

# The Topography of Holy Water in England after the Reformation

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## **The Golden Age of Faith**

In Europe, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been seen as the 'Golden Age of Faith'. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (2006[1930]) argued that Protestantism created a capitalistic spirit and that the great historic development of religions took place when magic was eliminated from the world. Magic was included in the concept of the sacramental force as a means of salvation. If Weber is correct in his thesis, then the replacement of the sacraments with predestination should be most evident in England, since it was here that the Industrial Revolution began.

Puritanism encouraged work rather than works, meaning magic, and this has a particular relevance to the idea of holy water as a sacrament. For common people, misfortunes, calamities, catastrophes, and sudden death were caused by the Devil and his malignant forces, and holy water was the solution to, and protection from, these adversaries. One of the parish clerks' lucrative benefits consisted of holy water fees, which they collected while carrying holy water supplies to every household. 'Holy', or blessed, water gave lay-people a powerful religious weapon that could be used to ward off the Devil, cure illness and avoid death, as well as to protect fields, properties and husbandry. This was not 'magic' as such, because 'the sacramentals were the basis for a genuinely lay Christianity, for they placed in the hands of the laity sources of holy power which were free from clerical control' (Duffy 1993:212).

However, with the Reformation emphasising justification by faith alone, the qualities and powers of holy water became evidence of diabolic presence, which had to be combated by all means. Thus, one of the main problems for the early Protestants

was 'that they removed magic from Christian ritual without countering the belief in magic' (Carroll 1981:463).

### **God and the Devil**

According to the medieval Church, the sacraments worked automatically (*ex opere operato*), regardless of the priest, whereas in most other ecclesiastical matters the rituals depended upon a good and moral officiating priest and a pious laity (*ex opera operantis*). The sacraments had immanent powers. In addition, former pagan beliefs and rituals such as the worship of wells, trees and stones had been modified and subsumed within Christian rites and remedies rather than abolished. In the process of this, the Church had been imbued with something of a magical aura (Thomas 1971:47-57). These beliefs strengthened the Catholic Church's claim that it had the power to manipulate aspects of God's *supernatural* power. Early Protestantism, on the other hand, 'denied the magic of the *opus operatum*, the claim that the Church had instrumental power and had been endowed by Christ with an active share in his work and office. For human authority to claim the power to work miracles was blasphemy – a challenge to God's omnipotence' (Thomas 1971:51). The logic, as formulated in *The Doctrine of the Masse Booke* from 1554, was simple: If humans can drive away the Devil and deal both with the body and soul, what need do we have for Christ? (Thomas 1971:51).

The Catholic practice of exorcism has to be seen in this light. Satan was exorcised during the rite of baptism. Water was believed to have the power to deter Satan in both baptism and in other situations, and this belief itself was claimed by the Protestants to be the work of the Devil or even the Devil himself. This has to be understood in relation to the shift in emphasis regarding who the Devil was and *what* he represented.

Nathan Johnstone (2004, 2006) has argued that, in early modern England, Protestantism favoured a particular type of belief in the Devil. Although the Devil was also perceived in a personal form or body, the most characteristic feature of Protestantism's demonology was *temptation*. The emphasis on

temptation was not a Protestant invention, rather the contrary, since it has been a general feature of belief in the Devil throughout the history of Christianity. Thomas Aquinas in particular focused on temptation in his works. However, where the Roman Catholic Church emphasised temptation as only one aspect or variety of the Devil's activities or character, Protestantism focused mainly or even solely on this aspect. Protestants believed that the true battle between them and the Catholic Church was between faith and sacraments, and that the ceremonies and doctrines associated with the latter had, for more than a millennium, been diabolic. This had its rationale in the Protestant understanding that demonism was an experiential reality and, indeed, one inflicted by God on His elect as a sign. Temptation was Satan's attack on individual Christians, and, although it could manifest itself in such concrete forms as lust, greed or avarice, it first and foremost took the shape of a mental and spiritual battle. Moreover, and, for the Protestants, fundamentally, God allowed diabolic temptation as a test of the faith of believers, but would not test His children beyond endurance. God had even tested Jesus. Against temptation, no holy water, bells or other remedies worked. The only remedy was prayer, which directed the devotee to God. Importantly, then, experiencing temptation was the sign that one was of the elect. Only truly ungodly humans could deny the Devil's temptations, and this could represent one of only two alternatives; either these individuals were already so corrupted that they could not recognise temptation, or they were already damned and therefore Satan was for the time being, leaving them in peace. Thus, when Catholics did not emphasise the inner struggle with the Devil as *the* most important aspect of the fight against Satan (fig. 1), Protestants took this to mean that they were already damned and corrupted by Satan (Johnstone 2004, 2006).

This had consequences for the sacraments and holy water. These Catholic 'magic' devices were declared to be sheer sorcery. The Edwardian Injunction of 1547 forbade the Christian from observing such practices as



Fig. 1. The Devil performs a mock baptism. After Guazzo in Rodker 1929: 14.

*'casting holy water upon his bed, ...bearing about him the holy bread, or St John's Gospel, ...ringing of holy bells; or blessing with the holy candle, to the intent thereby to be discharged of the burden of sin, or to drive away Devils, or to put away dreams and fantasies; or...putting trust and confidence of health and salvation in the same ceremonies' (Thomas 1971:53).*

Scory was one of the fix preachers and he asked rhetorically in 1543, do you think 'that the Devil will be afraid or flee away from cross making, hurling of holy water, ringing of bells and such other ceremonies when he was not afraid to take Christ himself and cast him on his back and set him on a pinnacle?' (Duffy 1993:213). For the Lollards, the sign of the cross could 'avail to nothing else but to scare away flies' (Thomas 1971:72).

## Holy Water and Sacramentals

Where the highlighting of different discourses of belief within water culture is concerned, one group of objects of the utmost importance is the 'sacramentals'. These objects have been used in benedictions and exorcism and represent a special category, since they have been blessed and used independently from the sacraments. From a theological perspective, the sacramentals did not work automatically (*ex opera operato*) in the way of the sacraments, which were divine *par excellence*. The sacramentals, unlike the sacraments, could be taken away from the church and the priests, and used by the commoners whenever they desired. In particular, holy water was a sacramental used by the laity in the household, in stables and on fields. When blessed items used in the liturgy, such as holy water and candles, were used outside the church by the laity, this was considered by the authorities to be misuse. Nevertheless, during the medieval period, the blessing of 'holy water' took place not only on Sundays, but also on numerous other occasions including certain saints' days. Even though the church partly opposed this practice, the sacramentals were an efficacious remedy for the laity. Moreover, with regards to efficiency, the distinction between sacraments and sacramentals became blurred, and among common people it was generally believed that the sacramentals worked automatically (Scribner 1987:5-7, 39-41). The focus of the ritual relationship between the sacraments used in church and the sacramentals used by the laity concerned the application of holy water, mainly for apotropaic purposes or protective magic of two types; exorcism and the expulsion of evil spirits (Scribner 1987:36, fig. 2). There was no doubt that the laity believed that the sacramentals worked automatically and that they were effective remedies against witchcraft (Scribner 1987:262).

Thus, what characterises the belief in both holy water and the erstwhile pagan well cults is the idea that *water works*; it cured human illness and misfortune. In practice, this was operative religion working for the benefit of humans. It was divine intervention in daily miseries and calamities.



Fig. 2. A priest and his assistant perform exorcism on a woman and the demon emerges from her mouth. In Boaistuau, P. *et al.* 1598.

The effect was understood to be the same as if prayers had been granted, but the belief in water rituals was more explicit and direct – or material – than prayers, which were spiritual only. Holy water and water rituals in Christianity worked mainly at the mundane level, concerned with small, daily problems. Good husbandry and crops, the preservation of health and family wealth, and good fortune in daily activities were the main concerns for common people. In this respect, both the belief in and use of holy water as a sacramental were understood to be more efficacious than prayers in church. As Duffy argues, ‘the rhetoric and rationale at work in such incantations cannot sensibly be called pagan. Instead, they represent the appropriation and adaptation of lay needs and anxieties of a range of sacred gestures and prayers, along lines essentially faithful to the pattern established within the liturgy itself. This is not paganism, but lay Christianity’ (Duffy 1992:283).

## **Water Cult and Worship**

Water worship remained banned into the twelfth century, but gradually, behind the anti-pagan facade, the old customs and pagan aspects of water worship began to be subsumed within Christianity. The total number of holy wells in Great Britain and Ireland amount to some 8000, and a conservative estimate for England is 2000. In Scotland, there might be nearly 1000, with another 1200 in Wales and at least 3000 in Ireland (Bord & Bord 1985:24). In the second half of the nineteenth century, the water cult and healing beliefs remained dominant within the English countryside (Hope 1893). In Wales, two-third of wells had some curative functions and, of some 1200 wells, 370 were exclusively healing wells (Bord & Bord 1985:34).

Since water was used in Christian rites such as baptism and hand-washing, well water was actively incorporated into the liturgy, and baptisteries and churches were built close to and, in some cases, over wells (Bord & Bord 1985:20). During the Christianisation of Britain, Christian ideology did not demand a total rejection of the old pagan gods. Rather, in accordance with the papal instructions to St. Augustine, pagan customs were converted 'into Christian solemnity, and pagan temples into churches'. Missionary monks included wells in this approach (Mackinlay 1893:24-25). In the sixteenth century, European holy wells served as the centres for annual religious rites, including pilgrimages, well-dressing and votive offerings. These rites and sites were also featured in both Christian saints' legends and folk tales of supernatural events.

The Reformation and, in particular, Calvinism attacked beliefs in holy water and wells as 'popish magic and superstition', with the result that holy wells became gradually relegated to the sphere of superstition (Gribben 1992:4, 16). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Reformed Church went on the offensive, and monuments connected to superstition were put to profane use (Moreland 1973:200-201).

In 1565, Bishop Bentham of Lichfield and Coventry commanded the clergy to abolish all 'monuments of idolatry and superstition', meaning that the items now viewed as idols had to

be kept in secret places in the church (Aston 1988:319). 'We can only guess at the impact on their sense of the sacred when they saw the priest feed his swine from a trough which had once been the parish holy-water stoup...Elsewhere the holy-water stoups became the parish wash-troughs, sanctus and sacring bells were hung on sheep and cows, or used to call work-men to their dinner' (Duffy 1992:586).

Even though the Reformation tried to end water worship, the cult was so important and such an intrinsic part of culture and religion that it continued for centuries, with nobles and commoners alike making pilgrimages to the holy wells with the aim of attaining long life and prosperity. St Winefride's well at Holywell (Flintshire) was immensely popular. It was attacked by the Reformists, but the cult was too strong to be dismissed. In 1629, there were approximately 1500 people present on 3 November, St Winefride's Day. On 29 August 1686, King James II and his wife visited Holywell hoping that Winefride would bless them with a son (and in 1688, a son was indeed born to them). Charles I and his queen stayed for several weeks at Wellingborough (Northamptonshire) in both 1618 and 1637, so that the queen could take a treatment at the Red Well. Charles II is associated with two other wells. In 1617, King James VI ordered that St. Katherine's Balm Well in Edinburgh should be protected. During other periods, however, both the monarchy and the clergy did whatever they could to curtail water cult practices and beliefs, sometimes even resorting to outright destruction of the wells. On two occasions, the Well of the Virgin Mary at Seggat in Aberdeen was filled with stones, but the local people cleared it both times and the well continued to be a site of pilgrimage. The authorities were by no means consistent in their views towards holy wells. Henry VIII, for example, walked barefoot the last two miles to the Well of Our Lady at Walsingham (Norfolk), but subsequently took action against some holy wells (Bord & Bord 1985: 32-33, 95). This dual attitude testifies to the deep-rooted nature of the water-cult beliefs, despite Protestant damnation of the purported magical effects of water.

Thus there have been, throughout the history of Christianity in England, opposite and conflicting views of holy wells and the spiritual qualities of water. As the water cult was incorporated into Christianity, Christian festivals began to take place at the same time as many of the former pagan and Celtic festivals. These ritual dates were already sacred to devotees, and the Church therefore attempted to absorb the old religious practices rather than displace them (Bord & Bord 1985:55). The pervasive use of and belief in the waters from holy wells were integrated parts of culture and religion. The water was used for any protective, healing or curing purpose. In 1557, Cardinal Pole insisted in his Injunctions for Cambridge University that, since holy water was being stolen, the font should be locked up. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the baptism of animals such as horses, sheep, cats and dogs was attempted, since it was believed generally that animals would benefit from the rite (Thomas 1971:35-37). According to a story from Scotland, the success of the holy well St Drostan's at Newdosk was so great that the local doctors planned to poison the well. When the local villagers heard of the doctors' plans, they came together to attack and kill the doctors. Whether or not they were successful is uncertain, but the tale testifies to the pervasiveness of belief in the curative effects of holy water (Bord & Bord 1985:46).

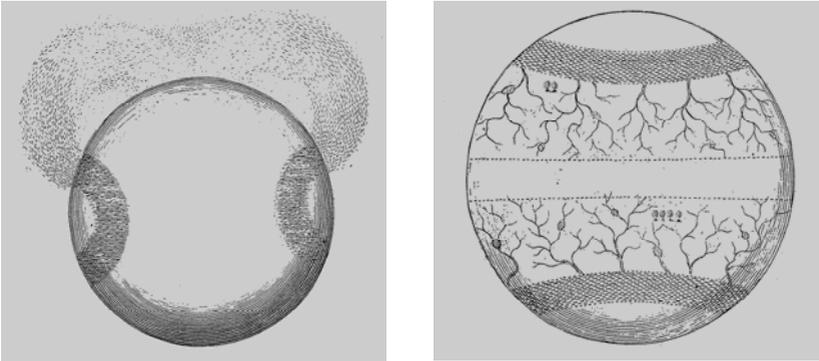
In the English countryside, the water cult and healing beliefs prevailed into the second half of the nineteenth century. This was not simply restricted to the laity. The fellows of New College in Oxford were reported to have worshipped at St. Bartholomew's Well every Holy Thursday (Hope 1893:124). Moreover, belief in holy water and the magical powers of wells in England have persisted into present times. When Veronica Strang conducted anthropological fieldwork amongst the inhabitants of Dorset and investigated their relationship with water, she found that the water cult was still strong, and that even non-Christians used words like 'aura' or 'mystical power' to describe holy water. Holy water was used on a number of occasions, including in funeral rites and, occasionally exorcisms (Strang 2004:93). Hence, in England, Christianity has been

closely connected to and defined by the water cult. Water was Christianity in practice, and the wells had in particular an important role.

### **Nature as the Work of the Devil or God?**

Although the Protestant Church eliminated water beliefs as a positive manifestation of *Christian* belief, it was nonetheless still understood that they existed in the hands of the Devil; the history of malignant waters is long. Old Church fathers such as Origen, Jerome and Chrysostom believed that nature and all external materialities were diabolic and in need of combating. In the words of Chrysostom, one had to bring ‘the beast under control’ by ‘banishing the flood of unworthy passions’. Aquinas, too, preached the necessity of human domination over the rest of the world (Harrison 1999:91). Tertullian, a third-century Church father, believed that water was highly attractive to demons and the Devil (Jensen 1993). Traditionally, water was seen as horrifying and dreadful; the repository of dangers and demons. The sea was seen to be evidence of the unfinished nature of creation; a primeval remnant engendering a strong sense of repulsion. In particular, Thomas Burnet’s *Theory of the Earth* (1681) had a special significance where this perspective was concerned, and was referred to throughout the eighteenth century (figs 3a & 3b). The sea was seen as the most frightful sight that nature could offer, and the seashore was considered nothing but the ruins of the world. The ocean was an abyss of debris (Corbin 1994:2-4), and the demonic nature of the sea justified exorcism. During the sixteenth century, sailors immersed relics in the waves (Corbin 1994:7). The sea was also seen as a purgatory and perceived to be an abyss of fire.

Nature was, therefore, understood to be a terrifying place. However, this view had its contradictions; on the one hand, nature was believed to be unfinished and literally the Devil’s place, but, on the other, the world was also seen as God’s perfect creation, with the latter perspective represented first and foremost by the hydrological cycle.



**Figs. 3a & 3b.** The hydrological cycle according to Thomas Burnet, *Second Book 1685-1690*[1965], p. 166 & 169. The first illustration (left) shows the river in the air where vapours rise from the torrid zones and move to the pole. The second illustration (right) shows the rivers running from the poles to the torrid zones.

Natural theology was crucial to the process of erasing the earlier understanding of nature as repulsive; as it is written in Psalm 52, ‘The Lord is admirable in waters’. Natural theology marked a fundamental change in attitudes towards nature. Physio-theologians saw the external world as a spectacle gifted by God. One of the most popular books of the period was *Theology of Water, or Essay on the Goodness, Wisdom, and Power of God* published in 1734 by the German professor Johann Albert Fabricius (Corbin 1994:25). God had created a perfect external earth which ever since the Flood had been stable. The physio-theologians rejected the idea of a world in decline, allegedly the consequence of human corruption and sin. The main goal of natural theology was edification, underpinned by the concept that possession of the five senses had enabled humans to understand God’s work. It was possible to discern the religious meaning of the world through investigations of the workings of nature. Linnaeus’ systematic classification was based upon such a vision; one which revealed the plan of Creation. Hence, ‘a close link developed between the collector’s patience, the scholar’s curiosity, and the Christian’s piety’ (Corbin 1994:24).

Philosophers of the Enlightenment viewed the life-giving properties of water as a sign of God's love (Krolzik 1990). During the Enlightenment, water became the 'fountainhead' of spiritual knowledge and wisdom (Strang 2005:106) and the new understanding of the hydrological cycle in particular became the catalyst for a shift in attitudes towards nature. From being a dangerous and Devilish place, it came to be seen the place where God's master plan and perfect logic were revealed. During the period between ca. 1700 and 1850, the concept of the hydrological cycle was therefore a construct of natural theology rather than natural philosophy. The relationship between religion and science was intimate and structured around water (see Farnsworth 2010). Yi-Fu Tuan provides a detailed analysis of the development of the notion and understanding of the hydrological cycle in *The Hydrological Cycle and the Wisdom of God: a Theme in Geoteleology* (Tuan 1968). Scientists believed that by understanding nature they could obtain knowledge of the wisdom of God. Pierre Perrault's *Treatise on the Origin of Springs*, presented in 1674, was a hallmark in the scientific consideration of the hydrological cycle. According to Perrault, the water that falls to earth as rain and snow is both the cause and the origin of springs. Another key figure in this scientific progress was John Ray, who published *The Wisdom of God* in 1691. The work was highly successful. It was reprinted twelve times, most recently in 1827 (Tuan 1968:7). The hydrological cycle explained the occurrence of all geological and topographical features. The rivers were fed by rain, which also explained the existence of mountains, in that these enabled the waters to flow down to the fields and back to the sea. Floods were also necessary, in order to return surplus water to the sea once the earth was sated with rain (Tuan 1968:14).

Thus, following the Reformation and the emergence of natural theology, nature came to be seen as the product of God's wisdom, rather than the work of the Devil. This had severe consequences where the subsequent domination of the world by humans was concerned, for which the religious rationale was the need to reconstruct paradise on earth – in other words, to

perfect nature. The Protestant work ethic in particular highlighted the need for the Garden of Eden to be understood as an actual garden in which Adam had carried out agricultural work. Thus, as pious devotees, humans had to work, and the paradise God created was by its very nature a paradise that needed to be worked. God had made men, according to Bishop Lancelot Andrews (1555 -1626), 'to labour, not to be idle' (Harrison 1999:99-100).

The domination of the earth was therefore conceptualised as a recovered or restored domination, and thus closely related to the idea of the Fall. The world inherited by Adam and his descendents was not the earth in a natural state, but a suffering and cursed earth. Harrison argues that 'the infertility of the ground, the ferocity of savage beasts, the existence of weeds, thorns, and thistles, of ugly toads and venomous serpents, all of these were painful remainders of the irretrievable loss of the paradisaical earth'. Consequently, human 'dominion is held out as the means by which the earth can be restored to its prelapsarian order of perfection' (Harrison 1999:99-103). The infertile and cursed earth was a natural world lacking life-giving waters. God was the provider of water and divine penalties were effected through droughts, famines and catastrophes. Although the earth was created by God, it was, following the Fall, a harsh place that nevertheless revealed the wisdom of God. As faithful devotees, humans had a moral obligation to perfect nature by working towards returning it to its original state. The domination of nature was not embarked upon in the interests of exploiting resources. Rather, it was intended to erase the scars which humans had inflicted upon the earth as a result of the Fall. Bacon wrote that the aim was to 'recover the light over nature which belongs to it by divine bequest', and John Flavell wrote in 1669 that the aim was 'a skilful and industrious improvement of the creatures' leading to 'a fuller taste of Christ and Heaven' (op. cit. Harrison 1999:99-103). However, Protestants also favoured the view that the natural world, albeit the lost Eden, was also the means by which, through floods and other natural disasters, God intervened and punished wrongdoers.

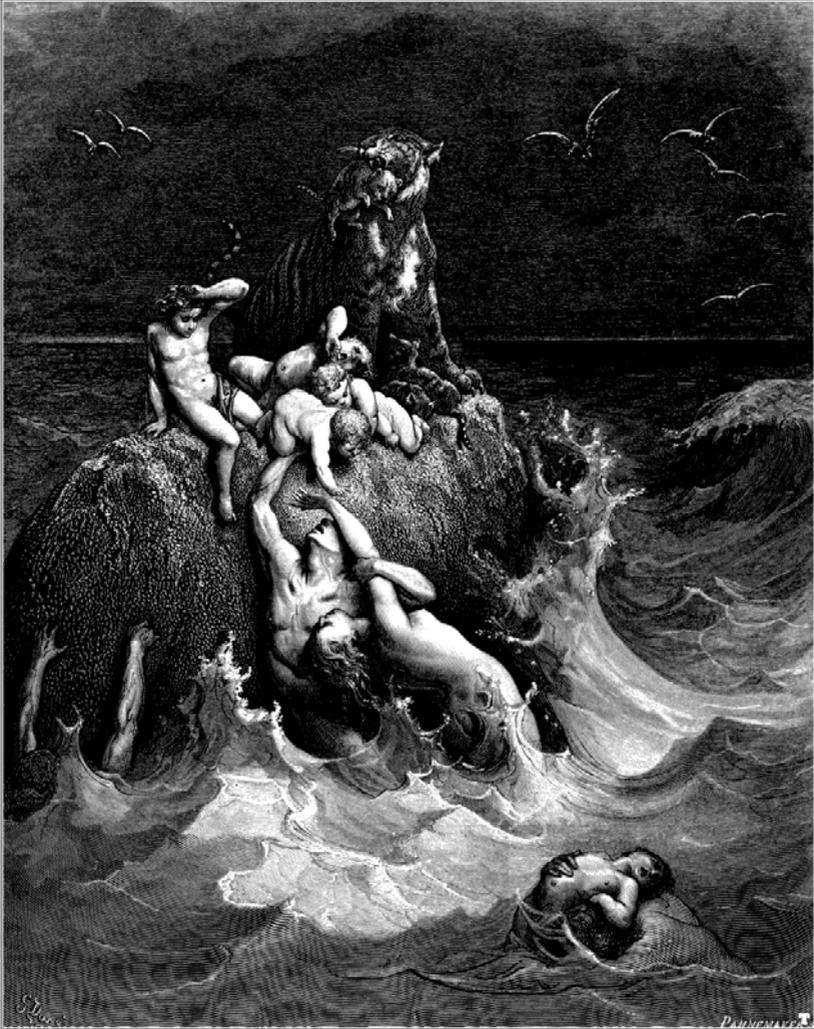
### **Disasters as God's Penalisation and Baptism of the World**

Although it was understood that the original Deluge annihilated humanity, it came to be seen not only as a hostile and destructive force, but also as the ultimate baptism that saved the world. This view was common in the writing of the early Fathers. After the Flood, the world emerged purified and free from sin. Cyprian made this comparison explicit, referring to the Flood as 'that baptism of the world' (fig. 4).

The equation of the Ark and the Church is also reflected in the Anglican rite of baptism (Book of Common Prayer, p. 323). Thus, with a basis in the Bible, major catastrophes and disasters were commonly seen as God's response to and penalisation of sin, and consequently, human misfortunes were linked directly to the environment in which they lived and the catastrophes they faced. In the *Homilies*, penury, famines and death were caused by God's anger and wrath, and the Bible showed that God sent plagues and misfortunes as punishment for collective sin. This was a belief shared by commoners. In 1653, Zachary Bogan published *A View of the Threats and Punishments Recorded in the Scriptures*, comprising over six hundred pages of calculations of appropriate punishments for every possible sin, including adultery and blasphemy.

The underlying belief was that obedience to God's commandments would ensure wealth and prosperity. A female secretary is reported to have confessed during the Interregnum that she became depressed when she saw that her neighbours were more prosperous than her, concluding that they had prayed more than her (Thomas 1971:88). 'This general assumption that virtue and vice would gain their true deserts acted as a powerful sanction for the morality of the day' (Thomas 1971:92).

This is in accordance with Weber's thesis that elect status was reflected in success and the accumulation of wealth (Weber 2006). However, Weber did not pay much attention to the implicit consequences at the other end of the social and religious scale.



**Fig. 4. The deluge. From Doré 1880.**

‘The course of worldly events could thus be seen as the working-out of God’s judgements. This was but a refinement of the more basic assumption that the material environment responded to man’s moral behaviour’ (Thomas 1971:89).



Fig. 5. The devastating 1607 flood at Burnham-On-Sea and the Bristol Channel. The commemorative plaque in entrance to the All Saints Church, Kingston Seymour, Somerset, reads: 'An inundation of the sea water by overflowing and breaking down the Sea banks; happened in this Parish of Kingstone-Seamore, and many others adjoining; by reason whereof many Persons were drown'd and much Cattle and Goods, were lost: the water in the Church was five feet high and the greatest part lay on the ground about ten days. William Bower'.

Hence, while true Christianity was evident in wealth and economic success, calamities and human suffering reflected moral disgrace and the sinful state of communities afflicted in this way.

The clergy identified scapegoats responsible for the communal experience of plagues, storms, floods and fires (Thomas 1971:83-87). A prostitute was blamed for the plague of 1665 at Hitchin. Catholics blamed Reformers for misfortunes and plagues. The 1666 Great Fire of London was seen by the clergy as a punishment for sins conducted by, and harming, most citizens. The Dutch, then at war with England, saw the fire as a divine judgement imposed upon their enemy, and the Spanish emphasised that a Catholic chapel in the Strand had miraculously

not been burnt, which clearly showed that the fire had had the sole purpose of penalising Protestant heretics. Moreover, the fire was also seen as a sign of the onset of Doomsday and the start of a new millennium; the year contained the number of the Beast – 666 (Thomas 1971:105, 141). In the seventeenth century, floods were seen as God's chosen instruments for cleansing the corrupt earth (fig. 5) and it was claimed locally that the area beside Dagenham near the Thames was the site of the original Deluge. Also implicit in the concept of holy condemnation was the idea that the uncorrupted would not be harmed (Ackroyd 2007:355).

### **Conclusion**

Although Weber may be correct in arguing that the Protestant ethic created a spirit of capitalism, his premise that magic, including the sacramental force as a means of salvation, was thereby eliminated from the world, does not stand in the case of England. To the contrary, even though the Church tried to erase all belief in magic in general, and in holy water in particular, the water cult was so strong that it persisted alongside Protestantism and capitalism, and, furthermore, one may argue that it defined lay Christianity. The Protestants developed a coherent theological system whereby salvation was to be attained by justification alone; the Devil and his forces were for the most part inner temptations, and, consequently, rites and rituals, including the belief in the efficacy of holy water, were the work of the Devil. This belief system did not go far enough towards meeting the religious demands of the laity, which faced misfortunes, calamities and sudden deaths amongst itself and its animals. These were seen as the works of an external Devil, against whom holy water was understood to act as an apotropaic device. When nature began to be viewed as the original Eden in a deteriorated condition, it is arguable that this led to the domestication and industrialisation of nature in the interests of perfecting God's creation. Regardless of whether they are God- or Satan-inspired, these worldviews are religious ones. According to Weber's argument, fortunate and prosperous capitalists may have been able to perceive themselves as the elect of God, but for

common people the opposite was the reality – a point with which Weber did not engage. Even when it was believed that the world was the unfinished product of the Devil, the implication was that the non-elect – the victims of floods, plagues and other disasters – were being penalised by God for their sinful behaviour. It is arguable, therefore, that the Christian water world of pre-industrial England became more sacralised when the natural world came to be seen as God's original Paradise on earth, and belief in the magical and healing qualities of holy water remained fundamental to lay Christianity long after England's industrialisation.

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