

Recognizing Encounters with Ultimacy across Religious Boundaries

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Conditions for Encounters with Ultimacy across Religious Boundaries

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Abstract: Simply reading sacred texts across religious boundaries rarely achieves an "aha moment" or an encounter with ultimacy. The possibility of engaging with ultimacy requires establishing some necessary conditions. Any attempt to compel an experience results in false spiritual encounters rather than permitting authentic ones to occur. Therefore, a balance is necessary between being open to the possibility of a religious experience and seeking, but not forcing, an encounter with ultimacy. Placing oneself in a prayerful or spiritual state, for example, achieves the potential for encountering ultimacy by actively reading and meditating on various traditions' sacred texts. These diverse writings relate others' encounters with ultimacy and reveal multiple perspectives and imaginative descriptions of the transcendent. An encounter with ultimacy entails an open, willing, prayerful demeanor, intellectual curiosity, a rich imagination regarding divine imagery, and a sincere effort at understanding such a religious experience. A Christian contemplative process known as *Lectio Divina* satisfies many of these requirements. The method is general and flexible enough to utilize with sacred texts across religious boundaries; it invites a person to slow down, read, pay attention, respond with wonder, and humbly submit to the transforming presence and revelation of ultimate reality.

Keywords: religious experience; spiritual experience; interreligious; Lectio Divina; sacred texts; religious boundaries; interpretation; active reading; prayer; analogical imagination

As a child, I enjoyed reading folklore from across several cultures. Guided by genuine curiosity, I explored unique narratives as well as different versions of the same stories, such as the fairy tale of Cinderella. I imagined numerous images of Cinderella portrayed in diverse settings and situations. In the French story, a kind beautiful young girl, cruelly marginalized by her step—family, receives guidance from a fairy godmother along with a lovely dress, a pair of glass slippers, and an enchanted opportunity to attend a royal ball. Asian versions contain a similar young girl named Ye Xian who befriends a magical fish, receives golden slippers, and attends a wonderful New Year's party. Each young lady fears the wrath of her relatives, loses a shoe, then a smitten prince finds the shoe, searches for its owner, and discovers his true love.

Years later while comparing sacred texts from various religious traditions, I suddenly realized that they exhibit similar traits to folktales because they express intrinsic metaphors in a variety of cultural terms yet articulate common moral lessons such as kindness, forgiveness, and faith during adversity. I experienced an "aha moment" in which I briefly perceived the universe to be completely interrelated and well–ordered far beyond my comprehension. This insightful encounter with ultimacy along with subsequent encounters happened when I incorporated elements of child–like wonder into reading multiple religious writings. Thus, in my experience, encounters with ultimacy across religious boundaries require important conditions of awe that include a sincere humble effort to dialogue with sacred texts, an exuberant curiosity, and a creative imagination regarding the divine.

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One's initial reaction to truth found in literature, art, and music evokes pleasant emotions or occasionally dislike, dismissal, or disgust. My first response to Picasso's painting, Guernica, for example, was rather disconcerting. Yet by studying the history, purpose, and symbolism in the painting, I gained understanding then an appreciation for the painting's deeper meaning. Similarly, reading is a dynamic encounter with the subject of the text. Interactions between the writer's words on a page and the reader's imagination meet and fuse horizons to create new experiences in real time. Since one purpose of sacred texts is to reveal the divine, an encounter with ultimacy across religious boundaries is certainly a possibility. Sometimes sacred writings conflict with the reader's notions of ultimacy, which causes cognitive dissonance. If discordance happens, the reader should avoid assimilating pluralistic concepts of the divine. An initial focus on similarities facilitates interreligious understanding; however, recognizing distinct perspectives leads to a more authentic encounter with ultimate reality as conveyed in the text. Prospects for meaningful encounters also increase if essential conditions are met.

1 What constitutes an encounter with ultimacy?

Although difficult to define, identifying the features of an encounter with ultimacy helps determine if one indeed has transpired. These characteristics vary across religious traditions. In general, a religious experience occurs in ordinary space and time between an ordinary person and ultimacy, which is symbolically mediated through text or another potential medium. During the encounter, ultimacy invokes a response, which alters a person's perception and future actions upon returning to ordinary reality. Hence, encounters with ultimacy are phenomenological, reflective human experiences involving altered emotional mental states that include "contact with or knowledge about a transcendent power, presence, truth or reality beyond the realm of the human and physical world." The broad category of spiritual experience includes all ultimate encounters such as mystical unions with the divine, transcendent awe, ecstatic euphoric trances, rare visual or auditory theophanies, explicit religious conversions, and charismatic emotions. These various activities across religious boundaries exemplify a "range of divine phenomena witnessed to by the religious history of mankind."3 Of primary significance is whether the person encountering ultimacy recognizes it to be a spiritual occurrence.

If a person identifies the incident as an encounter with ultimacy, mere human language incumbers expressing it with others. The ability to articulate an experience requires applying accurate words so an event enters language as a concept referencing back to the experience.⁴ Language expresses specific worldviews of human activity due to cultural traditions and historical influences embedded within it. Moreover, diverse religious traditions perceive their concepts of ultimate reality differently and convey them through unique symbols and language terms. Expressing an encounter with ultimacy is still possible because a "religious experience originates in religious language but always goes beyond it;" therefore, the resultant experiential surplus, defined by but not bounded by symbolic language, becomes a source for interpreting then comprehending the phenomenological incident. Interreligious understanding similarly benefits from listening, interpreting, and discussing narratives across religious boundaries.

Given the difficulties of expressing encounters with ultimacy, theologians employ cognitive science to evaluate religious occurrences that demonstrate phenomenological characteristics. The Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory (PCI) differentiates between perceptions of divine encounters and actual

¹ Portier, Tradition and Incarnation, 61-66. Examples of potential media include art, music, icons, and other persons.

² Astley, "Studying Spiritual and Religious Experience," 2.

³ Hick, God Has Many Names, 93. I have chosen to exclude out-of-body and near-death experiences along with paranormal, psychical, or parapsychological (psi) experiences due to their questionable religious application and conflicting results from scientific studies.

⁴ Gadamer, Truth and Method, 417.

⁵ Knitter, Introducing Theologies of Religions, 228.

descriptions of "someone literally experiencing a powerful sense of presence." Previous studies of spiritual encounters utilized subjective narratives of the event. With PCI, people recall a perceived religious episode then complete a survey assessing topics such as time perception, altered awareness, attention, emotions, and vividness. Narratives combined with PCI and neurological scanning validate a quantifiable, phenomenological basis for spiritual encounters within both theistic and non–theistic religious traditions. As a result, all knowledge and experience, including encounters with ultimacy, require mediation with phenomenological components affecting the embodied senses.

Reading sacred texts is one way, but not the only way, to encounter ultimacy. David Tracy refers to a notion of the classic, which is a text, event, symbol or person, whose "excess of meaning' both demands constant interpretation and bears a certain kind of timelessness," with the potential to initiate a spiritual connection. Classics exist in every age and in every culture. The thought–provoking work of Aristotle and Shakespeare, the beauty within Botticelli paintings, or the mesmerizing sounds of a Mozart opera continue to reveal truths across time and space. Likewise, the analogical imagination in C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Namia* expresses religious encounters in non–threatening ways while Flannery O'Connor's modern parables often contain disturbing analogy, allegory, and irony. Consequently, religious traditions also possess classics such as the Book of Job in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and the *Bhagavad-gîtâ*, a portion of the Hindu epic *Mahābhārata*. Classics found in numerous religious traditions dispose "the resources of their cultural context toward the dimension of ultimacy, allowing it to react on that context with critical and illuminative force." In sum, classics are normative to the cultural experience and to the quality of reality itself. Religious classics reveal truth that evokes ecstatic revelatory encounters with ultimacy.

2 Hindrances to an encounter with ultimacy

Sometimes an intense yearning to encounter ultimacy becomes a frustrating hindrance to achieving the desired result. Stories from people describing feelings of clarity, wellbeing, or peace create idealistic hopes for one's own spiritual occurrence. Likewise, the media and movie industries contribute to propagating imaginary depictions of divine encounters. Ingrained in viewer imaginations, these film portrayals formulate mental images that lead to unrealistic expectations. Assumptions that a religious event indeed will happen while studying one's own or other religion's sacred texts normally results in disappointment. By trying too hard to discover ultimacy, a person inhibits the openness necessary for the possibility of an encounter. Moreover, attempts to force an experience result in shaping false encounters rather than permitting authentic ones to occur.

Another difficulty to encountering ultimacy is misunderstanding unfamiliar religious symbols, cultural norms, and worship practices. Few people possess detailed knowledge of their own tradition's sacred scriptures let alone other texts across religious boundaries. Hence, reading different traditions' sacred writings through one's own religious perceptions is insufficient for accurate comprehension. Because context and interpretation influence meaning, numerous combinations of culture, religion, language, biased presuppositions, and personal history all condition understanding. Even an awareness of this conditioning, defined as historical consciousness, influences the interpretation of experiences. This accumulation of awareness forms a hermeneutical circle in which previous incidents affect the next event.

To comprehend several religious traditions' unique, sacred nomenclature requires the theological equivalent of multilingual skills. Comparative studies and interreligious dialogue reveal similarities as well as explore nuanced differences among various religions. Even though language itself is essential, it introduces challenges to encountering ultimacy. Language acts symbolically to name an object, thus

⁶ Wildman, "Spiritual Experiences," 160. For more information on Ron Pekala's PCI scale see pp. 152–3. See also Pekala, *Quantifying Consciousness: An Empirical Approach*.

⁷ Ibid., 153–4.

⁸ Tracy, The Analogical Imagination, 102.

⁹ O'Leary, "Ultimacy and Conventionality."

representing it along with calling "things to 'come and be present' so that they can speak to us." In other words, "conceptions of God can be used as signs by which we engage God." Language also enables the communication of ideas, senses, and feelings; it empowers humans to think at many levels of abstraction and to make symbolic exchanges, such as conversations across religious boundaries about ultimacy, beauty, or hope.

Ironically, reading sacred text with too much intellectual focus inhibits its affective nature, which is necessary for stimulating encounters with ultimacy. Logical analysis is an essential element for comprehending meaning; however, by disproportionately comparing and theologizing other sacred texts, one misses the subtle whispers of ultimate reality embedded within them. Approaching the text without passionate imagination restricts the endeavour to an academic comparative exercise rather than a transformative experience. Hence, the critical analytical nature of intellect needs to be suspended temporarily. One cannot reason one's way into a mystical encounter or Buddhist spiritual awakening because when a person becomes cognizant of almost achieving union with ultimate reality, the religious event abruptly ceases.

3 Conditions for an encounter with ultimacy

A balance is therefore necessary between being open to the possibility of a religious experience and actively seeking but not forcing an encounter with ultimacy. Rather than submit to complete passivity, placing oneself in a prayerful spiritual state achieves a calm active potential for engaging the divine by reading and meditating on sacred texts across religious boundaries. Sometimes an underlying reason such as a recent tragedy, sadness, yearning, or stress prompts healing compassionate encounters with ultimacy. Thus, interacting with ultimate reality requires humility, a vulnerability that enables intimate communication to occur. Despite being transcendent to the world, divine hiddenness gives way to the presence of revealed reality if a person approaches the encounter with child-like wonder.

Another condition for ultimacy encounters is intellectual curiosity, especially regarding religious diversity. Nevertheless, general philosophical inquisitiveness must yield to reverent awe when sacred writing "initiates an encounter of religions and involves the reader in hearing and understanding a specific other voice, not just the generic 'world religions.'"12 This novel encounter with religion is equivalent to human engagement with ultimacy according to Robert Neville. He posits that the components of religion, including sacred texts, prayer, and worship practices interconnect and harmonize primarily to establish an encounter with ultimacy that elicits a human response. 13 Secondarily, religious worldviews like Christianity or Buddhism provide sacred cultural resources as well as boundary conditions for engaging with ultimacy.

The depth of religious experience likewise depends on the quality of one's imagination, particularly a person's concepts of ultimacy. Reading sacred texts across religious boundaries portrays others' encounters with ultimacy, which interrelates numerous spiritual perspectives. Existential dimensions of religious occurrences require an intention to engage with ultimacy through complex, indirect causal links that exist between "the formal reality of the intended ultimacy and the experiencer, so that some character of the ultimacy is carried over into the experience through the medium of interpreting signs."¹⁴ Imagery within various religions' sacred texts assists with interpretation and shapes encounters with ultimacy. Authors from diverse traditions struggled to compose comprehensible stories that depict mysterious spiritual incidents in imaginative ways. Contemporary readers interpret those symbols to achieve greater insights into their own engagements with ultimacy.

For symbolism to be effective, its meaning must be understood. Ultimacy always initiates the encounter then communicates perfectly during a religious experience. Yet, how a person perceives the message limits

¹⁰ Chauvet, The Sacraments, 78.

¹¹ Neville, Realism in Religion, 199.

¹² Clooney, "When Religions Become Context," 35.

¹³ Neville, Defining Religion, 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., 99-100.

its effectiveness. Humans engage the world through their senses, so encounters with ultimacy necessitate interaction through one's senses or involve sensory—based components such as endorphins that evoke euphoria, ecstasy, relational unity with the cosmos, or peaceful feelings. Therefore, sacred texts contain narratives of auditory and visual theophanies to describe encounters with ultimacy.

4 Lectio Diving as a method for encounter

An encounter with ultimacy entails an open, willing, prayerful demeanor, intellectual curiosity, a rich imagination regarding divine imagery, and a sincere effort to understand the religious experience. A contemplative process known as *Lectio Divina* satisfies these elements. Frequently translated as "divine reading," *Lectio Divina* is respectful, thoughtful engagement with sacred scripture that establishes conditions for the possibility of an encounter with ultimacy. Although originally utilized with Christian scriptures, the general practice is flexible enough for use with other religious traditions' sacred texts. Its effectiveness depends on one's reverence, consideration, and openness to the text. As an integral part of the monastic tradition, *Lectio Divina* is a form of reflective prayer that contains many elements of eastern meditation. Whether contemplating sacred texts or embracing the harmony of nature as Dao (the Way), ¹⁶ the procedure invites a person to slow down, pay attention, respond with wonder, then humbly submit to the transformational presence of ultimacy.

Lectio Divina is a four–step process, ideally performed in a quiet, calm, comfortable setting to establish focus. In the first step (lectio), the person selects a scriptural passage then slowly reads it aloud several times with curious attentiveness to which word or phrase speaks to the mind and heart. During step two (meditatio), one meditates on the word or phrase, repeating it so that it encompasses all thought, emotion, and imagination. At the third step (contemplatio), the person contemplates the meaningful message conveyed by the word or phrase then embraces the spiritual experience. For the final step (oratio), the person willingly interacts with the word or phrase dialogically through prayer, discussion, or journal writing to discern how to integrate these new scriptural insights into daily life. Lectio Divina encourages a person to pause, read, reflect, and respond to sacred texts of one's own or another's tradition, which establishes conditions for the possibility of an encounter with ultimacy.

5 Conclusion

Most if not all sacred texts reveal notions of ultimacy whether those ideas conform to an ontological interpretation of ultimate being found in monotheistic religions or reference an anthropological perspective with an objective of improving the human condition. Approaching religious writings with a sense of intellectual curiosity reveals the complexity of cultural and religious symbols whose deeper meanings lead to an authentic encounter with ultimacy. Even if the reader's view of ultimate reality differs from descriptions in the text, a creative imagination facilitates novel encounters with ultimacy from various vantage points. By appreciating diverse religious texts with sincere child–like openness to spiritual revelation, one shares in the common aspects of engagement with ultimacy across religious boundaries. In my experience, utilizing processes such as *Lectio Divina*, from which one peacefully reads, meditates, contemplates, and reflects on sacred text before thoughtfully responding to it, thereby establishes the necessary conditions for a possible transformative encounter with ultimacy.

¹⁵ Lawlor, "Ever Ancient, Ever New," 1.

¹⁶ In the *Zhuangzi*, written by Zhuang Zhou, the Dao transcends all polarities and dualities, so a rational cognitive approach is ineffective. One returns to the mysterious Dao using a free clear mind, spontaneity, and actionless action (*wuwei*) without resistance.

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