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[Bradley, Ian C. Water: a spiritual history]

Religio. 2025, vol. 33, iss. 2, pp. 432-436

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2025-42056>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.83242>

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Access Date: 11. 01. 2026

Version: 20260102

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Kniha *Ten farář je nějakéj divnej* je cenným příspěvkem k porozumění současného křesťanství, povzbuzuje svobodu a originalitu duchovních, kteří propojují tradici s životem naší doby. Vytváří čtivý most mezi církví a světem, přináší inspiraci pro religionisty, teology i laické čtenáře. A možná právě díky této knize zjistíme, že ten farář, co je nějakéj divnej, je ve skutečnosti ten, kterého by nám bylo dobré potkat.



Religio 33, no. 2 (2025): 430–432.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2025-42075>

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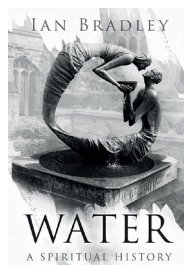
Ian Bradley.

Water: A Spiritual History.

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012.

ISBN 978-1-4411-1173-9.

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In many religious systems and cosmologies, water is endowed with a rich tapestry of theological and cultural symbolism. Through it, the complexity of ontological relationships becomes manifest, alongside the multidimensional social contexts that bestow aquatic motifs with depth and significance. The hydrological cycle shapes diverse aspects of existence, forging a timeless bridge between the past, the present, and the future. From both a religious and ecological perspective, water may be identified as a gift of grace or as an instrument of punishment. Depending on its quantity – its excess or scarcity – this element may bring forth prosperity or disaster and thereby conditions how its functions are perceived. Fortunate events are often interpreted as metaphysical blessings, frequently understood as affirmative acts of direct intervention by the Absolute. Conversely, negative phenomena such as earthquakes, floods, or droughts are generally construed quite differently – perceived as manifestations of forces hostile to humanity, exerting a detrimental impact on the religious and social fabric of entire communities. Water thus plays an exceptional role in both culture and religion. Its influence on human existence is so profound that, beyond its obvious material necessity for life, it has, since the dawn of time, been imbued with numerous cosmological meanings. As an inseparable part of

nature, it continues to shape the beliefs of many communities oriented toward a relationship with *sacrum*.

As a symbolic element, water – pervasively present in the ritual practices and mythic narratives of virtually all religious traditions – has, in recent decades, become the subject of numerous synthetic explorations. *Water: A Spiritual History*, authored by Ian Bradley and published in 2012 by Bloomsbury, constitutes yet another attempt to engage this thematic field – this time with a distinct anchoring in the cultural and religious context of Western Christianity, particularly within the contours of British spiritual imagination. The declared aim of the book is to trace the spiritual significance of water – its role as a religious symbol and as a medium of purification, healing, and consecration – across the expanse of history. This historical perspective is explicitly narrative and chronological in nature: Bradley guides the reader from ancient myths and biblical texts, through medieval monastic practices and baptismal rites, to contemporary expressions of water’s “spiritual echo” in popular culture and ecotheology. Such an approach renders the work a synthetic-essayistic contribution, positioned somewhere between academic scholarship and accessible popularization.

The timeliness of this review is provided by the author’s seventy-fifth birthday, celebrated in 2025. This anniversary offers an appropriate occasion to revisit *Water: A Spiritual History* and to assess its enduring place within Bradley’s oeuvre. Framed by this commemorative context, the volume may be regarded as a synthetic yet nuanced contribution that continues to illuminate the symbolic and cultural dimensions of water in the Christian West.

Although Bradley does not explicitly articulate a systematic structure for his exposition, the arrangement of chapters nonetheless allows for the identification of several distinct thematic clusters. For the sake of clarity in the discussion that follows, I have chosen to divide the book’s contents into three principal segments: the first encompasses the chapters devoted to the role of water in world religions as well as in ancient and medieval traditions (Chapters 1–3); the second pertains to early modern and nineteenth-century developments (Chapters 4–7); while the third addresses phenomena from the twentieth century and contemporary times (Chapters 8–9). It should be emphasized that this division serves merely as a heuristic device to aid in presenting the book’s contents and does not necessarily reflect the author’s compositional intent.

The first part of the book explores the spiritual significance of water within the broadly conceived European tradition – from ancient religions to medieval Christianity. Bradley does not attempt to construct a linear history of religions; rather, he seeks out points of intersection – moments where water emerges not merely as a physical element, but as a bearer of spiritual meaning: of life, transformation, and purification.

The author begins by presenting water as a universal sacred element – present in both cosmogonic myths and initiation rites. He then illustrates how Christianity

reinterpreted older, deeply rooted forms of worship, particularly those associated with rivers and springs. Water does not vanish from the religious landscape with the advent of Christianisation – on the contrary, it acquires new layers of meaning.

In the medieval period, as Bradley demonstrates, holy wells and springs operated in parallel to official liturgy, often on its peripheries – as sites of healing, penitence, and spiritual encounter. Their power did not reside in doctrinal content, but in the living piety of local communities. It is in this section of the book that the author most fully portrays water as a reality that transcends the perceived boundary between the “pagan” and the “Christian”.

The second part of the book traces the transformations in the spiritual meaning of water during the early modern period and the nineteenth century, with a marked shift of emphasis toward the Protestant experience in its British expression. The author does not present these changes in a linear fashion; rather, he follows the tensions that emerged between new attitudes toward the body and health, and inherited, more traditional religious imaginaries. In this context, water ceases to function primarily as a sign of grace or *sacrum* and instead becomes a medium of health, self-discipline, and progress. The growing popularity of spas and therapeutic bathing, practiced in the spirit of Protestant aesthetics of moderation and rationality, is, in Bradley’s reading, linked to a broader process of the secularization of religious meaning – not its disappearance, but its transformation. The motif of “purity” no longer refers solely to the purity of the soul but begins to encompass personal hygiene and moral order.

At the same time, the author highlights the fact that the nineteenth century was also a period of reinterpretation of earlier paradigms. Thus, practices such as pilgrimages to holy springs, Marian apparitions, and the belief that water could serve as a site of miracles reemerge. Bradley demonstrates that in this era, water comes to function simultaneously as a means of physical regeneration and as a sign of moral purification. On the one hand, we find a narrative of rationalization and modernization; on the other, a subtle return of *sacrum* – one that unfolds not in opposition to modernity, but often within its very structures. As a result, this segment of the book remains consistent with the earlier chapters, while also preparing the ground for the reflections on the twentieth century and contemporary times.

The final sections of the book transport the reader into the heart of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – a domain even more difficult to describe given the limited historical distance available for reflection. Bradley confronts this challenge with his characteristic sensitivity to tone and means of expression. In Chapter Eight, entitled *The Dawning of the Age of Aquarius*, we witness not only a reevaluation of the spiritual intuitions of the latter half of the twentieth century but also attempts to reincarnate “sacred water” within increasingly individualistic and non-institutional contexts. In the ninth (and final) chapter, the

author presents a world that is even more contemporary, more fragmented, and yet – surprisingly – replete with references to earlier, albeit now reformulated, models of spirituality.

It is precisely in these two chapters that Bradley's central – almost eschatological – concern becomes most pronounced: does the spiritual dimension of water, articulated throughout the book in so many variations, still have a future in a world increasingly shaped by consumerism, ecology (or rather its performative surrogates), and diffuse sacrality? Are the true signs of our times not new water sanctuaries, but vanishing springs and empty pools? The author does not offer a definitive answer, yet his tone conveys more than mere nostalgia – it resonates with a cautious hope that water, both as a phenomenon and as a symbol, will not surrender without resistance.

Bradley's style – restrained yet evocative – allows him to guide the narrative with ease, without succumbing to excessive detail. The book's strength lies in its capacity to weave together historical facts and spiritual questions without resorting to unnecessary emphasis or homiletic overtones. The author writes with lightness, yet he knows when to linger over a detail and allow it to resonate as a bearer of meaning. Despite its synthetic form, the text avoids superficiality, and certain passages – especially those concerning Romantic reconstructions of ancient practices or the nineteenth-century revival of “holy water” – take shape as a narrative of cultural longing for *sacrum* in its fluid form.

Bradley's book is built on a simple idea, yet one executed in an intriguingly nuanced manner. Particular commendation is due to the Appendix (pp. 247–263), which presents the author's selection of places that hold spiritual significance for him. This is not merely an extension of the book's content, but also a gesture of invitation to the reader – a sharing of Bradley's private map of spiritual topographies. Valuable complements to the text are the illustrations chosen with discernment and never excessive. They serve not only a decorative but also a narrative function – as in the case of the *Water of Life* sculpture from Chester Cathedral featured on the cover, which provides a symbolic coda to the volume (p. 262).

One potential point of contention lies in the book's title, which seems to suggest a wide-ranging, cross-cultural account of the spiritual history of water in a broad, interreligious sense – whereas the actual content focuses almost exclusively on the Christian experience, situated within a European and (to a modest extent) Middle Eastern context. To be sure, the author does not claim to offer a fully systematized treatment of the subject; on the contrary, he states early on in the introduction that he does not intend to present “a fully comprehensive examination of how water has been understood and used in all religious traditions”, recognizing that such an endeavor would require “many volumes” (p. x). In doing so, he positions his work more as an invitation to reflection and a tool for revealing certain mechanisms through a limited body of material, rather than as an ex-



haustive compendium. I fully understand – and do not question – the legitimacy of this decision. Nevertheless, I would argue that the title itself ought to more accurately reflect the scope of the subject as presented. The phrase *A Spiritual History* carries the weight of universality, which the book, quite consciously, does not attempt to fulfil. Introducing a geographical or cultural qualifier would help avoid this minor dissonance.

While *Water: A Spiritual History* does not entirely avoid certain simplifications and may leave the reader wanting more in terms of the universal scope suggested by its title, it remains a reliable, well-written, and simply enjoyable book to read. Bradley does not advance groundbreaking theses, but he organizes familiar motifs with sensitivity and guides the reader through the spiritual landscapes of water with due attentiveness. It is a publication worthy of attention and one that may serve as a valuable starting point for further reflection on the place of this singular element in the religious imagination of the Christian West.



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<https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2025-42056>

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Zdeněk Vojtíšek.
Hnutí Grálu. Příběh nového náboženství
(The Grail Movement.
The Story of a New Religion).

Charles University, Karolinum Press, 2025.

ISBN 978-80-246-5762-2.



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Zdeněk Vojtíšek, associate professor and current Head of the Religious Studies Department at the Hussite Theological Faculty of Charles University, Prague, has long been recognized as one of the foremost Czech scholars of new religious movements. In his latest book, he turns his attention to the Grail Movement, a millenarian religious group founded in early twentieth-century Germany. This is not the first time Vojtíšek has examined the movement, but *The Grail Movement. The Story of a New Religion* represents the most comprehensive and systematic treatment of the subject to date.