



Water

In many religions, water has transformative power, from concepts of sin and defilement to purity and participation in the divine. Zoroastrianism's protection of life-giving elements results in refusal to pollute holy water. In Hinduism, however, rites such as putting ashes and corpses into a river to assure salvation physically pollute holy rivers, and mechanical cleaning of rivers paradoxically renders them less holy.

From a religious or cosmological perspective there is a continuous battle between good and evil or cosmos against chaos forces. “Purity” indicates “completeness,” and “impurity” may be seen as “lack of completeness.” “Completeness” means godliness, and impurity is a lack of partaking in the divine or being separated from the purity of the divinities. Consequently, combating impurity, sin, and defilement represents the victory over chaos, thus the creation of the cosmos. The annihilation of impurity through the holy water’s transformation of pollution to purity is a process whereby the cosmos is re-created and moral and physical evil are destroyed. Thus, the beliefs in cosmic regeneration and the capacities of holy water to annihilate all kinds of pollution may enable physical defilement of rivers because it is an aim and obligation to combat and reduce the total amount of sin, impurity, and defilement in cosmos. Holy rivers are cosmic machines transforming pollution to purity, and if they do not have this capability, they are, strictly speaking, no longer holy.

Holy Water

Holy water is unique with regards to beliefs concerning purity and pollution. Whereas most other holy objects have to be protected from physical and ritual impurity because it is a sacrilege to defile the divine, in Hinduism

in particular but also in other world religions, water has precisely the function of embodying and taking on impurity before transforming it and thus remaining physically and ritually pure. The Zoroastrian veneration and protection of the water’s purity is exceptional in the worlds of water, whereas in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam water is used for washing away ritual impurity whether it is in the *mikvah*, baptism, or ablutions before prayers. Thus the three latter world religions share the same underlying logic that ritual impurity and sin are washed away by consecrated water. Nevertheless, water plays a minor role in these religions compared to Hinduism. Therefore, the all-pervasive beliefs that water cleanses all types of spiritual and physical impurity have paradoxically led to a situation where the rivers and the bodies of water are deliberately polluted. This is not a sacrilege but the logical end of holy water’s divine, purifying powers, and consequently beliefs in holy water may be the problem and not the solution to sustainability in a profane world.

Hindus and Zoroastrians

In all religions water is attributed with various and diverse holy qualities and spiritual properties. Hinduism, for instance, is in a unique position to be *the* “water religion.” The world’s largest congregation of people so far in history took place at the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna, and the mythological, subterranean Saraswati rivers at the Kumbh Mela festival in Allahabad, India, in 2001. The Kumbh Mela is a forty-two-day pilgrimage festival that is held every twelve years, and it was estimated that all together some 50 to 70 million pilgrims came to the festival that year. On 24 January, which was the cosmologically most auspicious day, between 20 and 25 million people took a holy bath in the rivers. All the pilgrims came to



Allahabad with one single purpose: to prepare for their forthcoming death by cleansing themselves from sin in holy water.

Pollution is transferred to the holy water; this capacity to wash away sin and ritual impurity characterizes holy water. Logically and practically, as a consequence the water that cleanses the devotee becomes polluted by spiritual impurity or physical defilement. Polluting the holy is, in other contexts, a sacrilege, but not with regard to water and holy rivers. Ritual purification with water involves a process wherein an individual devotee purifies him or herself by polluting the holy both spiritually and physically. It is possible to defile holy water, and consequently religion is not only the solution but also the problem for sustainability and ecology. Some of the most holy rivers in Hinduism are also the most polluted. This seeming paradox highlights structural properties and inherent qualities of what characterizes holiness and how and why holy water can be used for particular purposes in specific ways that no other religious objects can.

Traditionally, the “holy” causes reverence, veneration, and an awe-inspiring experience of the reality and the superior power beyond the individual. In general the most eco-friendly religion regarding pollution of water and protection of the life-giving elements is Zoroastrianism. The Zoroastrians protect the life-giving elements from defilements, and it is a sacrilege to pollute the holy. Whereas most people use water for everything that is impure, the Zoroastrians protect the cleanliness of the river itself. Herodotus noted as early as the fifth century BCE that, “They never defile a river with secretions [urine or spittle] of their bodies, nor even wash their hands in one; nor will they allow others to do so, as they have a great reverence for rivers” (Herodotus I.139). Impure water could not be used for drinking or cultivation, and when water was used for purification, it was only used as a secondary purifying agent. Water could not be used as a primary cleansing agent; to use water to wash away dirt and impurities was seen as a heinous sin that exposed water to demonic impurities. Unclean objects had to be cleaned with cattle urine and dried with sand or in sunlight before water could be employed for the final washing. This extreme reverence of water has been seen as a consequence of the Zoroastrians’ adaptation as nomads herding cattle on the arid Asian steppes where everything that promoted the well-being of humans and animals was venerated as precious and therefore protected from impurity and defilement. In such cases beliefs about water may promote sustainability and protection of the environment from pollution.

In Hinduism, on the other hand, holy water is attributed with other qualities and purposes. In India, the Ganges River is the holiest river, concentrating the sanctity of all rivers. The Ganges carries the “nectar of immortality”

connecting the Earth with the heavenly realms; the most auspicious place to die and to be cremated is along the banks of the Ganges River in Varanasi. Each year some forty thousand Hindus are cremated there, which enables them to cross the river of *samsara*. The associated spiritual entity Mother Ganga is so holy and powerful that even the smallest drop of water in Varanasi cleanses the devotee and liberates the dead, and the holiness of Ganges in Varanasi has since time immemorial ensured liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

The cremated remains from these tens of thousands are immersed in the river, and from all over India descendents pilgrimage with the ashes of their deceased to Varanasi. The immersion of the ashes in the holy river physically pollutes the water, but from a religious point of view this rite is necessary to ensure salvation. Water burials or immersion of corpses in the holy Ganges River have also been an intrinsic part of the funeral rites. Official reports estimated that between one thousand and two thousand corpses are immersed in the river each year, but the actual number has probably been higher. Together with domestic waste and sewage, the river has been in a horrible, polluted state. In the 1980s several hundred flesh-eating turtles were released in the river to solve the problem with decaying corpses floating in Ganges in Varanasi, and whether crocodiles should be reintroduced as a more permanent solution to the problems of floating corpses was also discussed. The opening of an electric crematorium in 1989 was therefore seen as essential to the antipollution program. Religion may thus prescribe rites that purify on an individual basis but pollute the very same river that eventually shall clean and purify others, and the holiest of the holiest river has been deteriorated physically by the ritual practices.

In Nepal, the pollution of the most holy river there became so severe that pilgrims could not use the water in their rituals and for their major festivals. Bagmati River, a tributary to the Ganges, passes by the Pashupatinath temple. It is the holiest place for Hindus in Nepal, where thousands are cremated each year, but the river has been polluted by more than just the death rituals. Prior to 2002, the holy water was sludge of domestic sewage, industrial waste, agricultural discharge, and other types of pollution. The river was only holy in its name, not in practice, and something had to be done. The solution was to cleanse the river mechanically by a sewage-treatment plant upstream of the temple, which opened in 2002 for the Shivaratri festival. With this engineering solution to physical impurity, the river changed from black sludge stream into a shiny and transparent river, but it left the devotees with a problem: was the river still holy or just pure?

Physical purity and ritual purity are related, but improving the physical quality did not necessarily enhance the spiritual quality. Although the river was too polluted to

use in rituals prior to the introduction of the treatment plant, the river was still believed to be holy, but in a deteriorated state. With the mechanical cleaning the logic of the holy was challenged. The Bagmati River was perceived as the holiest river in Nepal because it had the capacity to cleanse devotees from sin and human contamination *and still remain pure*. A holy river is holy because it has the power and capacity to annihilate spiritual and physical impurity by its divine qualities. Humans *transfer* sin and pollution to the river and the river as a divine and holy body *transforms* the pollution into purity and thus the river remains pure. If the river was unable to transform impurity to purity, it was seen as a proof that the river had lost its holiness. When engineers intervened and cleansed the deteriorated river, which it should have done by itself, numerous devotees perceived the river as being physically, but not ritually, pure.

The underlying belief in the capability of holy rivers to transform impurity to purity must be understood in the flowing character of water. A river transports dirt away as water cleanses the physical body by washing. By taking a bath the body becomes clean outwardly, which is the very same process that takes place in holy bath when the soul is purified inwardly through the body. In Hinduism moral qualities are embodied, and by taking holy baths sins are washed away and transferred to the river. Thus, the logic behind holy rivers is that the water has the capability to receive and annihilate spiritual impurity by transforming it to purity, which is a process where cosmos is created out of chaos. This logic has also been extended to physical impurity that has been disposed of in rivers because the flowing water transports it away, and the river seemingly remains pure. A holy river is therefore attributed with the power to *transform* all types of pollution to purity and this has enabled humans to *transfer* all kinds of defilement in the rivers, and domestic disposals of dirt and filth are not

seen as a religious sacrilege of the holy water and divine embodied substance.

Holy Water and Sustainability

In conclusion, the holiness or sacredness of water in religious traditions does not guarantee that water will not be polluted. Indeed, the spiritual “cleansing” provided by waters may be the source of further pollution. With regard to sustainability, reverence for water as sacred or holy will need to be rethought outside of the terms of mere self-purification and more in terms of purification of all life: the water, river, lake, stream or ocean then becomes a meter for how reverent humans are toward the rest of the natural water world.

Terje OESTIGAARD
University of Bergen

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