

Assignment #17

Topic: Sacred Language

Reflect and write: Your main task for this assignment is to imagine that you had to tell a story about yourself in the language of the sacred. You can use the language of myth, story or parable. You can describe yourself in general, or something that happened to you.

Here is an example: *Once upon a time, there was a very timid little girl who was afraid to go out of the house. She was a good little girl, and that was her mission, never to do anything that upset anyone, especially God. She felt God had called her to be a missionary, so she went away to foreign country right after she graduated from high school. On that trip, she saw lots of different colors of people worshiping together. This was new because she grew up in a suburb where everyone was white. She often heard the adults say bad things about non-whites. When she came home from her adventure, she tried to tell her parents and friends that all people, regardless of color should be respected and that this is what God wants. They laughed at her. She decided that church was nothing but a country club. It took her a long time to get over that.*

(Note: This example is read during the class preceding the assignment. The class applies the following questions to this story as preparation for their independent work.)

Critical Questions: In evaluating the example of a “sacred story,” discuss within your peer group the following questions:

1. In what way could this story be understood as a “sacred story”? What makes a story sacred?
2. What if there was no mention of “God” in this story, would it still be sacred?
3. What was this little girl’s sacred mission? What social and cultural factors may have shaped her belief about her sacred mission?
4. What did she discover when she applied her interpretation of “God’s call for her”? What response did she receive when she returned to share her insights?
5. What social and cultural factors may have shaped the negative response of the people at home when she returned to share her insight?
6. What does this story tell you about how context shapes the individual’s understanding of the sacred, and why the “sacred encounter” is often rejected when it upsets cultural and social expectations?

Assignment:

Write your own “sacred encounter story.” It does not need to be any particular length. Type or write legibly so you can exchange your writing with someone else in your group. **DO NOT PUT YOUR NAME ON YOUR PAPER.**

Group in-class exercise

Submit the stories to your mentor who will then distribute them among the members of your peer group. Once you have read your peer member’s story, write an interpretation of the story as you understand it. Now you have the story and your interpretation. Evaluate both the story and your interpretation by asking the questions we applied to our in-class example. When you have done your individual work, write any larger question that came from your reflection. When all are done, exchange insights and reflection with the peer group.

Finish your discussion with this question:

If social and cultural factors have such an influence on interpretation of “sacred encounter,” by what means

does one evaluate whether or not a “sacred encounter” is authentic? Is authenticity important?

When all peer groups are done, we will open the discussion to the class at large.

Example Test Question #1:

(Note: this type of exercise tests how well a student is able to identify his or her own biases and prejudices as shaped by social and cultural context. This course is not a course in world religions, so students would not be expected to be able to write a sophisticated analysis of a text such as the one below. The goal is to be able to recognize how much one’s own religious imagination is often unknowingly applied to other religious traditions which are then judged according to their conformity to one’s own expectations.)

Write a response to the primary text below addressing the following questions: What is the religious worldview associated with this text: that is, what is the concept of the sacred? What is the concept of the human being? What is the relationship of the divine to creation? What is the concept of “salvation”? Write a critique of your own interpretation and discuss how your conclusions have been shaped by your own religious tradition. In what way or ways does this reading challenge or expand your religious imagination.

Because of man’s union with the Self and his unbroken knowledge of it, he is filled with joy, he knows his joy; his mind is illuminated.

There is nothing that is not Spirit. The personal Self is the impersonal Spirit... The Self is the lord of all; inhabitant of the hearts of all. He is the source of all, creator and dissolver of beings. There is nothing He does not know.

He is not knowable by perception, turned inward or outward, nor by both combined. He is neither that which is known nor that which is not known, nor is He the sum of all that might be known. He cannot be seen, grasped, bargained with. He is undefinable, unthinkable, indescribable. The only proof of His existence is union with Him. The world disappears in Him.

(Excerpt from the Mandookya Upanishad)

Example Test Question #2:

Reading a sacred text. Below are two excerpts from two different religious traditions. Read them and write a one page essay response that addresses the following questions:

1. List any questions you would ask yourself that would help you identify any prejudices or biases you bring to these readings. Give examples from the texts themselves.
2. List any questions you would need to know in order to fully understand these two texts. When necessary, give examples from the text that help the reader understand the question you are raising.
3. Discuss the ways in which each text gives you the gift of challenge, comfort or both.

Text A: *O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You in a dry and weary land where there is no water. Thus I have beheld You in the sanctuary, to see your power and glory. Because your loving kindness is better than life, My lips will praise You.*

Text B: *I will grant you Nagasena, that Nirvana is absolute Ease, and that nevertheless one cannot point to its*

form or shape, its duration or size, either by simile or explanation, by reason or by argument...but is there some quality of Nirvana which it shares with other things, and which lends itself to metaphorical explanation? As the lotus is unstained by water, so is Nirvana unstained by all the defilements....As cool water allays feverish heat, so also Nirvana is cool and allays the fever of all the passions...