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Beauty in Diversity: Learning Humanity  
Through Religion

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## Beauty in Diversity: Learning Humanity Through Religion

Emma Christen, Book Collecting Contest 2017

### Essay

Throughout my life, the way that I have understood myself, others, and the world I live in has been through books. Reading was how I preferred to learn, which could easily be seen in my high grades in English and history classes and my lower ones in math and science. Stories made sense to me – whether they were creative, such as the narratives found in fiction or memoirs, or more informational nonfiction. I loved reading because it gave me insights into the human experience, through eyes that were often very different from my own.

Because of this love for reading, the particular books I chose to read helped many of the developments in my personality throughout my childhood and adolescence to grow. Picking up the Harry Potter series as a first grader legitimately changed the way my personality unfolded, and many other books provided the same effect. This is why, as I began to have questions about religion and spirituality in high school, the first place I turned was to books.

As a child, my understanding of religion was extremely limited. My parents had both been raised Christian, but each of them had moved away from the faith they had been taught as they grew up, and so the Christian religious framework was never passed on to me. Instead, my parents told me and my siblings that we could believe in whatever we want, which sounds nice but was very confusing to a young child. I had no concept of what my options were, or what other people believed in, which left me feeling lost. I

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knew some of my friends went to church, and I had heard some things about Jesus and God, but overall I didn't know what religion was or why it was important to so many people. My understanding of religion was only informed by the Protestant values that permeate American culture, and I had no sense of what one person's individual spirituality could look like.

This confusion lasted until my parents found the Unitarian Universalist church when I was eleven years old. Unitarian Universalism is a fairly small faith largely centered in the United States, which has historical roots in Christianity but has since split off from the Christian church. It is a liberal faith that encourages each person to seek their own spiritual path, helping its members along this path through various opportunities to explore and define their own spirituality. Members relate to each other based on a set of seven moral principles, the first of which is the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Unitarian Universalism emphasizes compassion, justice, respect for others' points of view, and a community based upon these values. This was the perfect place for me to come out of my religious confusion and into a deeper understanding of what spirituality is and can do for one's own understanding of the universe.

Much of my learning took place within the church, but I began to feel that this learning was not enough – I wanted to know more. This is when I did what I had always done: turned to books to help me understand. I first discovered the religion section of our small-town library one summer when I was about sixteen years old. I had spent most of my time reading fiction before this point, and it was only that summer that I began to explore nonfiction as another way of learning. I wanted to know more about world

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religions, and the perspectives of many different groups of people on the complicated topic of religion. My exploration of the topic began there, and it has continued ever since.

Today I am a Religion major at Puget Sound, quickly approaching graduation in May of 2017. I'm planning on getting my Master's in Divinity, and from there pursuing a career in hospital chaplaincy. Looking back on my history with religion gives a clear sense of why I chose this area to study in college and to build a future career – no matter how much I learned in church, through books, and in other ways, I always needed to know more. Studying and learning about religion helps me to understand so many different types of people, and to understand their greatest motivations, dreams, and fears. It opens up a beautiful world of so many diverse perspectives, which is one of the great wonders of humanity for me: the incredible variety of viewpoints, experiences, and worldviews that different people even within one religious community can hold.

One of my favorite conversations to have with others revolves around their religious backgrounds – or lack thereof – and their understandings of spirituality. Simply put, religion is the easiest way for me to connect on a deep level with other people, something about which I care very strongly. Empathy and compassion have always been my strongest values, and my understanding of religion hugely reinforces my ability to understand and connect with people around me. This is one way in which learning about religion also helped me to learn about myself: I only began to realize the importance of values like empathy to me when I started to learn about the religious values of other people and traditions.

My collection has been developed over many years, since my first venture into the religion section at sixteen. Many of these books I found in used or discount bookstores,

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picking up various titles until I found something that caught my interest. I have used these books to understand different religions and the various perspectives that exist within each one, expanding my knowledge with each title I read. Since my exploration began at the library, many of the books I've read are missing from this list, but I hope to find and add them to my collection someday. In addition, some of these books were assigned to me as textbooks for my religion classes in college, which has also been a significant part of my learning within the subject. Each book in this collection signifies a new depth of understanding I have reached in regards to spirituality and religion, and therefore a new possibility of connecting with people across the world.

## **Annotated Bibliography**

1. *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation*. Trans. Ali Ahmed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. Print.

Including actual religious texts in my collection is very important to me. In my approach to religion I like to not only read secondhand information about a tradition, but also to investigate the tradition in its own words, so to speak. Outsider information about a tradition can be helpful, and can give important information, but I also think it's important to read a tradition's holy texts in order to get a true understanding of what that tradition is about. I often don't read the entire text in one sitting, but instead I look through it and find interesting segments or things I didn't expect. This goes along with my common practice of attending the religious services of traditions outside of my own – I want to absorb information in the most direct way possible, so that I can understand some of what it's like to be a member of that particular religious tradition.

2. Armstrong, Karen. *A History of God: From Abraham to the Present: The 4,000-Year Quest for God*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1993. Print.

Karen Armstrong was one of the first religious scholars I ever read, and she's been a huge influence on my continuing search for knowledge in religion. Her life story in itself is fascinating: as a young woman she was a Catholic nun, until the senior nuns in her convent noticed how unhappy she seemed, and suggested that God wanted her to follow a different path. Eventually, she found that path in studying comparative religion. Most of her work focuses on the two religions that captivated her the most – Buddhism and Islam – but occasionally she writes on religion as a whole, as well as Christianity. This particular book focuses on the three Abrahamic traditions, and how each of them developed a different understanding of God. It allows for an excellent understanding of the differences and similarities between these three faiths, which are intertwined in so many ways.

3. Armstrong, Karen. *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*. New York: Ballantine, 2005. Print.

One does not have to know anything about religion to know that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the biggest political and religious issues of our time. This book is certainly written with that context in mind, covering the different ways in which Jerusalem has been considered sacred by each of the Abrahamic traditions through so many centuries. The book is fairly dense, and so I've had trouble making it all the way through, but I intend to once I have more time on my hands. One city being at the center

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of three of the world's biggest religious traditions makes for a fascinating topic, about which I would like to learn more.

4. Bruni, Frank, and Elinor Burkett. *A Gospel of Shame: Children, Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church*. New York: Perennial, 2002. Print.

This is one of the only books in my collection that focuses on a dark element of religion, or something other than a glowing portrayal of what religion can bring to one's life. It brings to light a terrible abuse of power that took place within the Catholic Church over multiple decades, one that was not only perpetrated by hundreds of priests but was also covered up by church administrators and officials. The scandal shocked the United States if not the world, and revealed that religious leaders are not so perfect that they are immune to abusing the power the church has bestowed upon them. Religious leaders are, in fact, in a unique position of trust and respect that can contribute to the abuse some perpetrate. This is not a problem only of Catholicism – it has been reported in other faiths, too. I think this power to harm is an important facet of religion that should not be ignored. It's very hard to stare it straight in the face, but I think it is important to do so.

5. Curtis, C. Michael, ed. *Faith: Stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003. Print.

This book is one of two in my collection that connect religion and fiction, two things I deeply love. It's a collection of short stories that all deal with religion in different ways, which I find to be very unique – I've never seen anything like this book before, in all my searching through religion sections in libraries and used bookstores. Many of the stories deal with Christianity, but some deal with other traditions, such as Buddhism, Judaism, or Islam. Some cover stories about religious leaders, like priests or monks, and some cover stories about ordinary people practicing or going through crises with their faith. Each story provides a fictional window into a character's experience with their religion, which is what I love about religion in the first place: its ability to tell you so much about what that person is like.

6. Gibran, Kahlil. *The Prophet*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1924. Print.

I haven't managed to read every single book in my collection, and this is one of the ones I haven't gotten to yet. So many people have recommended it to me, or told me I would love it, that I thought it would be important to purchase it once I saw this well-loved or even slightly beaten-up edition in a used bookstore in Tacoma. From what I know of the book, it contains various musings, stories, or poems, depending on how you look at it. I know many people who consult the book like they would a religious text like the Bible or the Qur'an, searching for wisdom within its pages. My edition also contains a loving inscription from a mother who gifted this book to her daughter in 1984, which gives me particular feelings of tenderness toward this book and its place in my collection.

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7. Goldberg, Natalie. *Long Quiet Highway: Waking Up in America*. New York: Bantam Books, 1994. Print.

This is a special book for me because it's a memoir, a genre where one might not expect to find a religious text. I include this book because a large part of Goldberg's life, and a large part of what the book focuses on, is her religious journey. Her navigation of her identity from her Jewish roots toward Zen Buddhist practice is fascinating and inspiring, and served as an inspiration for me. Goldberg's narrative is a powerful story of spiritual seeking, and the self-knowledge it often takes to find a spiritual home.

8. Helm, Thomas E. *The Christian Religion: An Introduction*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1991. Print.

This was a textbook for one of my first religion classes, called Religions of the Book, focusing on the history and connectedness of the Abrahamic traditions. It provides a history of Christianity and its various developments, including the splitting off of its thousands of sects and denominations. For me, it helped to clarify the differences between many of these denominations, showing how, when, and why they split off from previous sects. This makes it a useful book to return to whenever I'm confused about the differences between the Lutherans and the Methodists, and so on.

9. Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha: An Indian Tale*. Trans. Joachim Neugroschel. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print. Penguin Classics.

This book is a unique part of my collection because it's the only book that can be classified as fiction. I have other creative works in my collection, but only autobiographies or collections of poetry, not fictional narratives. Religion can be a difficult subject for fiction, since it can often be used to put forth a specific understanding of a religious faith or perspective, almost like a moral in a fairytale. I often don't find those books to be particularly useful to read, since they can generalize one person's perspective as the only correct perspective of a religious tradition. *Siddhartha* is a very different reading experience. The book is one way of interpreting the life of a religious figure in ways that are not literal, but focuses on capturing the spirit of the figure with a very new story. I was fascinated by the ways in which Hesse was able to communicate truths about Buddhism with a story that has nothing to do with the historical Siddhartha Gautama's life.

10. Lang, Virginia E., and Louise Nayer. *How to Bury a Goldfish: And Other Ceremonies and Celebrations for Everyday Life*. Boston: Skinner House, 2007. Print.

I love the ways in which this book allows for a religious or spiritual feeling to be embedded in many of life's daily activities, even for those who don't identify with a



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particular tradition. Some of the rituals in the book are borrowed from other traditions, and some the authors have created. In either case, these small rituals allow for a more ceremonious way to move through life, which is one of the benefits many people find in religion. I haven't used many of them myself, but I enjoy reading through them and seeing the different ways to honor the tiny blessings of every day, as well as the bigger moments that we may not know exactly how to honor or celebrate.

11. Mitchell, Stephen, ed. *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*. New York: Harper & Row, 1993. Print.

I love creative writing and poetry independent of religion, but in combination is just such an experience to read. Sometimes works that combine teachings from many different religions can create a false sense of equivalency, as if all of these traditions are saying the same things when really they're all expressing their own unique truths; because of this, it's important to read works like this considering each tradition in its own context. Reading the whole work without considering the different traditions each piece came from can allow a reader to lose the beautiful variety and difference that can be found in the world's thousands of religious communities. Because of this, I appreciate the way the book is organized, into different sections for each author. An index in the back allows readers to learn more about each author whose work is included, including which tradition they practiced and why they may have written each specific piece.

12. Rasor, Paul B. *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square*. Boston: Skinner House, 2013. Print.

This book is significant because it's the only one in my collection that's written from the perspective of my own religious tradition. Unitarian Universalism has relatively few members compared to more major traditions, and is also much newer – modern Unitarian Universalism has only existed since 1960, making it an extremely young tradition. This means that scholarship based in it is difficult to find, which is why I only have one example of it within my collection. I would like to continue collecting more, since Unitarian Universalism contains within its members so many different perspectives, life experiences, and understandings of the religion itself.

13. Scheindlin, Raymond P. *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood*. Oxford: Oxford U, 2000. Print.

This book was my introduction to a religious tradition about which I previously did not know very much. It was also a textbook for Religions of the Book – the importance of that class to my understanding of religion can be seen in how many of its assigned books I kept after the class was over. It is, as the title makes clear, mostly a history: it does not go in depth into rituals, beliefs, or practice, focusing instead on the changes and developments the Jewish people have been through. It is a short book that covers a very

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long history, meaning this can only serve as a brief introduction to the history of Judaism and the people who practice it. But it was a useful introduction to me, since before taking this class, I knew next to nothing about Judaism. Knowing the history allowed me to move on into learning about the practices and beliefs of the tradition.

14. Suzuki, Shunryu. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Tokyo: John Weatherhill, 1986. Print.

This is an introduction to the teachings of Japanese Zen Buddhism by a very well respected monk and teacher, who made it his life's work to teach Zen in America. The book expresses the teachings Suzuki-roshi found most important in instructing American beginners within the tradition. It was also assigned to me as a textbook in the Intro to the Study of World Religions, and provided an important look into a tradition that Americans are often curious about, but often misunderstand. Anyone who equates the word "Zen" with "peaceful" has so much more to learn about a complex tradition that emphasizes often challenging introspection and intense contemplation. This introduction by a skillful teacher provides an important look into the heart of Japanese Zen Buddhism, which I found to be very meaningful.

15. Talvacchia, Kathleen T., Michael F. Pettinger, and Mark Larrimore, eds. *Queer*

*Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms*. New York: New York UP,

2015. Print.

When thinking about religion, it's important to consider narratives beyond the typical ones, and narratives that possibly even directly challenge a more typical narrative. Many people believe that queer Christianity is a complete oxymoron, but the varied explorations of these essays prove it is not: in fact, one essay author suggests that Christianity at its very nature is queer, pushing back against assumptions that heterosexuality is the only way to be Christian. It's important to me to look at groups that might appear to be marginal or fringe groups within a religious tradition, and to recognize that their understandings of their tradition are just as valid as a more common or popular understanding.

16. *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, including the*

*Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006.

Print.

Having this particular Bible in my collection is important to me because of its focus on the Bible as a historical text that has gone through many changes and different interpretations. This is not a Bible that would be regularly used by Christians in their religious practice – this is a Bible for a religious scholar, which is how I use it. It would be useful to add a Bible that could be used for religious practice to my collection, but I think it's important to include this version in my collection first. This version allows me

to look at the Bible more critically, which makes a certain kind of sense when considering that Bible stories and references are widely used in American popular culture. Despite having not grown up Christian, I can recognize many of the stories within the pages of the Bible, so it becomes more familiar to me. With this in mind, it becomes more important to look at the Bible through the eyes of a scholar rather than a practitioner. I read sections of this Bible to understand how it became the enormous influence it is today, rather than to understand how individual practitioners may view it.

17. Thurman, Robert A. F., trans. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Book of Natural Understanding in the Between*. Comp. Padma Sambhava. New York: Bantam Books, 1993. Print.

I feel that this is one of the religious texts by which people are most fascinated, but also one of the texts most often misunderstood by those who haven't taken the time to look into it. Again, I have not read the entirety of the book, but I have enjoyed perusing it and reading different sections, trying to get a holistic sense of what the message of this tradition is. In this particular edition, introductions to each section help to contextualize their contents to readers who may not be familiar with Tibetan Buddhism and this text's significance within it. This religious text's focus on death is fascinating, and points to the importance of death within religion as a whole. I hope to read more of it when I get the chance.

18. Tzu, Lao. *Tao Te Ching*. Trans. Charles Muller. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005. Print. Barnes & Noble Classics.

This is one of the only religious texts that I have read all the way through – it's organized as a series of small sections that read like poems, which makes this much easier to accomplish. Taoism is also a unique religious tradition in that elements of it are practiced as more of a cultural tradition in China, and especially Chinese young people do not often understand it as a religion. I got to see this up close when I had the amazing opportunity to travel to China just after graduating high school. I was there visiting an exchange student my family hosted in our home during my sophomore year of high school, whom I still think of as a brother. He took me to the village where his parents grew up, and his family graciously allowed me to accompany them to the gravesite of his grandfather and many of their other family members. While they were there, they burned paper as well as fruit, coffee, and cigarettes in front of the grave – when I asked Li, my host brother, why they were doing this, he told me, "I don't know, we just do it." In this way, many practices that I would consider religious are not understood that way in modern China. This understanding is part of the interest I find in reading about religious traditions that either originated or found a home in China, which is why texts about them feature prominently in my collection.

19. Walters, John. *The Essence of Buddhism*. New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell, 1964.

Print.

This book is an overview of Buddhism's four Noble Truths, which are an essential element to the religion. It was written by a British convert to the religion, who was converted on a trip to Thailand in the mid-twentieth century. His understanding of the tradition is likely influenced by his conversion, and the fact that he did not grow up within the tradition or within a country where Buddhism thrives as a majority religion. I find it important to keep the perspective of the author in mind when reading about religion, especially when reading something written by a practitioner of the tradition covered in the book. I especially find this important when reading about Asian religions, which have so often been co-opted and taken out of context by Western people. The West has a tendency to view Asian religions like Buddhism as philosophies rather than religions, which can lead to the false assumption that one can adopt Buddhist beliefs as a life philosophy without being religiously Buddhist. This assumption allows for removal of traditions like meditation or prayer flags from their deeply religious value and context, which does a disservice to the Buddhist religion. Though I am critical of this book because of its origins, I do appreciate the learning it brought me, when I was just beginning to learn more about Buddhism.

20. X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York:

Ballantine Books, 1999. Print.

Many people may not think of this book as a religious text, but once you read it with that question in your mind, it becomes clear that, in many ways, it is. I was introduced to it in the first Religion class I ever took, Intro to the Study of World Religions, and also thought it was strange that this book was on the syllabus. In everything I had learned about Malcolm X in high school, his religion was never mentioned – now that I know much more about him, I find that hard to believe. The Nation of Islam is why Malcolm X became famous, and is integral to the ideas in his autobiography. The deemphasizing of Islam in Malcolm X's legacy is an aspect of the ways in which secular society prefers to ignore overtly religious aspects of important figures – particularly non-Christian religious aspects – and create a religion-less narrative that simply is not true. Understanding the religious aspects of Malcolm X's life is incredibly important to understanding the meaning and significance of his position on civil rights.

## Wish List

1. Armstrong, Karen. *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2007. Print.

I consider this book to be Karen Armstrong's most ambitious and important work. She traces the development of many of the world's religions based on their geography, giving a deep and powerful history of how religion has been understood in various parts of the world. This unique book allows for readers to understand the historical context in which religions like the Abrahamic traditions, as well as Hinduism, Buddhism, and many others came about, which gives a very important basis of knowledge for how these traditions function today. Because of my search for religious knowledge at the library, I have read all of the books on my wish list. I want to add them to my collection because I love reading books multiple times, and having the freedom to lend them to interested friends and family members. If anyone were to ask me what the most important religious book they could read would be, I would recommend this one, which is why I think it's so important to add it to my collection someday.

2. Buehrens, John A., and Forrest Church. *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989. Print.

I came across this book while writing a paper about Unitarian Universalism for one of my most important religion classes. It's the one class that every Religion major is required to take, called Imagining Religion. This is the class that really introduces a Religion major to religious theory, and the variety of differing viewpoints held by prominent religious scholars. The final paper is an opportunity to use this knowledge of theory to apply to a case study of your choice – I thought this would be a perfect opportunity to discuss my own religious tradition, which is virtually never discussed in Religion classes (likely due to its small size and relative newness compared to other traditions). Forrest Church is a well-loved figure in Unitarian Universalism, and reading this book showed me why. This book expresses so well the things I love most deeply about my tradition, and gave me new insight as to what Unitarian Universalism is all about. I would love to add it to my collection so that I can continue to look through it for inspiration, since I was so inspired when I first read it.

3. Crow Dog, Mary. *Lakota Woman*. New York: Grove Press, 1990. Print.

This was a textbook for my very first Religion class, Intro to the Study of World Religions. Unfortunately, I lent it to a friend who never gave it back. I would like to have it as a part of my collection because it gives insight into a religious tradition that is rarely understood as such – the wide category of American indigenous religion, which contains many different understandings and practices within its umbrella. In this moving memoir,

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Crow Dog discusses the ways in which her understanding of her identity as an indigenous woman was informed and shaped by her intentional reconnection with the religion practiced by her ancestors. It is an incredibly powerful religious narrative and I would love to include it in my collection.

4. Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991. Print.

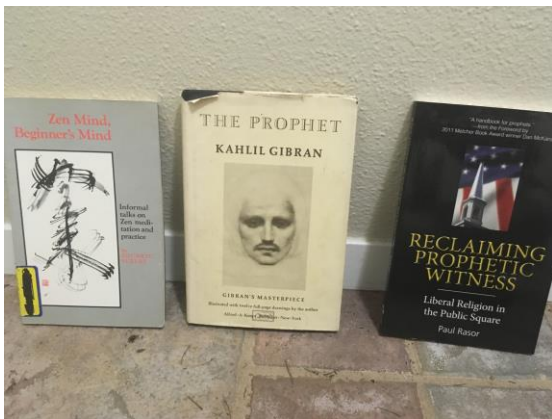
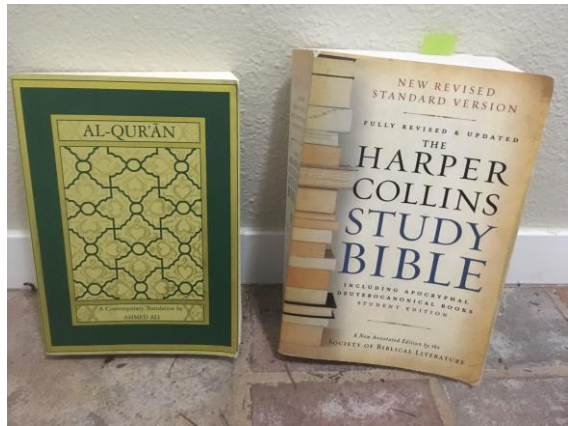
In my memory, which may be flawed, this is one of the first religion books I ever picked up. I remember finding it on a trip to the central branch of the Seattle Public Library, which is probably twenty times the size of my tiny hometown library. The book serves as an introduction to the major religious traditions of our world, providing knowledge about each tradition's history, beliefs, and practices. I think it's a great introduction for anyone wishing to learn more about religion, from a prominent religious scholar. I would like to add it to my collection so that I could lend it to anyone too intimidated by the length and density of *The Great Transformation*. If that book seems like too big of a task to attempt, this one serves as a good first step into religious knowledge and understanding.

5. Unitarian Universalist Association. *Singing the Living Tradition*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993. Print.

This is the main hymnal used in Unitarian Universalist congregations, including the one in which I grew up. Music is such an important part of religion in many ways, and my own religious tradition is no exception. Religious music can be a wonderful way to step into understanding a religious tradition, because of the deep and powerful meaning embedded in so many hymns and other devotional songs. I only have a limited knowledge of my own tradition's hymnal, because of the limited amount of hymns sung most frequently in our services. I would love to have this in my collection as a resource for my own religious practice, as well as to share these beautiful songs with others.

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Photos



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