

About Ancient Texts

by Anne Emerson, September 30, 2026

This essay is to remind believers that many of their (readable) holy books originated as (unreadable-today) ancient texts. I understand that the focus of many spirituality study groups in the Western tradition is on Christian teachings (including what is in The Holy Bible, in various different translations from other times and languages). I wish to address those who sometimes appear to forget that the many non-Christians among us have their own ancient texts and traditions.

Some of you may know that I have some scholarly background in the study of Islam (Main Holy text: The Qur'an. This is not the only "message" from which Muslims receive spiritual and legal advice, although it is a very important one.) You may not know that I also have an interest in Buddhism/Hinduism/Meditation, and other Eastern philosophies. The "Oriental Institute" at Oxford where I learned about the Middle East, ancient and modern, also included studies in all sorts of ancient texts, from all sorts of spiritual and philosophical traditions.



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I was fascinated to discover, sitting out on a long shelf under a window in the back of the library at the Oriental Institute, a number of *very* large books, each in a different language, called Lexicons. I had never heard of a Lexicon before. It is the next level up from an etymological dictionary. It is full of words in ancient languages, with examples of their usage. The person who compiled the Lexicon is not about to give you a translation of these words. He/she gives you a number of ways in which the word is used in a sentence or phrase, with their translations, and you have to decide for yourself how you are going to translate the word in the particular instance when you have run across it.

One reason for this hesitancy, on the part of compilers, is time and distance from the ancient world. Another is that ancient texts are to be understood differently from modern texts. I can think of various reasons for that, but an important one is that in ancient times reading and writing was limited only to the elites. Thus, ancient texts are unlikely to be readily accessible to everyday people, nor expected to be so. They required interpretation on the part of a wise mentor, often a priest or shaman, and it was expected that they would be used in this way.

I picked up a book at the Williamsburg Regional Library book sale recently. It is called *The Yoga-Sutra of Patanjali; A New Translation with Commentary*, by Chip Hartranft. (Shambhala Classics, Boston and London, 2003). It is an ancient East Indian text, translated with commentary, and the translator

reminds us that it is obscure to our modern Western minds, precisely because it is more in the nature of a “reminder” than a complete text. Ancient oral poems had a similar social function – to share with the public what the leaders wanted to share, often in the form of epic stories and the glorification of revered leaders or tribal norms.

I have read other scholarly books of this type, most notably one on *The Tao Ti Ching*, by Lao-Tzu. In my own religious education, I have read (some of) the Bible and been helped to understand its meaning, by vicars, priests, and theologians. In my scholarly education on Islam, I have been helped to translate the Qur’an (parts of it), and have read at least a few comments on the meanings of some passages within it.

I looked up, for myself, in my Arabic-English dictionary, the meaning of the word Hijra, which is often translated Holy War. It more accurately means “struggle,” as some Muslim scholars will tell you. While there is an element of an actual fight (Muhammad’s followers did go to war, to establish their community), many scholars today will say that the more-accurate way to understand the word Hijra (struggle) is in the struggle for justice. It does not have to be a physical fight against others and can also be thought of as a struggle within oneself to do the right thing.

I understand that there is a similar idea within Christianity, as, for example, heard in the Christian hymn, “Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before...” The point is that we are fighting for justice and I, for one, never thought of it as a fight in which weapons would be wielded. What justice might be, is a difficult matter. But a war over territory and resources does not seem, to me, to fit the bill.

My personal philosophical quest has become a search for what all of the great spiritual traditions have in common. If there’s a reason for that, perhaps you could say that I became “stateless” when I first moved to the USA at the age of 22, newly married to my DC-area husband. The shock of having left home was not anything I had anticipated, and the resolution of my sense of not being English anymore has been, perhaps, to find myself a citizen of the world instead.

My main conclusion with regard to this “quest” has been that spiritual teachings are what a culture needs in order to reconcile the conflict between self and society. We all have self-focused instincts; it is the “survival instinct” of living beings. Yet we also have loyalties to social groups, and sometimes those two types of instincts or loyalties compete.

Different cultures resolve these challenges in different ways; they develop different traditions, laws, and taboos. Yet we are all fundamentally human and there are some themes that all of the great ancient religious and philosophical traditions have in common. For the modern English-speaking world, if you can stand to read graduate-level psychology, I recommend A.H. Maslow’s last book – ***The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*** is a foundational posthumous work by humanistic psychologist [Abraham H. Maslow](#), published in 1971.

Thanks for listening.