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*Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions.* by Guy L. Beck, editor

Greg Hansen

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Guy L. Beck, editor. *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions*.  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006

Reviewed by Greg Hansen

Guy L. Beck's scholarly and innovative book explores religion through music. It elevates and emphasizes the critical role of musical activity in religious life. Rather than discussing music as an aesthetic supplement to religion, Beck's book takes the approach that music is not incidental in religious practice but is a sacred treasure central to the growth and sustenance of world religions. *Sacred Sound* promises to be a milestone in the growing cross-disciplinary study of religion and music and includes a CD of musical examples.

The project is divided into six sections, each one treating a major world faith: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism. Each essay is written by a different expert in that religion. Beck states that he assembled the book partly to fill his need for a textbook and audio anthology for the classroom. His focus is primarily on vocal music, especially chants, hymns, and sacred songs that have been memorized and passed down through generations to the present and are still a vital part of the transformation of lives in religious communities.

The book is innovative in its approach. Beck states:

One of the principal axioms in the academic field of religious studies has been that religion is a universal part of human culture and civilization. . . . A particular religion, including its cultic and social dimensions, is ideally perceived as a kind of artistic creation in total human response to the presence of the sacred or divine. . . . Scholars in the field of religious studies stress that other religions can be understood or apprehended by outsiders without the necessity of faith, commitment, or cultic participation. Such empathetic understanding is without regard to race, gender, nationality, social standing, or religious affiliation. (3)

Each section discusses the origins, ritual context, personal context, technical forms, current trends, and future of the music for that particular faith. The book's scholarship is impeccable, the research exhaustive, and

the information relevant. The chapter “Christianity and Music” contains audio examples that reflect a balanced and significant set of musical material: “Kyrie,” “Sanctus,” “Agnus Dei,” “A Mighty Fortress,” “Salve Regina,” “I’ll Praise My Maker,” “Holy Holy Holy,” “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” and “Amazing Grace.”

Of special interest to a *BYU Studies* audience may be the treatments on chant and music in early Christianity, ritual context in public liturgy, the background leading to our present Christian hymns, and the evolution from oral tradition to hymnal and songbook. The context of how the present form of worship in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints evolved from the Christian tradition is evident, though not explored specifically. Being intimately familiar with mostly Christian religions, I can only assume the accuracy of the other treatments are as well done as this section.

As a contribution to the emerging field of ethnomusicology, the book stands well on its own. It is less about presenting new information than it is about the emphasis and understanding of diverse religious musical traditions, gathered into one volume. But it is this very emphasis that is also its weakness. Studying religion only through its music, in a context lacking the necessity of faith, commitment, or participation, is like a purely clinical analysis of a kiss between two lovers; the experience itself is far more than a biological description of the attraction of a species. The accompanying CD is comparable to the book in its need for greater spirit and passion. If Beck’s purpose was to inform and educate from an academic standpoint, he has succeeded. If Beck desired to help readers empathetically understand world religions, then he may have missed the mark. The direction taken for the book, though innovative, overemphasizes one part of the world religious experience by focusing on a single aspect of it, thereby removing much of the enlightenment, life, and passion that Beck claims religious music is all about. Relatively expensive for a paperback book and CD, those with no professional or personal relevance to the book’s subject may want to investigate further before purchasing it.

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Greg Hansen (ghmuspro@aol.com) is an award-winning composer, arranger, and record producer. He also serves as the Music Review Editor for *BYU Studies*.