

McAnally, E. (2019). *Loving Water Across Religions: Contributions to an Integral Water Ethic*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Reviewed by Verna DeLauer¹

Many environmental practitioners are aware of the role Aldo Leopold played in the environmental movement in the mid-20th century. Leopold was a forester, a professor, a conservationist, and a writer known most notably for his book, *A Sand County Almanac* (1966). This book in particular brought to light the interrelationships between humans and land as well as the moral responsibility incumbent upon us to honor those relationships.

Leopold's "land ethic" is an expanded definition of the notion of "community" to mean that caring for one another or for the land are not two separate processes but are intrinsically linked. With the threat of a climate emergency looming, this enhanced framing of "community" is desperately needed to create global solutions. Leopold also stressed that caring is often the result of understanding, feeling, and experiencing. Leopold's vision was for people to have open dialogue about the land to conserve it for future generations. While water is a part of the land ethic, is it important enough to stand on its own? Should water be at the center of the community from which all else flows?

An *integral water ethic* is the topic of *Loving Water Across Religions* by Elizabeth McAnally. Her book is educational and a call to action. Specifically, she says, "Recognizing that the amount of water on Earth is finite demands a shift in values; humans need to learn to regard water not as a resource to be exploited but as a source of life to be cared for" (p. 5). I believe her aim is to bring attention to the global water crisis and provoke empathy for water itself through explanations of the intricate ties between some of the world's religions and water. She examines water through the perspectives of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, ending her book with a secular approach to embodying a water ethic.

According to McAnally, our global water crisis manifests in the way we exploit our water resources in some areas of the world and in the way millions of people lack access to clean water and appropriate sanitation services in other parts. In other words, while water covers 70% of earth, 3% of that is freshwater and even less is potable, or water that can be made available to people. Water use around the world has increased. Increased use coupled with threats from climate change leads to even more vulnerable water security in areas of the world already experiencing water stress.

Water is a social issue. Our experiences and connections to water differ around the world. A water ethic would mean acknowledging not only our own reliance on water but others, even non-

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humans, reliance on it too. McAnnally is asking us to rethink our relationship to water from one of utilitarian to one of interdependence; from instrumental to intrinsic. Can we feel love for water?

McAnnally's approach to a relationship with water would cultivate the subjective experience of water rather than water as a resource, a commodity, a source to be managed and objectively studied. She calls for conversations about water to transcend economics, politics, and science. Valuing water through an *integral water ethic* lens would acknowledge that ecological problems cannot be addressed without also examining social and cultural interconnections. McAnnally points to the intersection of religion and ecology as being ripe to tackle the complexity of today's problems, such as the water crisis. By making explicit the many ways that different religions relate to water, religious and environmental scholars, leaders and advocates can collaborate on future solutions. She focuses on Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

She states that reflecting upon baptism helps us reconnect to our relationship with water. According to McAnnally, baptism is a "central ritual of Christianity" (p. 51). Because water is a cleansing element, it metaphorically, also cleanses one's soul. Water used in baptism and water used in other elements of a church service is water blessed by a priest, or holy water. The "material substance" of water is just as important as the symbology of water (Robinson, 2013). Protecting the material substance of water is a moral endeavor. In seeing water as part of God's creation, one's relationship to water reflects their relationship to God. In helping Christians see these connections, McAnnally advocates for more attention paid to one's own responsibility to nature.

McAnnally draws from a range of thinking by philosophers and theologians in building her thesis throughout the book. She references ecotheologian Larry Rasmussen's work as it builds off of the existentialist philosopher, Martin Buber's I-Thou and I-It types of relationships. These perspectives argue that we must shift our perspective of water to include the subjective. If water is simply a resource for humans, we may forget or ignore its intrinsic value as part of God's creation. She quotes Pope Francis who says that we must understand that the world is God's loving gift and that we realize and care for our interconnectedness.

Her chapter on Hinduism aims to more explicitly connect science and religion. Commitment to scientific inquiry and loyalty to religion can work together to protect water resources. The Ganges River is worshipped as a Goddess. The metaphor of river as Goddess is part of an integral water ethic where water fosters love. Whereas her chapter on Buddhism advocates for the Bodhisattva² within to do one's part in water conservation; She refers to this as Ecosattva. Or, instead we might think of water itself as a bodhisattva, nourishing us, cleansing us, giving us life.

Loving Water Across Religions ends with two chapters that offer both practical and philosophical guidance to implement some of the book's main ideas. She says, "An integral water ethic considers water to be not merely a resource for human ends but a sacred source of life... An integral water ethic supports the cultivation of love and compassion for water and for all who suffer from the global water crisis; in doing so it promotes relating to water as a loving and compassionate being" (p. 155). To realize this ethic, we should try to be fully conscious of the ways we interact with water - in the shower, at the beach, at the sink, and as we quench our thirst. From a religious

² A Bodhisattva is "someone who is full of love and compassion for all human beings, generating awareness of the suffering of others (including non-humans)...and striving for their well-being."

perspective, water is sacred and as a result, we should honor, respect, and love it intrinsically and for its nourishing qualities.

McAnally offers contemplative practices for practicing and nurturing an integral water ethic. From simple actions such as being mindful as we drink a glass of water to a more involved meditation, the practices offered can be used within schools, community groups, and places of worship. I tried one practice called The Bowl of Tears (Macy, 2012) with my early morning environmental studies undergraduate class. Students begrudgingly followed me from our warm classroom to the chilly shore of Pearly Pond. We are fortunate to have our own body of water as the backdrop for our small campus up on a hill. Yet, do many of us fully experience the pond in the way that McAnally's integral water ethic suggests? We drive by the pond, kayak in it, fish from it, and get our drinking water from it, yet, do we love it? Do we have empathy for it? Are we interested in protecting it? Do we see it as sacred? I asked my students and myself these questions as we started the contemplative practice. I asked a student to go to the pond and fill a bowl of water and to place it on the ground in the middle of our class circle. The bowl, I said, represents the tears of the world. As we stood around it, I asked the students to walk to the bowl of tears and place one hand inside if they felt compelled. As they ran the water through their fingers, I asked them to imagine a feeling of love for water and of empathy for those who are suffering from a water crisis. At first, no one moved. I began the practice myself to nervous smiles and averted gazes. We waited. Then one student said, *Ok, I'll do it*. Within minutes all 28 students' hands were wet. They needed the support of one another to support water. Rather than religious devotion, commitment to community and need for acceptance guided the practice that day. I asked for a volunteer to dump the water back into the pond now that we all had felt it. We walked to the shoreline and watched quietly as one student poured the water into the pond. As she turned back to the class, I saw tears in her eyes.

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