

Q&A

AUTHOR INTERVIEW



About Tamara Park

When she's not listening to NPR, reading Henri Nouwen or snickering at *The Onion*, Tamara Park serves as pastor of community at Warehouse 242, a church in Charlotte, North Carolina, overseeing small groups and spiritual formation.

Park has a B.A. in telecommunications from Liberty University, where she learned that asking people questions is a vital way of understanding the world. She also has a Master of Divinity degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

How did you come to write *Sacred Encounters*?

Tamara Park: In this increasingly multicultural world, I was curious if my understanding of God—largely constructed on American soil—was sturdy enough, true enough, to stand up to the complex global issues of our day. I had come to believe that my understanding of God was the most important perspective I held, influencing how I engaged the world, interacted with others and comprehended myself. After six years of studying theology, I still had more questions. Less than a month after acquiring an M.Div. I embarked on another quest for learning.

Not only did I have questions about God, I had mounting questions about the East. I had lived in Jerusalem from 2001-2002. During that time I had learned so much from Israelis, Palestinians, Armenians, Greek and Syrian Orthodox, Bedouins, and Domari Gypsies. In this mélange of cultures, my assumptions got challenged and my understanding of the world expanded but I had to leave with so many more questions unaddressed. This all happened during the time when 9/11 broke apart the world calendar.

While I returned to the States endowed with new ideas and questions from the East, I came back to a country grieving and angry over what the East had taken from it.

I soon realized that the questions I was asking were not the ones best answered in the finest of libraries or in the most erudite institutions. Travel happens to be my favorite classroom and conversations are my teacher of choice.

So trekking along an ancient pilgrim route from Rome to Jerusalem asking strangers to describe God seemed to be an apt response to my grapplings. And the forty-day journey through the Balkans and Middle East turned out to be too potent and beautiful not to share. The Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims and Jews I met en route offered such significant understandings and showed such great generosity that I had to write this book.

Not only did my sacred encounters reshape and expand my understanding of God, others and myself, I think they will enrich readers. I believe this book is salient for our day because as Americans we have a significant role in the world; we've been gifted with a disproportionate amount of power and resources. With that being so, we don't naturally have to rely on and learn from other cultures. We have the option to isolate; we have the opportunity to be self-contained.

However, when we're poised to receive from others, we gain so much. A powerful grace is let loose when we learn from others, especially those we might consider our lesser, or even our enemy. And we not only learn from others and about ourselves, I believe our understanding of God expands.



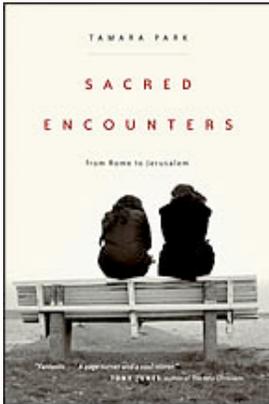
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Tell us the story of *Sacred Encounters*.

Tamara: *Sacred Encounters* charts an American thirtysomething's quest to discover God and the East in an ever-increasing global society. Entranced by travel, intrigued by other cultures and stirred by pressing questions, I'm compelled to retrace an ancient pilgrim route from Rome to Jerusalem.

As I trek through the Balkans and the Middle East, each day I pray for divine encounters and position myself to simply receive from others. Along the way I interview over a hundred people, asking them to describe God. I get glimpses of how Christian Orthodox, Catholics, Muslims and Jews embrace and articulate faith. However, these strangers from different traditions and faiths not only share with me their view of God, they also extend friendship. They offer me their personal stories, generous hospitality and even gifts.

However, the act of receiving is countercultural to my American sensibilities and unwieldy to my egalitarian soul. Coming face-to-face with my inability to repay strangers, I encounter a startling and stunning picture of God. My description of God takes shape as one who—like my hosts in the East—is extravagant in his generosity and impossible to pay back.

In my travels I not only experience a personal story line of grace, I discover relevant paradigms for East-West relations. For over 1,500 years, spiritual insights, money and power have flowed back and forth along this pilgrim route. At times the cultural exchanges have been vibrant, at other moments bloody. Today these ancient Roman roads cut a path through cities that have been cracked open by conflict in the past two decades.

So, along the way I must grapple with my interpretation of cultures and my understanding of politics as I learn about the history around me and converse with the people next to me. From Serbia to Syria I am invited to look at the contributions of countries often considered enemies of America. Sometimes, I allow myself to receive—partaking in sacred encounters—and other times I am too entangled in my own story.

Yet, ultimately my journey leads me to this: if I am to experience authentic spirituality and if the world is to move toward reconciliation, one gift is needed. It is the capacity to receive. And, this is the story of *Sacred Encounters*.

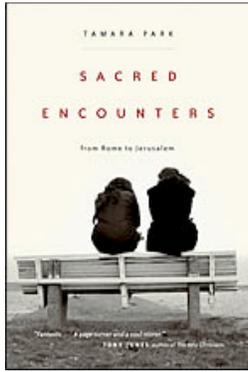
All these insights about faith and culture unfold in the midst of the adventures of lodging in a cave, fighting with taxi drivers, imbibing holy water with nuns, acquiring an amoeba and dining with spies. Throughout the book, *Sacred Encounters* provides readers with opportunities to reflect on their own conceptions of God and their assumptions about other cultures and traditions.



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“Mixing historical account with current stories from volatile areas like the Balkans and the fractured Middle East, Tamara Park guides readers on their own introspective journeys. Tamara interviews Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Jewish people, skeptics, laypeople, clergy, Americans, Serbians, Italians, Croats. . . . [This] diverse record of common beliefs about God doesn’t leave you once you put it down.”

—Rebecca Mayer, contributing writer, *Relevant*, and special section editor, *Lake Oswego Review*

What are the main points that you want readers to take away from your book?

- (1) Our image of God is the most important view we hold, informing how we interact with others, engage the world and comprehend ourselves. However, this image is not shaped in isolation or revealed by pithy descriptions we announce. Our view of God gets exposed by gut assumptions and spontaneous actions we have toward others and our world. A deep hope of mine is that this book provides a multiplicity of angles and opportunities for the readers to look at their own view of God as I interact with people from different cultures and traditions. By encountering different perspectives and grappling with diverse questions, the longing is that the readers gain an expanded and sturdier understanding of God. And, in this increasingly multicultural world, I believe it is vital that our view of God be influenced by those beyond American soil.
- (2) I believe this book is salient for our day because as Americans we have a significant role in the world; we’ve been gifted with a disproportionate amount of power and resources. With that being so, we don’t naturally have to rely on and learn from other cultures. We have the option to isolate; we have the opportunity to be self-contained. However, when we’re poised to receive from others, we gain so much. A powerful grace is let loose when we learn from others, especially those we might consider our lesser, or even our enemy. And we not only learn from others and about ourselves, I believe our understanding of God expands.
- (3) Through the generosity of strangers I discovered two core truths about the spiritual journey. First, as I couldn’t repay the strangers’ kindness, neither can I pay God. The extravagance of God’s love is profoundly disruptive to my egalitarian soul that strives to be on equal footing with God and others. Second, I gained a vision of God as the gracious host. As I encountered amazing Balkan and Middle Eastern hospitality, I began to recognize God as host—an image that courses through the story of God in the Scriptures.
- (4) Through hearing these strangers’ stories and learning more about their histories I believe I gained a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the world. My interpretation of religion and politics got challenged and stretched on the journey. I believe these kinds of cultural learnings are significant for peacemaking in our twenty-first-century setting.



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