

## Mark Roques Interview

### Laughter, Sex and the Life Beyond - How we've been led astray by the Brainy Greek Boffin to seek the Perfect Crisp..

After Mark Roques' first interview "Hallowed be Thy Game!", interviewer Bruce Wearne decided to keep asking questions of this renowned story-teller that prodded him to discuss philosophy. Mark in this interview gives answers to some strange, even crazy, questions that are designed to appeal to younger people. As a senior high-school teacher Mark Roques has lots to say to young people and he's learned a lot from his teaching, too.

BCW: Mark, it seems to me that you love nothing better than to tell a good story. And it seems your preferred audience is young people. Why is that?

Mark: Well Bruce I love to get young people giggling and smiling. I like to combine entertainment with learning and a powerful, dramatic story is always a great place to begin. For example Hetty Green was an extremely mean millionaire who worshipped the false god – Mammon. She had terrible body odor and bad breath because she refused to spend any money on hot water, toothpaste and soap. She spent an entire night searching for a missing one-cent stamp and yet when she died in 1916 she was worth a staggering \$100 million. Kids love talking about mad, eccentric people and you can learn a lot by thinking about their lives.

BCW: If not interrupting your classes with loud cackles. So tell our readers, what have you learned over the years from young English people?

Mark: I've learned that our educational system in England does not teach young people to engage with important religious and philosophical issues but when they get the opportunity they love debating and discussing the big ideas. Our secular educational system stops them engaging with the really important topics. In my opinion young British people leave school knowing almost nothing! This is all part of what I call the commodification of knowledge. Young people only remember things in order to pass exams and then they forget what they've learned. Knowledge has been reduced to information which can help you to become rich. We study a subject in order to get a good job. Picture it – a kid puts up his hand and asks – "Why are we studying Chemistry?" And the teacher says – "One day you might become a window cleaner and you will need to know about chemicals etc."

BCW: Commodification?

Mark:: The perfect story to illustrate commodification is the story of a 13 year old Thai girl who was sold by her father to a brothel in Bangkok because he wanted to buy a fridge! This girl has become a thing. She has been turned into a commodity....an economic object. In England many companies talk about people as 'human resources'. This is a form of economic idolatry and young people need to understand it. Hetty Green stunk and so too does this form of modern secular idolatry!

Bruce : So what needs to change mate?

Mark: We need to reinchant the world for young people and that's where we need to rediscover the wonderful biblical teaching about God creating whales to frolic in the ocean (Psalm 104). They're not just future bars of soap for greedy consumers, Bruce me old mucker.

BCW: Well it is a gift to see God's glory in his creation isn't it?

Mark: What really makes me grin and chuckle is the biblical idea that creation reveals God's glory. Psalm 19 communicates this theme brilliantly. I'm bustin' to come out to the southern hemisphere to see what He has done 'down under' and in the friendly isles, Fiji. When we consider God's work in creation we should be overwhelmed by God's wisdom and power. Take squirrels - they're cheeky blighters and they tell us something about God's love affair with this amazing cosmos. When I was fourteen I fed some grey squirrels some digestive biscuits and they almost bit my hand off! What a memory I will always treasure!

BCW: You discussed this biblical theme in your TV interview by mentioning the audacious scorpion kick that was performed by the goalkeeper Rene Higuita when playing for Colombia against England in 1995. Higuita dived forward and cleared the ball with his heels!

Mark: I remember discussing that marvellous moment with a class of 15 year olds and I told them how much God loved that explosion of sheer audacity and invention. "At last someone has done it – that's the scorpion kick." God probably whispered something like that to one of the seraphs.

BCW: You really think God is interested in scorpion kicks on the football field?

Mark: Absolutely Bruce me old cockerspaniel - God delights in everything he has created. The earth is full of his glory. This includes crocodiles and ferrets but it also involves human cultural formation – singing, tap-dancing and making chocolate!

BCW: So He's also interested in our laughter?

Mark: Of course He is me old porkpie. Humour is just one of the many ways in which we open up the hidden potential of the earth. Just look at the duckbilled platypus and you have to understand God's comic genius! Humour can be full of sin, cruelty and idolatry but it doesn't have to be. Humour can be a wonderful gift from the Lord if used as an expression of love and service.

Bruce : Last time we touched briefly on cartoons to discuss the world-wide media frenzy about the Danish article back in September.

Mark: Yes Bruce - I replied by referring briefly to the Bible's use of comedy. Readers should check out Proverbs 26 verses 13-16 which is one of my favourites. The idea of the lazy loafer who pretends to himself that the streets are crawling with lions and cannot even lift a jam sandwich to his lips – this opens up sloth in a delightfully quirky and comical manner.

BCW: What about laughter and funny stories? How are we to develop these gifts? Surely we have to restrain ourselves from laughing too much or hurting others with our jokes! How can story-telling be an important part of our daily life?

Mark: Well me old chocolate chicken there is a relentlessly frivolous comedy which leaves me cold. Comedy is like any other sphere of life Bruce – it's fallen and in desperate need of redemption. Putting my point in a slightly different way – we don't give up on a marriage just because it is drenched in sin and hardness of heart. We pray that the marriage will be put right.

BCW: So, as with marriage, it has to be worked at - we have to show up every day and repent and keep working. Is it the same with humour?

Mark: Exactly the same is true with comedy Bruce. There is a great deal of comedy that is saturated with sin but to reject humour per se is a dangerous form of otherworldly claptrap. My daughter Hannah loves it when I do my impressions of the crazy people I have had the good fortune to meet. This is part and parcel of enjoying God's world in a redeemed way. Eliminate humour and imagination from life and we begin to resemble the Pharisees who prevented people from entering the Kingdom of God.

BCW: And those who are always frowning at humour are very funny - they are like a standing joke which everyone knows except them!

Mark: Humour is a gift from the Supreme Gaffer and we can develop this gift in obedience to the Almighty or we can pervert and ruin this 'little beauty' to use Steve Irwin's expression - By the way I'm a big fan of Steve Irwin. He has this infectious enthusiasm for snakes, lizards and crocodiles which reinchants reality for all of us. I love the passage in Genesis where Adam is naming the animals. I can picture the monkeys screaming with laughter as the elephants break wind very loudly. Just look at the rhino and you have to smile. The Garden of Eden was just bursting with this goodness and smiling and laughing is one way of responding to this extravagance.

BCW: Yes, Irwin's humour is very educational. Which reminds me, animals are great for humour and humorous teaching aren't they?

Mark: Wherever we live God sometimes brings special creatures very close to our front doors. You must know this living near the Southern Ocean and Fijians are never far from it as well. In England we have very few creatures when I think about Australia and Fiji. You have so many critters and so many opportunities to praise God. We have squirrels and they make me laugh but not too much besides.

BCW: It's interesting isn't it that we can use animals in our stories - Eeyore in Winnie the Pooh - and we can laugh at them but who's going to report us to the RSPCA? We can laugh at animals in our stories. What is it about animals that makes them such good characters?

Mark: We all know that children love stories about elephants (Babar), and whales (Free Willy). When we tell stories about dolphins who rescue people from drowning at sea, people come alive. You can't stop them talking! For me this must be connected to our stewardship of the world. We were supposed to look after the world (Genesis 2:15) and we catch glimpses in the book of Isaiah of children playing with snakes and lions (Isaiah 11). We desperately need to integrate animals into the future bliss of heaven on earth. Bruce - what will it be like to slide down the neck of a brontosaurus in the age to come? I don't know about you mate but I'm looking forward to it. Imagine sipping a glass of wine and talking to a twenty foot salt-water croc. Beat that mate!

BCW: Now the Kingdom of God is not all laughter, nor is it all tears.

Mark: The Kingdom of God, Bruce m' ole goal-keeper, brings us both great joy and great sadness. We don't have to choose between relentless austerity and relentless frivolity. We can laugh and cry...reaching out to the joy and the sadness. In my opinion redemptive story telling will make people laugh and then move them to tears.

BCW: Tell us about your joys and tears in your work with WYSOCS. What's the idea?

Mark: I can't speak for Fiji and Australia me old China but in England we are experiencing a crisis with our young people. Recent research by Dr. David Voas of Manchester University suggests that Christian belief in the UK is in terminal decline. Christian parents are only 50% successful in passing on their religious convictions to their children. Staggeringly parents with secular beliefs are completely successful in passing on their unbelief to their offspring. At WYSOCS we are desperate to equip young people with a confident faith which is articulate and intelligent. We believe that it's vital to have a comprehensive Christian worldview which goes way beyond the personal and the activities we associate with church. For example Christians must be able to respond intelligently to aggressive atheists and New Age devotees. At the moment the vast majority of Christian young people are completely unable to do this. It's a spiritual nightmare.

BCW: You also discuss the history of philosophy quite a lot - in Fields of God you refer to the Greek Boffin, Plato. Who was this guy Plato? Is he important? Can someone from 430-350 BC still have an impact on the way we think?

Mark: Without going into too much detail we need to understand that Plato's thinking completely undermines the biblical theme of creation.

BCW: So you seem to be saying that it is relevant to study Plato today because his influence is still very much around.

Mark: Let me put this in black and white terms: the central thrust of Plato is to pretend that we really belong in heaven where we can spend all our time contemplating quadratic equations and geometrical figures. This had led to a very otherworldly Christianity which becomes culturally irrelevant and fixated on fonts, gargoyles and collection plates.

BCW: And so Plato's views downgrade our enjoyment of God's creation.

Mark: Exactly me old fruitcake. Biblical teaching emphasizes that God has put us on the earth in order to bring glory to God and look after those cheeky squirrels and badgers among many other tasks. God loves this planet (John 3:16) me bearded Oz pal and he declared it very good. It's a total belter Bruce me old muffin.

BCW: So Plato has also had an impact upon the way people watch football matches?

Mark: Of course he has Bruce – the Greek boffin would have absolutely no interest in the game. It's a complete waste of time for the crafty Greek geyser.

BCW: Well if he was standing there watching the match with you what would he be saying? Would he be conducting philosophical tutorials on his SMS mobile, sending messages to his aspiring Boffinettes?

Mark: Bruce – you are starting to crack this baby mate..

BCW : Mark well draw the picture even further for us. We like a good story.

Mark: Let's take Plato to Milan in Italy in our imaginations and show him the San Siro stadium where AC Milan are playing Juventus. Suppose I say to him – "Look here revered and mighty

Greek one, this stadium is as crushingly real as a thumping Roy Keane reducer. Surely you don't believe it's an illusion?' Plato would probably punch me in the stomach and declare: 'You are an ignorant, unenlightened football nut. You spend your entire life chasing shadows. Get a life fats, and contemplate real things like perfect triangles, squares and rectangles. Forget footballs and think about the perfect circle. Get out of the pub and think about the form of the Kava bowl!'

BCW: You are saying he's behind the idea that students who study maths are the really brainy ones? I've watched football matches with those who would rather be doing maths - they try to turn the game into a set of quadratic simultaneous equations.

Mark: Yes Bruce me old coconut. The Greek boffin was convinced that the real world is somehow invisible, unchanging and eternal. He insisted that human beings used to live in this heavenly and noble world before they were born. At birth our immortal souls fell from this splendid environment and became encased in the cement bag we call the human body. He was convinced that human beings are really prisoners living in the most appalling prison - the flesh, our bodies. For Plato we are really immortal souls created to live in heaven but we have fallen far from our true home. All of us have become concussed and confused.

BCW: Hang on. This view of concussion and confusion, this fall as you call it, it's not the biblical idea of the fall is it?

Mark: Certainly not squire! It's a pagan story which totally goes against the biblical account!

BCW: OK. You can continue now ....

Mark: Plato says we think we belong to this place we call the earth but we are mistaken. We really belong *back home* in an invisible, ethereal and immaterial world filled with perfect chips and perfect dips and perfect kava bowls. Plato urged his followers to shun the world and all its transitory pleasures and to embrace the lifestyle of the remote and austere philosopher. Plato contended that intellectuals and those who look after their immortal souls would return to this heavenly bliss; the rest of us would be doomed to the horrors of reincarnation. In actual fact he condemns the worst people to become female fish!

BCW: At this point some of our readers might think that Plato sounds like a Christian - he was trying to get people to think about the life beyond wasn't he?

Mark: In a sense he was but the platonic perspective completely denies the biblical hope in the resurrection of the body and a renewed heaven and a renewed earth. This world is illusory and shadowy. In many ways Plato's mindset is similar to the Buddhist religion. And not many people know that Bruce. I hope I'm enlightening you - you daft gherkin!

BCW: I happen to like gherkins you toothy crocodile! You better go on. Tell us more about Plato's views. Is Plato suggesting that simple, ordinary blokes who enjoy ogling at dirty photos and sinking gallons of amber nectar on a daily basis are destined to become shrimps and crayfish in the next life?

Mark: Precisely. Plato would scream blue murder and urge you to repent and give up your sordid, seedy and repulsive ways.

BCW: This is very interesting. Maybe it helps me understand something of what was going on, and going wrong, when I was a teenager in the 60s. Many of my school friends acted as if they

were rebellious members of Plato's school. They decided to do exactly what Plato said we shouldn't. It seems that they were entranced with rejecting Plato's ideas - smoking, porn, getting drunk, calling girls pigs, losing their virginity - and Christians like me seemed to have a 'perfect' view of life close to Plato's view.

Mark: Many Christians have unwittingly adopted a mindset that is very similar to Plato's. For example in the film *The Name of the Rose* there is a monk who is convinced that humour is evil and he murders people because he wants to stop people reading a book by Aristotle that speaks highly of humour. That approach to life is highly platonic and ends up rejecting God's good creation as a pile of useless junk.

BCW: So you are saying that Plato's views about the body, about our bodies, are very much alive.

Mark: Yes you old turnip. In my book *Fields of God: Football and the Kingdom of God* I have tried to outline a view of the kingdom of God that asserts that God longs to redeem both footballers and football as well. I argue that Manchester United could indeed bring honour to God if it incarnated the teaching of Jesus. Christians who are influenced by Plato believe that I am misguided. They argue that God is only interested in footballers' immortal souls.

BCW; What about studying maths? If as you say Plato encouraged young people to fill their time contemplating the eternal and fixing their gaze upon eternal things, like squares, triangles and circles, does this mean that the senior maths class at the local high-school is ripe for Plato's academy?

Mark: They might be. It depends how they understand the significance of maths and geometry.

BCW: Now hang on bit. You're not saying that those who love maths are followers of Plato. It's the other way round. You are saying that if a young person is influenced by the Greek Boffin she or he may well decide to get lost in studying maths and giving up on the concrete earthly world. Is that it? Or getting lost in studying anything - society, theology, economics ... it can all go Plato-shaped?

Mark: A nice glancing header Bruce ... I'll have to think about that a bit.

Bruce: What about "every day life"?

Mark: Let me get concrete. House work! It has to be done right? And we don't necessarily like it. Agreed?

BCW: Yeeesss. Go on.

Mark: I know you guys in Oz-land play a different beautiful game but just picture it when you and Val come and visit Anne and me in our new house in Leeds. We are loafing about on a Saturday afternoon enjoying the big game and Liverpool is trouncing Real Madrid in the Champions League and I'm explaining the game to you because you're a novice. Suddenly your wife and my wife return from their shopping trip and rudely interrupt our convivial fellowship. We're really engrossed and Steven Gerrard has just scored a cracker in the dying embers of the game. We are dancing around the room like demented jackals full of the joys of spring. Our firm intention is to sprint down to the local boozer and slurp pints for thirty or forty minutes after the game. Horror of horrors the house is filthy and untidy; we must knuckle down to serious domestic

labour as the girls vent their wrath and spleen. Can you imagine it?

BCW: Actually, I dare not imagine what Val might say to me.

Mark: Well it's only a story. Please convey that to her. Anyway, the point is that Plato was keenly aware that important intellectuals and boffins like us cannot and shouldn't waste a single moment of our lives grinding and sweating procuring the food, shelter and condiments so essential to a decent life. We should be busy contemplating the form of beauty or the perfect triangle. We were watching the Game. We were involved in personal fulfilment on the highest level. You get my drift.

BCW: I hope so. Go on. I'm sure Val will be interested to hear how you get me out of this.

Mark: Plato's solution was simple, stark and radical. A strict caste system will create the perfect society where boffins like us and appreciators of beauty (and clever Greeks) can focus upon the sweet delights of contemplation and acute logical activity without the crude interruptions of cooking, cleaning and ironing. No doubt Plato would sneer at our ecstatic drooling over Gerrard's killer pass but both he and us crave leisure for our respective hobbies.

BCW: And you are saying that Plato enters the room when the women return from the shops (hands on hips) and they plead with us to clean up the mess, the detritus of our afternoon's contemplation in front of the box.

Mark: You're catching on. And Plato's there....whispering in our ears: Philosophers should rule and occupy the first rung on the societal ladder. Only those who know the forms can enjoy the power to decide who cleans up the mess. Anyone unacquainted with the Universal Smith's Crisp must serve and obey. Thick, stupid people must keep to their stations and exhaust themselves in the hurly-burly of productive life. The second or middle caste will be composed of beefy policemen and tough soldiers who will maintain firm discipline and thrash lazy proletarians who refuse to labour for a good and worthy cause. Do the words 'police state' come to mind, Brucie? Plato was most emphatic that no one in the ruling caste should be allowed to own personal property and even their own children must not be allowed to know their own parents. Plato really had it in for the family and urges us to scrap this comforting and jolly institution and embrace unquestioning loyalty to the state!

BCW: You're travelling very fast here mate. I'm still wanting to know what to do with Val's hands on her hips expecting me to clean up the mess, our mess. And anyway I know you don't think Anne is thick and stupid! But are you saying that Plato thought so?

Mark: Well in Plato's view Anne and Val are on the third rung. They are simply there for the pleasure of the ruling philosopher class and so there's no case, no case at all. If we listen to the Greek Boffin we'll go down to the Boozer to continue our analysis knowing that our wives will do what they are destined to do and the house will be spick and span for us when we return!

BCW: So really this picture is about what happens if we follow the Greek Boffin and live according to his ideas. You're telling us that his influence can be seen today in Leeds, in Bristol, in Melbourne and Suva?

Mark: Brucie me old jar of vegemite. For the Greek Boffin marriage in the way you and I understand it as followers of Jesus had no part. No part at all. After all, for him even sexual intercourse had to be regulated by the state! The Rulers carry out a careful breeding programme;

stage-manage mating lotteries which will allow lusty punters to think that they are part of a breeding casino but in reality couples will be mated in combinations that will produce the finest possible crop of children. Does this sound rather similar to the Third Reich, Bruce?

BCW: But you are not promoting the Greek Boffin are you?

Mark: Certainly not.

BCW: Well short of going through the whole history of philosophy, we'll have to wait until next time to here in more detail about the Christian way you are promoting.  
(to be continued)