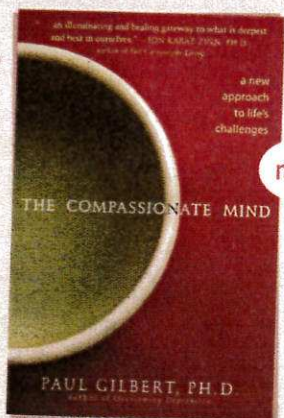


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women, some of whom—Ethel Merston, for instance, or Mme Ouspensky, or Pamela Travers—have received little attention in the historical literature. The other is the history of the Work after Gurdjieff's death; the present volume is one of only a handful that have essayed Gurdjieff's legacy from 1949 onwards. Dushka Howarth's sometimes caustic assessments of the current state of the Work will vex some (she claims insufficient attention to Movements and too much emphasis on meditative sittings) but it's refreshing and even edifying to hear a contrarian viewpoint.

The meat and potatoes of this book remain the memories and photographs, however, and for those interested in reading about the Work and its astonishing range of personalities, the book provides a full meal.

Jeff Zaleski is editor in chief of PARABOLA.

WATER & ITS SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

EDITED BY VIRGINIA GRAY HENRY-BLAKEMORE AND ELENA LLOYD-SIDLE. FONSVITAE (WWW.FONSVITAE.COM). 2009.

PP. 184. \$19.95 PAPER

REVIEWED BY SAMUEL BENDECK SOTILLOS

"Why die of thirst when the water of life is near? Drink from the source, *For all things live from water.*"

HAFIZ

Conventional wisdom informs us of the crucial role that water plays in our collective lives. Regrettably, present-day discussions of water are often outweighed by its *quantitative* aspect pertaining to

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its increasing scarcity due to lack of rain fall, deforestation, and increasing atmospheric temperatures associated with climate change, not to mention the hitherto unprecedented phenomenon of the privatization of water, while *qualitative* concerns regarding its contamination are also on the rise as fresh water is becoming evermore limited. The current pandemic is often couched within what has been identified as the environmental crisis of our times; although undeniably real, it frequently lends itself to misdiagnosis by not acknowledging or understanding what is above and beyond it, which is essentially a matter of the spiritual domain. In contradistinction, the perennial wisdom of the *sophia perennis* informs us that not only is water essential to sustaining sapiential existence itself, but it is sacred and concurrently a symbol of the human soul, thus framing the most urgent call of all, the spiritual crisis of contemporary life. The following Native American proverb of the Lakota people is fitting: "The frog does not drink up the pond in which he lives."

WATER & ITS SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE was prepared in honor of the fourteenth annual Festival of Faiths, in Louisville, KY, organized by the Center for Interfaith Relations. It is therefore apropos that among its selections are providential essays by spiritual representatives who are at once authorities within their respective traditions, yet also embrace the universality of truth underlying the religions of the world, including the First Peoples or Shamanic traditions. These selections include essays and or poetry by Sri Ramakrishna, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Whitall N. Perry, Emma Clark, Huston Smith, Henry David Thoreau, Thomas Merton, Wendell

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Titus Burckhardt in his consummate essay, "The Symbolism of Water," underscores the interconnectedness of the environment and the human being, who is made of up seventy-percent water, in its unanimous light: "When the balance of Nature is not disturbed, the earth's waters themselves continually re-establish their purity, whereas, when this balance is lost, death and pollution are the result. It is thus not merely a coincidence that the 'life' of the waters is a symbol for the 'life' of the human soul." That the corporeal world and life itself are indivisible from the element of water is directly acknowledged by the sacred traditions: "We made every living thing of water" (QUR'AN XXI:30). The mystic Angelus Silesius writes: "The world is my sea, the sailor the spirit of God. The boat my body, the soul he who wins back his Abode." This is also verified by the eminent Sufi, Shams-i-Tabriz: "Conceive Soul as a fountain, and these created beings as rivers.... Do not think of the water failing; for this water is without end." Plotinus also affirms the mystical dimension of water: "Imagine a fountain that has no origin beside itself; it gives itself to all the rivers, yet is never exhausted by what they take, but always remains integrally what it was...the fountain of life, the fountain of intellect, beginning of being, cause of the good, and root of the Soul." The process of spiritual alchemy and its relation to water is symbolized by Gautama Buddha's words: "As a lotus flower is born in water, grows in water and rises out of water to stand above it unsoiled, so I, born in the world, raised in the world, having overcome the world, live unsoiled by the world." The coincidence of opposites or *coincidentia*

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oppositorum is skillfully presented in the following symbolism offered in the Rg Veda: “Though the rivers flow, the Waters do not move.” (v. 47:5)

The timeless wisdom of all ages is perhaps summarized best within the topic of water in Verse 8 of the Tao Te Ching:

The best way to live
is to be like water
For water benefits all things
and goes against none of them
It provides for all people
And even cleanses those places
A man is loath to go
In this way it is just like Tao
Live in accordance with *the nature*
of things...

One who lives in accordance with nature
Does not go against the way of things
He moves in harmony with the present
moment
Always knowing the truth of just what
to do

The underlying symbolism of water both East and West is well expressed in the didactic words of René Guénon: “Walking on the water’ symbolizes the domination of the world of forms and change.” Sri Ramakrishna humorously presents this theme in light of those seeking paranormal powers in dissimilarity from integration with the transcendent, and we also are reminded of the warning

presented across all spiritual traditions about the seeking of such powers:

A man after fourteen years’ penance in a solitary forest obtained at last the power of walking on water. Overjoyed at this, he went to his Guru and said, “Master, master, I have acquired the power of walking on water.” The master rebukingly replied, “Fie, O child! Is this the result of thy fourteen years’ labors? Verily thou hast obtained only that which is worth a penny; for what thou hast accomplished after fourteen years’ arduous labor ordinary men do by paying a penny to the boatman.”

The life-giving qualities are perhaps most perceived in places that have minimal rainfall, such as the desert ecologies. Muhammad Asad articulates in a descriptive and seamless manner how life originates from the Divine, is sustained by it, and thus returns to it:

We had stopped for our noon prayer. As I washed my hands, face and feet from a water-skin, a few drops spilled over a dried-up tuft of grass at my feet, a miserable little plant, yellow and withered and lifeless under the harsh rays of the sun. But as the water trickled over it, a shiver went through the shriveled blades, and I saw how they slowly, tremblingly, unfolded. A few more drops, and the little blades

moved and curled and then straightened themselves slowly, hesitatingly, trembling.... I held my breath as I poured more water over the grass tuft. It moved more quickly, more violently, as if some hidden force were pushing it out of its dream of death. Its blades—what a delight to behold!—contracted and expanded like the arms of a starfish, seemingly overwhelmed by a shy but irrepressible delirium, a real little orgy of sensual joy: and thus life re-entered victoriously what a moment ago had been as dead, entered it visibly, passionately, overpowering and beyond in its majesty.

Within the discussion, it is apt to mention the following words of John Chryssavgis in consideration of the meaning of water outpouring from the human body in the form of tears and their transpersonal significance: “Tears signify an opening of new life, a softening of the soul, a clarity of mind. They bring us to rebirth and the world to healing. They signify a true homecoming. Through tears we are able to enter the treasury of the heart.”

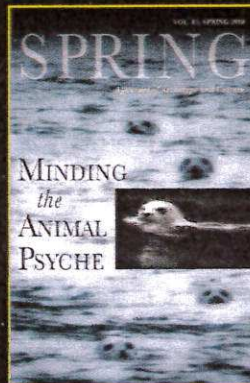
A. K. Coomaraswamy highlights the symbolism of water and contextualizes its symbolism in its unanimous orientation by way of grand synthesis: “In conclusion: we are not much concerned here with the literary history of these striking agreements.... The point is, rather, that such collations as have been made above illustrate a single case of the general proposition that there are scarcely any, if any, of the fundamental doctrines of any orthodox tradition that cannot as well be supported by the authority of many or all of the other orthodox traditions, or, in other words, by the unanimous tradition of the *Philosophia Perennis et Universalis*.”

This anthology assists in the recovery of the sacred meaning of water via the spiritual traditions of the world in a very

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GUEST EDITOR: G. A. Bradshaw Ph.D., Ph.D., Executive Director of The Kerulos Center, co-founder of the Trans-species Institute, and author of *Elephants on the Edge: What Animals Teach Us about Humanity* (Yale University Press 2009), an in-depth psychological portrait of elephants in captivity and in the wild.

Publication Date: April 2010

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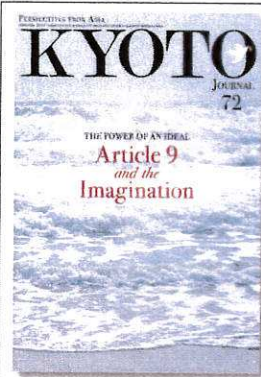
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comprehensive and unitive fashion. There have been scores of books published in recent years on the miraculous stature of water yet they often “miss the mark” by not acknowledging the underlying spiritual principles that provide the true origin in divinis, not only of water but of all the elements (air, fire, water, and earth) that make up the manifest world. In renewing the spiritual significance of water, we are reminded of the Buddhist parable of the finger pointing at the moon—*When the finger points at the moon, the foolish man looks at the finger*—which is to say water is sacred and inseparable from sapiential existence, yet the finger points beyond its own designation, to what is transcendent and Divine from where water and consequently all existence originates—“from God do we come and unto Him do we return” (*inna lillahi wa inna ilahi raji’un*).

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos has received graduate degrees in Education and in Psychology. He has traveled throughout the world to visit sacred sites, and has had contact with noted spiritual authorities. He currently works as a mental health clinician in northern California.

BOOKS FROM THE PARABOLA FAMILY

THE DICE GAME OF SHIVA: How Consciousness Creates the Universe

BY RICHARD SMOLEY, NEW WORLD LIBRARY, 2009. PP. 240.

\$14.95 PAPER

REVIEWED BY TRACY COCHRAN

In the prologue to his latest book, Smoley, the editor of the Theosophical Society journal, *QUEST*, and a consulting editor to *PARABOLA*, describes participating in an extracurricular Kabbalah group that met in shabby apartments (often his) during the time he was formally studying classical literature and philosophy at storied Oxford (a course famously known as “Greats”) in the late 1970s. “When we met in the Kabbalah group, our discussions were not always profound, and in fact were seasoned with a large dose of the silliness that could only be expected of beginners, but I had the sense of being surrounded by something greater—an unseen cosmos that was as infinite and mysterious as the night sky,” writes Smoley, who also had a degree in classics from Harvard. “When I turned

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