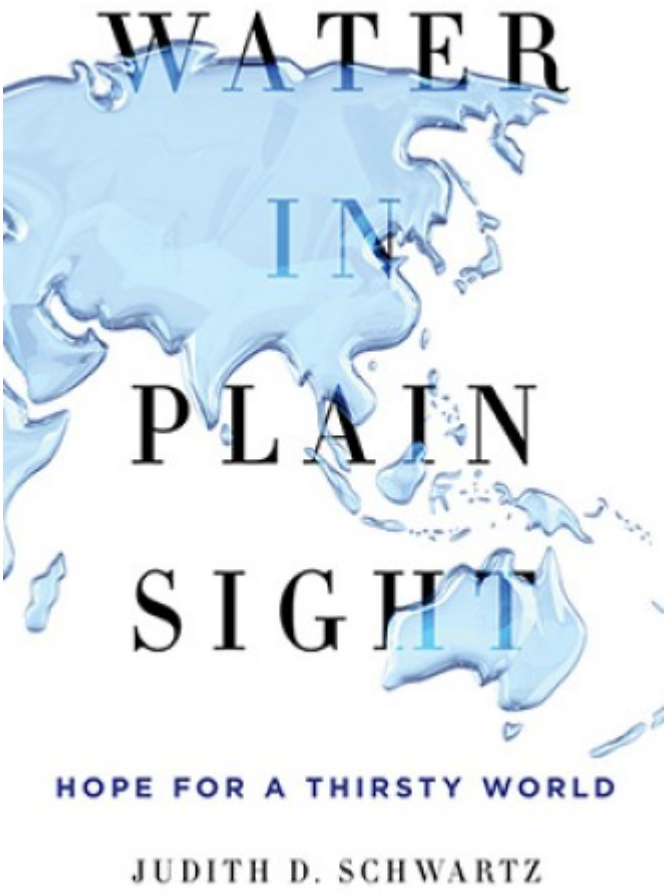
Holiness in every drop

Judith Schwartz and Michael E. Webber each call attention to the challenges facing the water over which the Spirit broods.

by Ragan Sutterfield in the February 1, 2017 issue

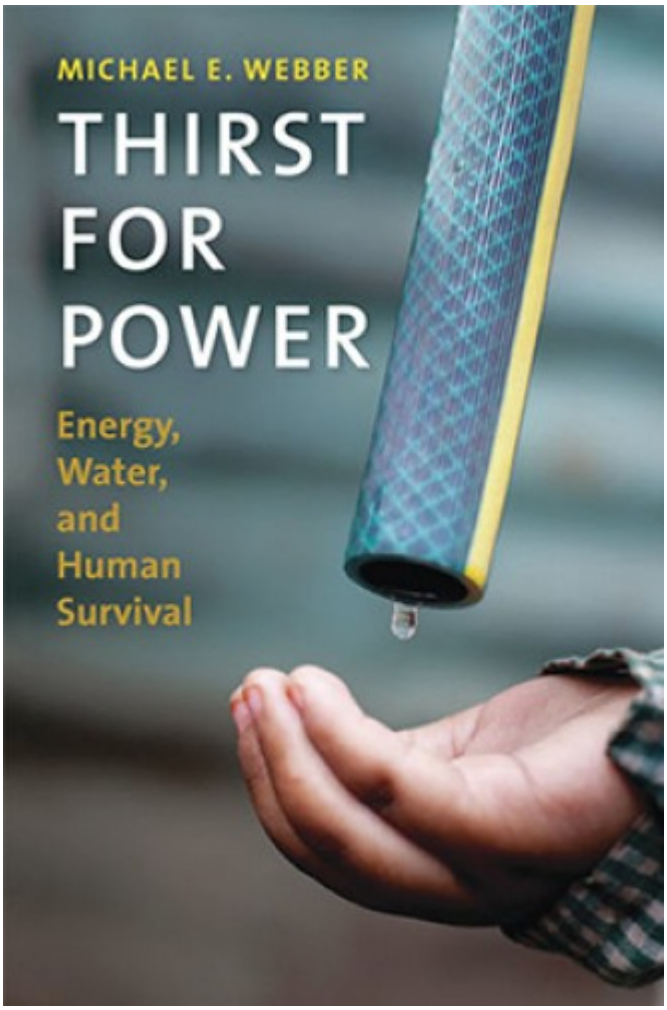
In Review



Water in Plain Sight

Hope for a Thirsty World

By Judith D. Schwartz
St. Martin’s Press



Thirst for Power

Energy, Water, and Human Survival

By Michael E. Webber
Yale University Press

The rain that falls on the north side of our sanctuary rolls down the roof and over the asphalt of the parking lot, making its way to the cypress-filled waters of Fourche Creek. The water that falls on the south side arcs around the church and moves through hill-flanked valleys into the Maumelle River. The Maumelle River is dammed

just upstream from the church to form the reservoir that serves the city of Little Rock. It's this water that pours from the tap and fills our baptismal font each week, running down the foreheads of parishioners as they cross themselves. Both streams flow into the Arkansas River, which flows into the Mississippi River, joining the oceans—the waters of the world.

Many contemporary North Americans give little thought to water. It's generally there when we need it, and it is usually clean. It's considered a great sacrifice to let the lawns wither during a drought when rationing is enforced. Most of us never doubt that we'll have good water to drink, even if the crisis in Flint gave us pause. This is why the work of Judith Schwartz and Michael Webber is so important. Both authors draw our attention to the complex challenges the world's waters face.

Schwartz evades the script of many "crisis" books and begins instead with a hopeful visit to Zimbabwe's Dimbangombe Ranch. Managed by the Savory Foundation, this preserve demonstrates how restoring the ecology of a place can restore its water too. Alan Savory is a renegade ecologist whose TED talk on why brittle environments need more cattle rather than less has reached over 3.5 million views. He's a pioneer of "holistic resource management," a framework that invites land managers to think of whole systems rather than simply the problem at hand.

For Savory, managing water in an arid place is about making the most of the water that falls. Rather than fretting about whether it will rain or not, he works to maximize the retention of every drop of water that enters the land. Recent water flow on the Dimbangombe reserve validates his method: more and more water is traveling through the land, even while the neighbors experience drought and the resulting desertification of the land.

"Desertification is neither inevitable nor wrought by nature's whim," writes Schwartz after visiting with Savory. Instead,

> it is the result of human impacts that include deforestation, fire, poor grazing management, tillage and inappropriate use of irrigation—most basically, Savory says, "management that leads to a high level of bare soil between grass plants and thus less effective rainfall."

This picture seems gloomy, but Schwartz presents it in the context of Savory's work to restore the land through good grazing management, reforestation, and the

restoration of grass cover that helps retain the soil's moisture. In other words, the challenges are not inevitable and can be reversed in many places through a careful shift in the way we use water and the land.

Schwartz is a powerful storyteller and accessible writer. Her book is good fodder for discussions among Christians who wish to think and act more deliberately with respect to water.

Webber examines the relationship of water to another modern necessity: energy. Although most Americans think of water and power as separate realities, "the two are intricately connected." Webber explains how "energy needs water which needs energy which needs water," recounting a summer of massive blackouts in India which resulted from drought. Because of the drought, hydroelectric dams were not running at full capacity. At the same time, farmers were using electric pumps to get more water into their fields to save their crops, causing a cascade of bad effects.

The close relationship between water and energy is not limited to hydroelectric power. From the water in injection wells at natural gas fracking sites to the cooling ponds for nuclear reactors, water and energy are intertwined.

Like the heroes of Schwartz's book, Webber believes our hope is in seeing and managing such connections. What we need, he argues, is "holistic thinking that recognizes these resources are interconnected, and a systems-level approach that acknowledges how one change in one state to a water system could impact an energy system five states away." One might suspect a hint of the wonk in this sentence, but Webber, who worked for the RAND Corporation and now runs an energy think tank at the University of Texas, does a remarkable job of engaging storytelling and history lessons alongside discussions of "kilowatt-hours per million gallons." Still, Webber's book is directed more toward government and policy professionals than toward a general audience.

Christians are called to name the sacred and desecrated realities of the world. Currently our water systems face both peril and hope. Schwartz and Webber call attention to the challenges facing the waters over which the Spirit broods. If we can see the many-layered connections in every drop of living water, we might be able to imagine anew how to relate to the runoff from our roofs and the holy water in our fonts.

A version of this article appears in the February 1 print edition under the title “Hope that flows.”