



## "That's just your interpretation"

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The little robotic sparrow lying on its back twitching occasionally while stuck inside a window at the Tate Modern is a piece by the Danish and Norwegian artistic duo Michael-Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset. Lots of people have offered their own comments and interpretations of what it means:

'You get used to artists doing this sort of stuff and you become de-sensitised. It's not real, so I don't care too much about it.'

'The decline of the species is a metaphor for the decline of working class identity in modern Britain.'

'This is an experiment on people - how we respond to the spectacle of a small, helpless, feathery creature apparently fluttering its last.'

'It's not taken lightly by many of our supporters and the joke doesn't really work.' (RSPB spokesman Andre Farrar).

'This is 'have-a-go' amateur philosophy worthy of French and Saunders.'

We've all heard the saying, 'That's just your interpretation.' We hear it everywhere. Perhaps we've heard it in the midst of a conversation about moral issues such as abortion or homosexual behaviour as they relate to the Bible. Those who try to express their view might be told, 'That's just YOUR interpretation of the Bible.'

How might a thoughtful person respond?

§ Gently ask, 'Do you mean that your interpretation should be preferred over mine? If

so, I'd like to know why you have chosen your interpretation over mine. You must have a good reason.'

§ Remind your friend that you are willing to give reasons for your position and that you are not simply taking a particular viewpoint arbitrarily.

§ Try to discern if people toss out this slogan because they don't like your interpretation. Remind them that there are many truths we have to accept even if we don't like them.

§ If someone doesn't believe that there are any legitimate interpretations, then playfully say, 'That's just your interpretation of my interpretation!' He assumes that he has correctly interpreted your view and that it differs from his.

§ Some interpretations are better than others, and to see this is simply not a matter of interpretation.

§ 'There are no facts, only interpretations' is a statement that is presented as a fact. If it is just an interpretation, then there is no reason to take it seriously.

Often the motivation that people have when they say, 'That's just your interpretation' is that they don't want to argue or be a cause of bad feelings. Tolerance is good, and while the motivation is right and good, this is indifference which is the enemy of true respect and tolerance. Genuine tolerance means that we accept people as people, whatever their beliefs and lifestyles – Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, New Agers – people of all religions, and none. So people have the right to disagree with us, but we still respect them.