

Bradley, I., (2012) *Water: A Spiritual History*. London; New Delhi; New York; Sydney: Bloomsbury.

Introduction

This book offers an exploration of water from a spiritual perspective which, according to its author, concerns water's association with 'the magical, the mysterious and the divine' (back cover). It reflects Ian Bradley's personal interest as well as scholarly endeavours from the subjective stance of a liberal theologian, that is, one disposed to inner motivating factors as opposed to the traditions of an external authority (Gaur, 2018). Bradley's liberalism embraces a philosophical, humanistic, approach that engenders a nuanced exploration of water's unique characteristics and spiritual history. Bradley's broad aim is to track the spiritual history of water in terms of its symbolic and ritual significance with a view to charting 'key developments and themes' (p. x). His investigation is limited to fresh water, which is admitted to making up just a fraction of our planetary waters. However, as Bradley asserts, it is this precious supply that 'has been accorded particular spiritual significance and venerated through human history' (*ibid*). This publication fits neatly between the likes of *The Living Stream* (Rattue, 1995), *The Meaning of Water* (Strang, 2004) and *Water, Pure and Simple* (Consigli, 2008) providing a valuable contribution to studies of water from cultural and religious study perspectives. This work has wider implications in terms of also contributing to urgent environmental debates.

Summary

The book's format is well laid out with nine chapters followed immediately by an interesting appendix that describes a selection of watery sites chosen by the author for their spiritual significance. Thereafter, there are comprehensive chapter notes, a bibliography and alphabetical index. The book opens with a number of literary quotes that include a verse from Philip Larkin's classic poem *Water*. The words from this poem capture the sentiments of the book's opening chapter which deals with the spiritual significance of water as perceived by the world's major religions. Bradley describes how each of these faith groups makes use of water to construct foundational cosmogonic stories and metaphors that speak about ways of being in the world. Bradley goes on to identify another eighteen ways in which water has been used to create meaning within a spiritual context. These include ideas such as certain sources acting as gateways to other worlds or as mirrors into the future. Water also represented a 'state of pre-existence' and 'source of wisdom' (p. 15; 21). Tapping into his theological expertise, Bradley closes this chapter with an in-depth exploration of water's spiritual significance in Christian baptism.

The following two chapters focus on the notion of hydrolatry, a term appropriated and revitalised by James Rattue (1995) to describe practices of water veneration. This section of the book charts the veneration of springs, wells, rivers and lakes from the Neolithic through to the Classical, Celtic and early Christian periods. Bradley narrows the focus of these chapters to Euro-centric cultural practices to deliver a salient account of recurring themes found in the water veneration practices of these ancient civilisations. As he explains, bodies of water were frequently viewed as the habitats of divine beings, whilst water itself was viewed as the source of life and valued for its capacity to heal as well as its 'liminal qualities' (p. 38). He describes, for instance, how the Greeks used waters that emerged out of the ground for practices of divination. Bradley presents the art of bathing as central to the social, cultural and spiritual life of the Romans arguing that their therapeutic baths also served as places of worship. He then charts the demise of these bathhouses and the prohibition of water veneration with the coming of Christianity showing, ironically, how the bathhouses eventually resurface as holy shrines and water is once again venerated through ritual sanctification.

Bradley admits to speculation regarding pre-Christian *water cult* practices, but nevertheless recognises that a proclivity for baptisms conducted around springs and rivers as well as widespread water-shrine activities had a significant influence on the *holy well* phenomena of medieval Christianity. He embarks on a systematic exposition of the *holy well* phenomena arguing that it was 'especially prevalent' in so-called Celtic parts of Britain and constituted 'one of the most important and intriguing chapters in the spiritual history of water' (p. 71). Bradley restricts this account to practices within the British Isles taking great care to debunk the romantic antiquarianism of the 18th-19th centuries. Bradley argues that the majority of holy wells, that is, both naturally-emerging sources of water and culturally-constructed artefacts, were the product of medieval Christian practices. Despite historical divergences, Bradley asserts the importance of holy wells in terms of them testifying 'to a long and lively tradition of devotion centred around the element of water' (p. 75). He refers to archaeological evidence for their association with healing and worship; evidence that reveals a continuation of ancient pre-Christian practices in the well rituals of medieval Christianity that survive the Protestant Reformation to re-emerge in the practices of 21st century revivalist movements.

Discussion

Bradley's work is a compelling read; a spiritual journey across millennia exploring perceptions of water from a range of religio-cultural perspectives. It has been criticised for lacking 'deeper scriptural commentary' as well as 'a more rigorous comparative theology of water across faiths' (Ridpath, 2018) but, within the

limitations set by the author himself, this work nevertheless covers a broad spectrum of ideas. As summarised above, Bradley's core aims and objectives are met in terms of tracking key developments in the spiritual history of water albeit, at times, such developments having a narrow Euro-centric focus. Bradley's theological stance is prominent throughout this work with the sacrament of Baptism being central to his investigation into water's spiritual history. This sacramental act embodies the symbolic and ritual significance of water that Bradley sets out to explore so, unsurprisingly, plays a central role throughout the book. As he explains, the 'single most important and ubiquitous spiritual function of water within all the world's major religious traditions is as a medium for ritual cleansing and purification' (p. 26). Bradley's strength lies in his considered, liberal, approach. He frequently cites the work of Rattue (1995) heeding the pitfalls of post-Enlightenment romanticism whilst remaining open to emerging notions of 'secular hydrolatry' as well as latter-day revivalist practices (Strang, 2004: 103-111). Bradley also acknowledges the narrow divide between sacred and secular uses of water commenting that such a distinction 'is not clear-cut' (p. 75). Such integrity arguably lends credence to his work. The inclusion of four contemporary voices on the subject of water's spiritual aspects from a 'New Age' perspective round off Bradley's quest to understand water's symbolic value (p. 241).

Conclusion

Within the limited scope of this book, Bradley has woven an insightful narrative across time and space to illuminate key developments in the spiritual history of water. This work is arguably a history of ideas in terms of how water's anomalous qualities have contributed to the meaning-making processes of faith groups around the world and through the ages. From healing wells through to therapeutic spas and modern-day practices of dowsing, hydrotherapy and well-dressing, Bradley's account of water's spiritual history as well as his exploration of water's symbolic and ritual significance provide a valuable and timely resource for scholars of cultural as well as religious studies. However, this work has wider implications in terms of current environmental concerns. Contemporary views about water's spiritual nature add legitimacy to concerns about global water crises in terms of increasing urbanisation, pollution, water-intensive agriculture and groundwater extraction. Bradley comments on the paradox of rediscoveries about water's spiritual meaning 'just as the global supply of the element itself is under such severe strain' (p. 246). In the end, Bradley's exploration of water's spiritual history pays tribute to the element of water for its symbolic potentiality as well as its finite, life-sustaining, materiality.

1,284 words

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