

Water: an eco-spiritual perspective

*Water does not close itself to light as does a solid body, but makes itself clear
and transparent; in the pure play of colour in the rainbow
it attains the fullness of possibilities.*

Theodor Schwenk (2014: 98)

Introduction

As something both material and ethereal, water lends itself to religio-cultural analogies pertaining to our place within, and relationship to, the cosmos. Such concerns underpin notions of *spirituality* (MacDonald, 2005). This review is situated within the context of contemporary spiritual practices which combine ‘particular religious traditions with concern for the global situation and the life of the planet’ (*ibid*: 8719-8720). A survey of the literature reveals a range of approaches to the role of water in traditional as well as secular spiritual practices. This review commences with a look at the literature pertaining to the element of water and thereafter critiques aforementioned approaches to eco-spiritual waters. The aim of this literature review is to establish the relevance of viewing water from a spiritual perspective in relation to wider ecological factors as well as the significance of this field of study in terms of identifying common themes and knowledge gaps. This information may be used to develop the research question.

Elemental Water

In order to ascertain water’s spiritual nature and wider ecological implications, an exploration of water’s qualities and characteristics is arguably a necessary starting point. To this end, the work of Philip Ball (2003), Paolo Consigli (2008) and Chen *et al* (2013) are useful resources. Through diverse methodologies, their work attempts to define the nature of water and episto-ontological significance of such in human-

water relationships. Ball's *H2O: A Biography of Water* (2003) remains a classic with regards to disseminating a jargon-free scientific perspective on water. Ball's humane approach embraces the multi-dimensional nature of water. It also recognises how the commodification and politicisation of freshwater sources have contributed to global inequalities in terms of quality and accessibility suggesting a need to 'rethink our relationship with water' (*ibid*: 331). Questioning water's meaning outside of its scientific box, Ball acknowledges the value imparted by mystical teachings that speak of water's 'non-physical vital force' in tandem with capacity to act 'as a kind of sensory organ through which celestial influences enter [into] the world' (p. 311). It is a surprising, but arguably refreshing, stance from the world of science that recognises a prerequisite for greater water-reverence in the mitigation of escalating water crises. Further works of significance include Brian Fagan's *Elixir* (2011) and Jamie Linton's *What is Water?* (2010). The past decade has produced a number of such works in response to a growing awareness of water being more-than-resource (Chen *et al*, 2013: 276-7).

Consigli's work in *water: pure and simple* (2008) offers a broad, multi-disciplinary, approach that includes an interesting philosophical discussion on water's *moral compass*. He argues that 'water teaches us how to live more sensitively, more consciously', through the study of its natural rhythms and flow patterns (p. xiv). This work brings the worldviews of science and spirituality together to show how water's unique molecular structure provides an ecological model that 'generates equilibrium and has the power to harmoniously integrate all things' (p. 24). Chapters on water and consciousness as well as water lore in mystical traditions further illuminate water's potential as a spiritual medium. Consigli's work falls short with regards to applying the spiritual wisdom he espouses about water to wider pragmatic issues, but it nevertheless makes a valuable contribution to studies of water in terms of embracing the more mysterious aspects of water. The work of Chen *et al* in *Thinking with Water* (2013) complements the latter with an innovative eco-cultural approach that gives agency to water. In their introductory chapter, the editors argue that 'waters hold great spiritual meaning across cultures' and that such waters gather 'stories, identities, and memories' (p. 5). Contributors to this work are largely motivated by eco-political and eco-feminist concerns that recognise an inter-

connected relational world. In her contribution, Veronica Strang draws on ethnographic studies of Australian aboriginal cosmology to demonstrate how the sacralisation of water engenders harmonious human-environmental relationships (pp. 185-211).

Holy Water

Within the discipline of anthropology, Strang has contributed significantly to the literature on water's spiritual dimension. Her seminal work, *The Meaning of Water* (2004), includes two particularly useful chapters on water's role in both religious and secular cosmological schema (pp. 83-111). Her field research for this ethnographic study in Dorset's Stour Valley reveal an abundance of traditional and revived water-veneration practices that acknowledge water's essentiality to life. Thus, eco-social relationships feature strongly in Strang's work with an unabashed call for water management and conservation policies to honour the sanctity of water. Themes pertaining to water's spiritual nature continue in later publications. In *Water: Nature and Culture* (2015), Strang provides an expanded account of water's spiritual significance from early Nature religions through to modern-day water-veneration practices. In her final chapter on the eco-politics of water, Strang argues that 'societies need to remember what water really is, what it means and *why* it matters' (p. 173). Ethnographic accounts abound on the subject of sacred waters with symbolism and ritual practice being their focus of expression. Alan Ereira's *Heart of the World* (1990) provides an insight to the cosmology of Colombia's Kogi Indians wherein water is synonymous with *Aluna*, the cosmic sea of 'memory and potential' (p. 115) thereby echoing the philosophical stance of Mircea Eliade who described water as '*fons et origo*, the source of all possible existence', in *Patterns of Comparative Religion* (1958).

The spiritual qualities attributed to water are epitomised in the *well cult* practices explored by Janet and Colin Bord in *Sacred Waters* (1985), James Rattue in *The Living Stream* (1995), Ian Bradley in *Water: A Spiritual History* (2012) and Dieter Gerten in *Water of Life, Water of Death* (2014). These seminal works provide rich,

well-researched, data on the subject of water-veneration from historical and religio-cultural perspectives. With the passage of time, the authors of these works have become increasingly vociferous with regards to environmental issues. Commenting on the historical aspect of water-veneration, Gerten argues that 'a spiritual sensibility for water might well still be effective in solving environmental and water-related problems today' (*ibid*: 46). Finally, Jean Rudhardt's 'Water' in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2005), offers an invaluable resource from a religious studies perspective despite lacking an ecological view. However, this article provides a useful synopsis of water as portrayed in the cosmogonies and mythologies of ancient civilisations to present-day indigenous peoples. Rudhardt argues that 'wherever they are found, waters are often bound up with divine powers' (p. 9701). Primordial waters are particularly significant for the generation of anthropomorphised deities and / or life itself. Joining the eco-spiritual water dots, the *Encyclopedia of Nature and Religion* edited by Bron Taylor (2005) offers perspectives on Islam (pp. 1714-16) and Zoroastrianism (pp. 1716-18) which, due to their situated waters, emphasise equity and sustainability of resources.

Conclusion

This literature review has attempted to critique a selection of scholarly works pertaining to elemental as well as spiritual waters. Situating this discussion within contemporary notions of a spirituality contingent with eco-social and eco-political relations, this review has focused on works that reflect current environmental concerns. Such an approach has arguably served to establish the relevance of investigating water as something that is intrinsically sacred and, as such, offers a lens through which analyses of both traditional and secular religio-cultural practices can occur. This review has also served to establish the significance of this field of study in terms of having identified recurring themes such as practices within both traditional and secular communities that reflect a reverence for water and calls to protect our planet's watery resources. In terms of knowledge gaps, there is arguably scope for further investigations into revivalist water-veneration practices and such a topic could provide an interesting dissertation research question.

1,265 words (without main title and epigraph)

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