MR PICKWICK

Mr Pickwick was born in Kent, England, to wealthy parents. He was their only child, which was fortunate as from the day of his birth he was a very picky character. He refused his mother Margaret's breast, that of a wet nurse, all the milk formulas and even cow's milk. When he was at death's door, Doctor Soames suggested trying a mixture of his Mama's milk and a formula. It worked and baby James survived. Of course, there was the same problem when he was four months old and put on solids. He turned his head away and yelled or spat it out. His parents were frantic until they found he preferred ice cream, crispy bread rolls, tomato sauce, chicken, scones with butter, cream and strawberry jam and a tiny sip of Papa's finest champagne to all the good things babies were supposed to eat.

When his Mama pushed him in his pram in the park, she often stopped to talk to friends. The babies, sitting in their prams looked at each other. James yelled immediately and the mamas had to part. Mama complained bitterly to Papa when she returned. "I have no friends anymore. I must steer clear of everybody with a baby in a pram, and I can't even

ask my old friends to tea unless I put James in his playpen in another room." However, one day a miracle happened when Mama inadvertently met an old friend in the park. James beamed and held out his hand to try and touch baby Alan in the next pram. He had found his friend for life! Although they had different ideas about almost everything, their friendship endured.

Both boys were intelligent and vied for top place in their class. They attended a Diocesan school. Scripture lessons were optional, and Alan soon became a fervent Christian, loving and serving the Lord Jesus Christ throughout his life, marrying a Christian and raising a God-fearing family. James opted out - not even giving the Scripture class a minute of his precious time which was a tragic decision.

Alan was gregarious and had many friends while James was lonely. He watched Alan playing with his friends in the fields near the village, jumping over rocks in the little stream and splashing one another, shrieking with laughter. James sat

on a boulder, watched, and sulked. When they were eighteen, they enrolled at Oxford. James chose to major in History, and Alan in Law. During this time Alan had many girlfriends, first there was Mary, then Carol, then Susie, then Agatha, then Jean, and finally Ishbel whom he married. James had no girlfriends. The idea of holding a girl in his arms while dancing, simply horrified him. When Alan and Ishbel married, James was their groomsman. The happy couple flew to South Africa for their honeymoon, and shortly afterwards Albert, Egbert and Herbert made their appearance. James loved them and spoilt them rotten.

Alan had proven to be an exceptional lawyer, then a sought-after advocate, and there was even speculation that he would soon be appointed as a judge. With his promotions he had been able to buy an attractive house in Richmond with a large garden that ran down to the Thames. James lived at home. It suited him very well. He had graduated cum laude from Oxford, did not need to earn a living, and indulged himself by buying books on many subjects. He was especially interested in religion although he had no

religious beliefs of his own. Because of that, he began to study Atheism.

He had a large study in the house. It had many empty bookshelves that were soon to be filled. One of his greatest pleasures was buying books. Browsing in his favourite bookshop for books about atheism in Oxford, he found a huge selection. There was Sigmund Freud's THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS, THE PORTABLE ATHEIST and THE EGO AND THE ID and many more, but James was satisfied. He prided himself on being able to spot a good book. Then he turned to the Karl Marx section, quickly choosing CAPITAL: A CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMICS and finally, he chose three books by Richard Dawkins: THE GOD DELUSION, THE MAGIC OF REALITY and THE SELFISH GENE. James caught the bus home feeling very pleased and looking forward to reading them.

Every day after breakfast James read a book and thought about it long and hard, the next day, jotting down his

thoughts and discarding them. He finally decided he was not an atheist. “Look at the flowers in our garden, and the sky,” he said to his Mama, and pondered about his next quest.

After breakfast the next morning, he settled himself in the summerhouse, chose his book for the day, arranged his pens of different colours. It was not long before his peace was disturbed. “Hi James,” said Alan, “sorry I have not seen you for some weeks, but I have been terribly busy at work.” “No matter,” replied James, “super that you made it.” “I’m searching for meaning in life, so I started on Atheism but discarded it. You only have to look at these flowerbeds and all the bees and butterflies buzzing over them, and at humans, wonderfully made!” Alan looked at him quizzically, “Come to St Peter’s with us,” he said. James laughed. “I won’t go to church, but I am longing to see the boys!

James thought that he should consider world religions. There was a lovely ceramic statuette of a female Hindu god which his father had given his mother some years ago on an antique table in the entrance hall. He glanced at it as he went into the garden, and found his first world religion, HINDUISM! Hurriedly returning to his study, he started Googling. He found that Hinduism began about 1500 BCE and there were many branches of it. Leading exponents of it appeared in the 8th, 10th, 11th, and 12thc BCE. The first was Shankaracharya, the second was Ramanuja and the third was Madhva.

James hurriedly grabbed his shopping bag; some cash and his credit card. “Bye, Mama!” he shouted as he passed her in the front garden. “I’m off to Waterstones.” It didn’t take him long to buy all nine books by the leading exponents of Hinduism. He stopped at Mark’s and Spencer’s and bought a large cheesecake for afternoon tea. It was the family’s favourite. After lunch, he took Shankaracharya’s book and his pencils into the summer house, when Alan arrived. “Hi James,” he said, “your Papa said you were here.” “Great to

see you, Alan," James responded. Alan picked up the book. "So, you are into Hinduism now?" he asked with a quizzical smile. What's next?" "Confucianism and Secularism," said James. "And don't forget to end with Christianity!" said Alan.

Hinduism arrived sooner than James expected. He had googled some more and found there were more than 330 million gods, and that it was a poly-theistic religion, and people worshipped their favourite god. All the gods had different looks, for example, Brahma, the god of creation, was an old man with four heads and four arms and his skin was red. Shiva had a white head, blue neck and his hair was a matted coil of locks. James tried to find a theology but there was none, only a list of what these gods were gods of and what they looked like. He thought it was just a huge library of fairytales. He rejected it for himself for these reasons, and turned to Buddhism, the next world religion on his list.

When James decided to study Buddhism, he started Googling Buddhism and found that it originated in India 2,500 years ago and is one of the world's largest religions. It has since spread to many other countries. Buddhists believe in the reincarnation of the soul, and that by following the teachings of Buddha people can reach an enlightened state called Nirvana.

Buddhism encompasses the ultimate phenomena of which the universe is composed but it also means truth or reality as expressed by Buddha. He taught that life involves unsatisfactoriness, suffering and stress. If one made enough effort, one could be liberated from this. Buddhist monks live a simple, meditative life of poverty, studying Buddhist doctrines, meditating and being an example to their lay followers. They are celibate, wear red, grey or black garments, shave their heads, have few possessions and never embrace a female. Monks live in simple, silent and solitary lodgings, are forbidden to use high luxurious beds or chairs and they sleep on the floor on mats. Only thin blankets are allowed. They carry bowls in the streets

begging for alms. James shuddered. He could not imagine living such a spartan life! And so, he did not visit Waterstones.

It was as warm spring morning. The daffodils in the garden were in full bloom. “Just the day for Easter shopping!” James said to himself. He caught the bus to Fortnum and Mason’s where he found this year’s selection of Easter eggs, beautifully boxed and trimmed with ribbon. He bought eight. One each for Papa and Mama, James and Isabel, Albert, Egbert, and Hubert, and one for himself. Chocolate was an addiction as far as he was concerned. This year’s selection of large Easter eggs was filled with small Easter eggs with a variety of fillings. James chose individual gift-wrapping papers and asked that they be delivered to his home.

The next category on his world religions, was Confucianism. James knew nothing about it and started Googling and found that it began in the 6$^{th}$- 5$^{th}$ centuries BC

in China. It was a social and ethical philosophy propounded and developed by Confucius. He believed that a perfect society could be created by people behaving properly towards each other. James thought wryly about his history major at Oxford, and of the endless wars over the ages, and he stopped Googling.

James, having majored in History at Oxford, knew a lot about Secularism. He had even researched and written learned articles on the subject. He wholeheartedly agreed with the common view that Secularism is a belief system that religion should not be part of the affairs of the state or part of public education. He also agreed that religious freedom was guaranteed, that government should not fund religious institutions like church schools or church hospitals and charitable organizations. James considered himself to be a secularist, but was still bent on finding meaning in life, so he turned to Christianity.

James, of course, knew a lot about Christianity. As a history major, he had read and written much about it because from

Christ's birth right up to the present day, it had been tremendously important with the persecution of it, victims dying for it, wars fought over it, churches split over it, and yet it continued to grow and thrive throughout the world. However, it had never touched him personally. Christmas was the time for decorating the house, lighting the Christmas tree, of feasting on turkey and gammon, of drinking Papa's finest French wines, of family coming for a week's stay and presents, while Easter was all about chocolate bunnies and Easter eggs. Of course, Alan had told him how he and his family celebrated Christmas and Easter, and had often invited him to church services. But James never went. He knew exactly what Alan, Ishbel, Albert, Hubert and Egbert believed.

Because he had promised Alan that he would conclude his search for the meaning of Christianity in his life, he set off one day to visit Waterstones. As he knew from his student days, there were rows upon rows of shelves about it, and he had many books in his study. Today, however, he was looking for a different type of book – books written by

prominent authors explaining their personal faith. He asked an assistant to help him. “I’m a Christian, sir,” he said. “You can’t do better than John Stott’s BASIC CHRISTIANITY, it has been one of the best sellers for years! Stott was also voted by Time Magazine as one of the hundred most influential people in the world in this century. Do you know that church at the top of Regent Street with the Gothic tower? He is the Rector, and I am a member.” James took a copy. “And here,” said Timothy because they were now on friendly terms, “is a small booklet written by Nicky Gumbel who was a well-known barrister in London. He was a Jew and when converted studied for the Anglican ministry. He was ordained and became the Rector of Holy Trinity Brompton.” Handing James a copy of the small red covered booklet, he said, “it’s free.” “Thanks Timothy,” said James shaking his hand, “this has been a most productive visit.”

James spent the next two months reading and re-reading BASIC CHRISTIANITY and WHY JESUS. There was much underlining in different colours as he leant back on his seat in the summerhouse and pondered. One Sunday morning,

he said to his bemused parents, “I’m going to church.” He set off for All Souls’ Langham place, and unexpectedly met Timothy in the street outside. “Hi James,” he said shaking his hand, “Great to see you! Come and sit with me in the Gallery.” They climbed the spiral staircase and sat on a tier facing a magnificent painting of Jesus Christ knocking on a door. “That’s Christ,” explained Timothy, “as he knocks on every one’s door to ask them to open the door of their hearts and let him in.” The gallery was soon filled with eager, chatting young men and women. “Most of them are at university in London and some are foreigners.” said Timothy. “They were brought to church and became Christians. One day they will return to their homes as living witnesses to their Lord and Master.” Many elder people quickly filled the rows of chairs, divided by a central aisle. ‘It’s sometimes hard to find a seat because so many people visit to hear John Stott preach. Fortunately, there is a large hall underneath with a wide screen and after the service people can meet John Scott. Many ask him to sign BASIC CHRISTIANITY which they have bought in the bookshop next door. There’s a wide selection of his best books there,

so don't go to Waterstones!" The organist played voluntaries as the church filled and then the service began. The first hymn was Immortal Invisible, God only wise. The Curate led the service and after Bible readings by a woman and a man, John Stott rose to preach standing before a lectern. "My text today comes from the Gospel according to Saint John, chapter 3, verses 16 and 17: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." He preached a very logical sermon on these two most important texts in the Bible. Then he said, "I have a strong feeling that there is someone here who is a sinner like all of us were, and who will be saved like we were through confessing his or her sin. Please come so I can bless you on your onward Christian journey." James rose, and climbed down the spiral staircase into the church, and walked down the aisle to John Stott who placed his hands on his head as he knelt before him, and said, "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine

upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace." After a final hymn James followed John Stott to the church doors and was warmly greeted by his fellow Christians. Timothy gave him a hug and said, "God bless you, James." He reached home in time for Sunday roast. "Papa and Mama," he said, "I have some wonderful news! I have solved my quest for meaning in life! I have found mine. I am a Christian and feel called to be a minister and serve in parishes all my life.

Alan and his family were thrilled. "You will need a wife in a parish!" laughed Alan. James enrolled in a theological college in Oxford and obtained his Bachelor of Divinity. During vacations he went home. His first converts were his dear Papa and Mama, and Alan introduced him to Emma. It was love at first sight and they were married after he graduated.