

Sylvie Shaw and Andres Francis (eds.), *Deep Blue: Critical Reflections on Nature, Religion and Water* (London: Equinox, 2008), xvii + 310 pp., \$27.95 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-8455-3255-0. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v4i1.100.

In most discussions of water, economic and political factors dominate. For instance, statements such as ‘water is the oil of the 21st century’, and ‘this is a century of water wars’ have become commonplace. In many ways these are appropriate metaphors for the global crises around water availability and scarcity, purity and contamination, and questions of water as commodity or human right. Yet rarely in water discussions are cultural—and in particular religious—dimensions, with their profound symbolic meanings, moods, and motivations, included. In *Reflections on Water*, political scientists Joachim Blatter and Helen Ingram argue convincingly that the primary meanings ascribed to water have been limited to controlling water through engineering, law, and economics to the neglect of other meaning systems, reflecting an ‘individualistic, rational, and utilitarian perception of water’ (Blatter, Ingram and Levesque 2001: 32; see also Blatter, Ingram and Doughman 2001: 5, 16).

In *Deep Blue: Critical Reflections on Nature, Religion and Water*, editors Sylvie Shaw and Andrew Francis respond to that exclusion through an intriguing and challenging assembly of authors notable for their passionate and profoundly spiritual approaches to water. The volume explores a variety of traditions often overlooked in discussions of Western and Eastern religions. The authors of *Deep Blue* share a sense of religious understandings and expressions embracing a wide diversity of indigenous religious traditions along with Pagan rituals, Wicca, Jungian symbolism, reflections of Rachel Carson, animistic thought, and other sources—a swirling vortex involving the sacred nature of water. As the editors state in their introduction, ‘the sacred connection with water, physically, emotionally and spiritually lies at the heart of this volume’ (p. 13). The book’s import is to recover ancient and contemporary meanings, moods, and motivations necessary to engage people in a recovery of water’s significance beyond its utilitarian necessity.

The variety of authors share one central conviction: the need for the recovery of water’s sacred reality in our lived experiences, whether through Bron Taylor’s reflection on ‘aquatic nature religion’ (Chapter 12), or in the explorations of Margaret Ferris in Christian theology (Chapter 11). The writers all reflect the definition of ‘deep blue’ given by editors Shaw and Francis ‘as that glimpse of divinity resonant in the life-affirming connection between humans and water. Embedded in this lived and living religion is a deep reverence for water and water bodies that manifests a profound relationship with the divine other’ (p. 1).

Three major themes emerge in the volume. First, island peoples, whose reality is literally surrounded by water, voice their living traditions and challenge our ‘landlocked’ conceptions. The planet’s surface is 70% water, and yet the ‘blue’ of the waters has been marginalized in relation to the ‘green’ of forests. A second theme involves the fluid boundaries between land and sea, between control and the certainty which the solidity of ground provides versus the amorphous, mysterious, even threatening loss of control in deep waters, both literally and in the depths of the psyche. Finally, the authors explore the ethical and spiritual dimensions of water issues, whether through Susan Bratton’s exploration of Rachel Carson’s ‘ecosystemic equity’ and ‘sea ethic’ (Chapter 9) or in Andrew Francis’s discussions of surfing and the reality of the spirit in water (Chapter 5). Sylvie Shaw explores the ethical dimensions of

'sea-carers' and the rights of the marine ecosystem to flourish, while Bron Taylor reflects on a sea spirituality (Chapters 8 and 12). The authors share a reverence and sense of awe as well as trembling about the seas, which replicate the language, moods, and motivations of traditional, historical religions.

Deep Blue is enhanced by Andy Smith's art and the inclusion of poetry, beginning with Francis's own introductory poem, 'I am water. /I have come to speak to you' (p. xvii). Finally, Adrienne Harris adds an 'eco-logue' calling readers to a water ethic to ensure water's right to its own flourishing. One could wish for one or two more articles on rivers and lakes as most of the articles relate to the sea, reflecting perhaps the image provoked by the title. Nonetheless, the volume is an important contribution to developing a new water ethos resting upon the reverence due to the sacred waters of earth. *Deep Blue* is an essential and desperately needed contribution to any further discussions and study of the spiritual import of water.

References

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