

Close Encounters of a Religious Kind James Beebe

Living and working outside the United States for more than 20 years provided a wonderful opportunity to be an observer and participant, often up close, in the religious experiences of people all over the world. The reading earlier was from Ackerman's book, A Natural History of the Senses and is a reminder of the value of intentionality in experiencing what life has to offer.

My experiences with religion have been varied, rich, and almost always very positive. Three of these experiences illustrate very personal responses that were in the first situation a deeply spiritual experience, in the second situation led to a strengthened commitment to social justice, and in the third situation provided education and understanding about a particular aspect of a religion that is different from my own experience. These experiences are only a sample of my close encounters with religion worldwide.

Of the many possible lessons that can be drawn from these experiences, five stand out for me. I invite you to find other lessons.

They provide evidence of the tremendous variability that exist in religious experiences

They demonstrate the powerful role of culture in how these experiences play out among different people.

They demonstrate the ability of religious experiences to build and strengthen community

They demonstrate the power of religion to provide emotional support to individuals who are facing loss and trials.

Finally some of these religious events demonstrate the misuse of religion to advance political agendas, especially the maintenance of the status quo.

There are times when religious events have simply elicited overwhelming awe. Come and join me as I share some of these events with you.

The first occurred when I was a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Philippines I had ridden in the back of a truck to the village of Poonbato near the top of Mount Pinatubo, a full day trip from the town where I lived.

It was January 24, 1969, the feast day of "Ina Poonbato."

It was already getting dark when we arrived and joined thousands of pilgrims gathering at a very small and plain shrine.

Many had been walking since before dawn to arrive before the end of the day.

The story of the image of "Ina Poonbato" is fascinating.

The indigenous people of Mount Pinatubo are the Aetas, people who are shorter and darker than lowland Filipinos and sometime incorrectly called Negritos.

The Aetas legend was that before the Spaniards had arrived in the Philippines, a famous Aeta hunter had encountered a beautiful woman dressed in shimmering gold.

She commanded him to "Come and take me home with you."

As he drew closer she vanished leaving behind only an image carved on a piece of shining wood.

When he reached home, his wife seized the wooden image and cast it into their fire pit.

Flames shot up instantly, reducing their small home to ashes.

Children, who were poking the glowing embers, discovered that the image was not burned but was still shining like gold.

The Aetas enshrined the image on the rock where the hunter had discovered it.

Many years later the Spaniards arrived and set about replacing the indigenous religion with the Catholic religion.

The Catholic missionaries presented the Aetas with an image of the Virgin Mary.

The Aetas were delighted to see that it was a replica of their "Ina Poonbato" and showed their image to the Spanish missionaries.

The missionaries concluded that the Virgin Mary had preceded them.

The Aetas credited their "Ina Poonbato" with many miracles, including bringing rain.

Overtime many lowland Filipinos also came to believe that the "Ina Poonbato" was proof that the Virgin Mary had visited the Philippines before the Spaniards had arrived and credited her with miracles.

Lowland Filipinos then began the tradition of making the pilgrimage to her shrine to seek her favor.

And thus I found myself in the midst of thousands of pilgrims.

Many were reciting the rosary in any one of numerous Filipino languages while some were making their way to the image walking on their knees with the hands outstretched holding their rosaries.

The only light was the hundreds and hundreds of candles of the pilgrims.

I stood just outside the open door of the small shrine and was overcome by a powerful sense of reverence, awe, amazement, and wonderment.

This was one of the most powerful spiritual experiences in my life.

As a footnote, in June 1991, Mt. Pinatubo erupted blasting away the top 500 feet of the mountain and burying the village of Poonbato.

However, the image was rescued by the fleeing Aetas and is now in a lowland village.

While the first encounter was spiritual, the second religious experience I am going to share with you this morning is about an encounter with institutional religion that significantly increased my commitment to social justice.

This encounter was also while serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Philippines. The house of the family I lived with was on a road that started in front of the church and passed the cemetery before arriving at a small village about two miles away.

Now the family I lived with was not well off by Philippines standards. Both the mother and the father were public school teachers, but without even a two year post secondary teaching certificate. They had a small house made of wood, with rusted corrugated metal roof, and plumbing including a toilet of sorts, but no running water. They had their little house, their two small salaries, an adopted elementary school age child, and for two years a Peace Corps Volunteer who more than helped with living expenses. The really poor people in this town lived in the outlying villages, often had large families, and generally did not own their any land.

I very soon became aware of funeral processions where family and friends accompanied the coffins of the recently departed to the cemetery for interment.

The most common procession consisted of the coffin of a baby or small child, often suspended beneath a bamboo pole and carried on the shoulder of two men. The coffin might be decorated with a flower or two picked from the road side or with paper flowers made from toilet paper. These were people who were so poor they could not afford to buy flowers in a country where flowers are plentiful and cheap. It was easy to identify the mother because she appeared overwhelmed as only a mother is who has lost a child.

The story that was told to these mothers is that their baby was on its way to heaven where it would become an instant angel.

The grief displayed by the mothers suggested that this either was not believed or was not relevant to their pain at losing a child.

It was a while before I realized that the only funeral procession for babies that I was witnessing was for the babies of the very poor. Even under-paid teachers and government employees expected their babies to live and by the late nineteen sixties, most did.

But not the babies of the poor.

With growing awareness there was growing anger on my part. I asked but did not get answers as to why it seemed that it was only the children of the poor who died. My anger increased when I concluded that the only response was the story that these babies became angels. My anger was divided between the political structure in the Philippines, the policies of the United States that historically supported and benefited from the injustices, and the church that supported this system.

Over time I concluded that even though my anger was justified, by itself it was not going to help even one child survive. However there were things I could do that could contribute a little toward a solution. Graduate work and joining the United States Agency for International Development, the agency of the United States government that administer foreign assistance provided me a way to make a small contribution by working on increasing food production, influencing policies, and supporting increased education and involvement of women in development. I became part of an organization that has supported efforts to educate women about providing their babies who develop diarrhea with oral rehydration therapy consisting of boiled water with sugar and a tiny smidgen of salt.

My conclusion has been that both our government and religious institutions can either be the source of the problem or can be part of the solution and that I can have a small influence on this.

For the third close encounter, fast forward about a dozen years and I am employed by the United States Agency for International Development. I was assigned in the Sudan, one of the poorest countries in the world. I knew I need to get to know more about life in the rural Sudan. I requested permission to spend up to two week in a northern Sudan village and requested that a Sudanese Agricultural Economist from my office accompany me. The United States was sponsoring research around a provincial capital in the Western Sudan in the province next to Dafur. The people working on that project asked the folks in a fairly remote village if an American and his Sudanese colleague could spend some time in their village. Given that no outsider, especially an American, had ever spent even one night in the village they agreed to the visit but never really expected it to happen.

Picture with me a small village with a total population of less than 100. All the houses are round and made of straw except for two that are made of dried mud bricks. Rainfall is less than 5 inches a year. Survival depended on producing enough sorghum, millet, and sesame in the good years that it would be possible to go at least two years without any rainfall. The other source of income was goats and camels that provided the major source of transportation.

Just before sundown my colleague and I are dropped off with an agreement that we will be picked up in 12 days. We had no transportation or any means of communication. In hindsight this was probably not the smartest thing to have done, but it worked out. Once folks understood I would eat anything that they brought me, competition developed on bring me exotic foods. The place we set up our sleeping bags was a circular straw house similar to that of most of the folks in the village, but that had been built for village meetings and Friday worship.

My encounter with religion, with Islam specifically, in this village was not something I could have anticipated. At the time of my visit, there were only two men who had more than one wife and they both had two wives. I got to meet both of the wives of one of the men when they asked me to come to their compound consisting of two straw structures to take picture of them and their children. Taking picture and sending them back was one of the things I could do to try to repay the hospitality.

The topic of conversation was the desire of one of the better off men to take a second wife. He looked to be in his late thirties, his wife looked to be about the same age, and they had four children. I eventually met both the wife and the proposed second wife when I was asked to take pictures. The proposed second wife looked like she might be in her early twenties. I was told both women were in favor of this arrangement, but bear in mind I was told this by men. Women in the Northern Sudan do not engage in conversation with outside men. Now in the Sudan, the saying is that a man's first wife is so important, his parents make the decision for him. A man's second wife is also so important that his first wife makes the decision for him and it is only for his third and forth wives that a man gets to make his own decision.

Remember, I told you we were staying in the straw structure build for village meeting. So at the end of the day men would bring us food, eat with us, drink tea, and then take advantage of our presence to talk, and talk, and talk. The main top was the proposed marriage of the man to his second wife. The Village Iman, the religious leader of the community, would recite from

memory the appropriate traditional sources concerning the basic rule for taking a second, third, or fourth wife. This rule is that the man had to treat all the wives equally in all ways, including the time he spent with each. Every night the discussion followed the same pattern. The Iman would introduce the topic, the man who wanted to marry the young woman would swear before Allah that he would treat both wives the same, and everyone would then question him, gently laugh at him, point out that I was an outside witness to his claim, and remind him of their doubts about his ability to treat both women the same. I would follow this through the translation provided by my colleague unless he forgot I was present as he joined the conversations or I fell asleep. I quickly realized I was witness to the unofficial power of this gentle, non assuming village Iman who was not afraid to speak up to one of the better-off men in the village. The Iman was taking advantage of my presence to put this man on notice that he was going to be watched by everyone. For the people in this village the taking of a second wife was clearly a religious issue and one that involved the entire village. I left with an appreciation for how this aspect of Islam actually played out in a village

I eventually sent more than 200 pictures back to village.

During my more than twenty years outside the United States I had the opportunity to have many other close encounters of a religious kind. Very briefly, some of these have included:

In Afghanistan, while teaching a course on Public Policy at Kabul University, spending several hours one evening in conversation with a young angry radical student of Islam Shara law. He observed I was the first American he had talked to and that he had been prepared to dislike me for what I stood for. By the end of our conversation we were becoming friends. I asked him if I was called before a Shara court could I hire him to be my advocated. His reply was definitely **not** since because we were now friends he would defend me without being paid.

Another close encounter was participating in the large rotation by pilgrims around a cluster of temples in Lhasa, Tibet. I stopped to buy from a sidewalk vendor who appeared to be selling only to Tibetan pilgrims a small red plastic device about the size of a match box. By pressing a button it would recite one of four chants for eternity or until the battery when dead.

Still another close encounter was delivering a sermon in a mixture of English and Filipino in a Unitarian Universalistic storefront church in a poor urban neighborhood in Manila and then questioning the ethics of efforts to introduce another religion in a very religious country where religion has often been a divisive issue.

These are just a few of the many, many close encounters of a religious nature I experienced during my more than twenty years living and working outside the United States.

These close encounters with religion have had a significant influence on me. There are many ways religion plays out and these are strongly influenced by culture. They demonstrate the ability of religious experiences to build and strengthen community

They demonstrate the power of religion to provide emotional support to individuals who are facing loss and trials. Interesting linguistic side light. In Filipino languages it is not possible for a person to say "I am grieving". The only structure the language permits is to say "I am grieving with you."

Finally some of these religious events demonstrate the misuse of religion to advance political agendas, especially the maintenance of the status quo.

I would like to close with a brief story about an encounter with religion that does not illustrate anything, but that I think you will enjoy.

In 1969 in addition to my Peace Corps work with the local elementary school, I also started teaching at a provincial college. A fellow teacher, also known as a match-maker introduced me to Maria, a part-time teacher at the college who was working on a graduate degree. We agreed to talk, but after a few minutes it became clear that she was a very nationalist Filipina and viewed Peace Corps Volunteers as agents of Fascism, Imperialism, and neo-colonialism. She may have been right. A year later the match maker tried again and got us to promise to at least talk with each other. We did, and less than six weeks later we were married. I was almost at the end of my two year tour as a Peace Corps Volunteer and wanted to make sure I would be able to get a visa for my wife before I left. The priest married us in the presence of our witnesses/sponsors early in the morning with plans for a church wedding 19 days later. We grabbed our newly signed marriage certificate and boarded a public bus to Manila to file for her visa. We planned to return that night so had nothing else with us. Because it was during the monsoon season we were not paying attention to the heavy and constant rain. When the bus crossed the low mountains that separate the coastal province where we lived from the center part of the large island where Manila is located, we encountered flooding. What we did not know was that a typhoon had intersected our journey. The water got deeper and deeper very quickly, the bus stalled. Folks started sharing stories about gas floating out of the tanks of stalled buses and catching on fire. We decided to take our chances in the flood, so we left the bus and started walking toward a town that we knew was ahead. There were many stalled buses and increasingly large number of folks walking in water that was for my wife almost chest deep at time. As we passed a bus, an Irish voice called out to us. It was the catholic sister who was the principle of the demonstration elementary school at the college where we both part-time teachers. She joined us in the deep water and immediately told me that her bladder was about to explode. I pointed out she was standing in water that was waist deep. Almost immediately her look of distress was replaced with a smile. The three of us then hired a local dug-out canoe with a bamboo outrigger and negotiated with the driver to take us to the only place we could think would be open, the catholic convent. The nuns were surprised when we arrived, even more surprised when they discovered that I was not a foreign priest but a Peace Corps Volunteer and the woman I was with was my wife of less than a day. They found dry clothes for us and offered to put Maria and I up in the newly completed but still unused dental clinic. They had taken a part of their 400 year old convent, closed off the inside door, and build an outside door. The next morning the water had reached the steps of the convent and the nuns had children build a raft so we could get from the door of the dental clinic to the main door of the convent where we were greeted by a group of nuns singing "here comes the bride." We spend a second night there before the water had gone down enough that we could take a bus back to our province. The folk belief in the Philippines is that it is good luck to have rain on your wedding day. We had excessive rain and have had excessively good luck in the 40 years since we got married. Spending one's honeymoon in a 400 year old catholic convent is a special, very close encounter with religion.