’ James straightened up with a broad smile. ‘I might just do that, eventually. And, seeing you all had a part in it, you’ll all be in it.’

‘Good.’ Kevin sat up straight. ‘We’ll all be famous.’ Then he looked hard at James. ‘What will you call the book? The Dual Paradigm Theory? I like that title.’

‘You would, Kevin.’ James snorted. ‘You helped make it up.’

Kevin waved deprecatingly. ‘Well, what *will* you call it?’

‘In science there is something called a ‘Unified Field Theory’ - a kind of T.O.E. - Theory of Everything. How would that be?’

‘Too technical,’ objected Mary. ‘Not everyone’s a science buff like you.’

‘I agree with that,’ said Peter, glad to be able to contribute something to the discussion.

‘Then how about ‘The Unified Theory of Spirituality,’ suggested Stephanie.

‘Spot on,’ said James. ‘Thank you Stephanie. I’ll dedicate the title to you.’

Kevin raised his glass of orange juice. ‘Here’s to James and Mary and their new ministry. May God go with you both.’

‘Amen,’ chorused the others as they raised their glasses.

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