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WATER, CHRISTIANITY
AND THE RISE OF
CAPITALISM

Terje Oestigaard

I.B. TAURIS

LONDON · NEW YORK

Published in 2013 by I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010
www.ibtauris.com

Distributed in the United States and Canada Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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ISBN: 978 1 78076 066 7

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
A full CIP record is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: available

Designed and typeset by 4word Ltd, Bristol

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2008–2009 Professor Terje Tvedt led the international and interdisciplinary research group ‘Understanding the Role of Water in History and Development’ at the Centre for Advanced Study (CAS) at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in Oslo (<http://www.cas.uio.no/>). The overall aim was to address why the initial phases of the Industrial Revolution (c. 1760s–1820s) took place in north-west Europe in general and in England in particular.

My role in the project was to investigate religious beliefs and changes with regard to water in the period after the Reformation leading up to c. 1800. Water and Christianity has been a field of research that has interested me for quite a while, but due to other commitments it has been difficult to find time for such a study. I am deeply grateful therefore to have had the opportunity to be part of this research group during the autumn of 2008 and I am honoured to have been able to work at the Centre for Advanced Study in Oslo on this topic.

I would like first and foremost to express my gratitude and thanks to Terje Tvedt and to the rest of the research group: Richard Coopey, Graham Chapman, Roar Hagen, Karen Syse, Nina Witoszek, Armando J. Lamadrid and Eva Jakobsson. The staff at CAS provided the best research opportunities one could wish for and created a unique atmosphere, and I would like to thank here the director and Professor Willy Østreng, together with Maria M. L. Sætre, Trude Gran Peters and Marit Finnemyhr Strøm.

Also, I would like to thank Francesca de Châtel for allowing me to use parts of her unpublished material. Since I worked at the Centre for Advanced Studies and also in Bergen, I have moved from Norway to Uppsala in Sweden, and I would therefore thank Kjell Havnevik and the Nordic Africa Institute. In addition, Pernilla Bäckström has

helped finding literature not easily accessible. Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to the Norwegian Research Council which has supported this publication financially.

'The one who believes is the person to whom the blessed, divine water is to be imparted. If you believe that through this water you will be saved, it becomes a fact.'

Martin Luther
Sermons on the Catechism

1

INTRODUCTION

Water and Religion

Water plays a fundamental role in many of the ritual practices of the world's religions and is an important element in many of their underlying concepts. By studying water and religion, therefore, we may gain valuable insights into many aspects of religion – not only how religion works but also how its devotees see themselves, how they perceive the realm of the divine, and their own religious practices and rituals. Water is also vital to the welfare of human beings and society. It sustains life. This pervasive role of water in both society and cosmos unites micro- and macro-, legitimises social hierarchies and religious practices and beliefs. Water is a medium that links different aspects of humanity and the divinities into a coherent unit; it bridges paradoxes, transcends the human and divine realms, allows interaction with gods, and enables the divinities to intervene in humanity. Water is a medium for everything – it has human character because we are human, it is a social matter, but it is also a spiritual substance and divine manifestation with immanent powers. But still it belongs to the realm of nature – the hydrological cycle links all places and realms. Water transcends the common categories by which we conceptualise the world and cosmos.

Richard Gombrich (1988: 6) asks the question: 'If religion claims to explain the world, can we in the world explain religion?' For those who believe, religion is not only the most important element of their life, religion is the very being and essence *of* life, not only here and now but also in the life hereafter for eternity. A study of religion is thus a study of how humans see themselves and their practices in the cosmos, of how they perceive that god, or the various divinities will judge their human life and behaviour, and will reward

good deeds and actions. A proper understanding of religion, therefore, must include an analysis of how humans respond to what they see as the cosmic premises structuring both this life and the life hereafter when they perceive themselves to be thinking and acting religiously. And water is crucial in both conceptualising cosmos and engaging with divinities.

But a focus on beliefs and ritual practices does not explain religion in itself. Max Weber – whose work *The Sociology of Religion* has been claimed ‘the most crucial contribution of our century to comparative and evolutionary understanding of the relations between religion and society, and even of society and culture generally’ (Parsons 1964: lxxvii) – himself said:

To define ‘religion’, to say what it *is*, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can only be attempted, if at all, at the conclusion of the study. The essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behaviour (Weber 1964: 1).

Thus, following Weber, the aim of analysing religion is not to reveal some eternal truth or to make universal and essentialist definitions of what religion *is*, but to study what humans *do* and why they do so when they are religiously committed. With this approach, the study is not primarily concerned with theological exegesis but with what devotees actually *do* in ritual and religious practice. And these practices and beliefs can be analysed from a water system perspective.

In England there was a topography of holy water, which influenced most parts of society, religion, development processes and perceptions of nature, linking water, Christianity and the spirit of capitalism. But after the Reformation major changes in the perceptions of water occurred that changed worldviews radically. Using beliefs about water to understand society and historical processes enables a discussion of Weber’s thesis – put forward in *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* – that the Protestant ethic created a capitalistic spirit because magic was eliminated from the sacraments. From a water perspective this is not so.

The Reformation represented a watershed in Western Europe in the sixteenth century. Not only was it a religious revolution enabling Protestantism to become one of the three main branches of Christianity: it also had deep political, social and economic consequences. When Martin Luther posted his famous *Ninety-Five Theses*

in the Castle Church in Wittenberg in 1517, he also challenged the authority of the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church. Among other things, Luther and reformers attacked the corruption and indulgence of the Catholic Church, but, more fundamental, were the theological changes. The reformers denied the saints their role in Christianity and denied that the Pope and Catholics could affect the sinners' stay in purgatory; and they even rejected the doctrine of purgatory. A central feature was also how the holy works, which directly put the emphasis on water and in particular the role of baptism.

The Golden Age of Faith

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe have been seen as *the 'Golden Age of Faith'*. Following Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2006[1930]), the crucial question is: what transformed the mind of the typical Middle Ages man, who was dominated by a belief in devils and angels, ghosts and holy relics, into the self-controlled, disciplined and inward Puritan of seventeenth-century England (Caroll 1981: 459)? According to Weber the great historic development of religions took place when magic was eliminated from the world, which included the sacramental force as a means for salvation (Weber 2006: 61). Theoretically, 'idolatry was to be replaced by ideology, things by ideas – ideas manifested in language' (Sands 1999: 241). This theological distinction has fundamental consequences for how holy water has been perceived and used, and the question is whether predestination really replaced sacraments, because then water and the sacraments would have lost their liturgical and religious role in the Church and the community. If Weber is correct in his thesis that Protestantism created a capitalistic spirit, then the replacement of the sacraments with predestination should be seen most clearly in England, since the industrial revolution started there, and 'Water thus conquered man in triumph linked to increasing industrialization and an economy that devoured water' (Goubert 1989: 25).

Puritanism encouraged *work rather than works*, and 'puritanism was gaining adherents, offering both a rationalization of this worldly success and a refuge in a brutal world' (Caroll 1981: 467). For common people, misfortunes, calamities, catastrophes, sudden death and so on were caused by the Devil and his malign forces,

and holy water was the solution to, and protection from, these adversaries. One of the lucrative benefits of parish clerks consisted of a holy water fee, which they collected while they carried holy water supplies to every household. The blessing of this water gave laypeople a powerful religious weapon, which they could use to keep the Devil away, cure illness, avoid death and protect fields, properties and animals. 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' (Caroll 1981: 463). The holiness and magical effects of water became, therefore, one of the main battlegrounds for the Protestants where God faced the Devil.

The persistence of magic in beliefs and practice after the Reformation has fuelled a longstanding debate concerning *how* religious or Christian the laity was. Although Christianity was dominant and influential among the ruling class, it has been claimed that:

The peasantry...were largely untouched by the civilizing role of the Church throughout the Middle Ages and they remained the main vehicle of magical, irrational practices up to the Counter-Reformation and the era of the Protestant evangelical movements of the nineteenth century (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 1980: 69–70).

Keith Thomas (1971) argues in his *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* that magic and superstition were more important for the laity than orthodox Christianity. Therefore, it has been claimed that 'on the whole, English men and women did not want the Reformation and most of them were slow to accept it when it came' (Scarisbrick 1983: 1). To put it another way, religion is more than the Church's dogmas and liturgies, and Christianity as a religion was important for common people (Bruce 1997). Hence, as Spufford has argued:

The degree of importance that religion held in the lives of non-gentle parishioners in the sixteenth and seventeenth century will never be

established...At no period is it possible to distinguish the conforming believer from the apathetic Church-goer who merely wished to stay out of trouble (Spufford 1981: 194).

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, for example, few people received the Communion more than once a year during Easter. However, throughout Easter the attendance during Communion could be extremely high – as much as 90 per cent – and in rural parishes it could even have been 100 per cent of the population who received Communion (Hunt 1998: 41–44). This is but one example that can be used to support both views: the laity was not particularly Christian since they received Communion just once a year; or, on the contrary, people were deeply religious since during the most important Mass attendance approached 100 per cent. Similarly, as will be shown, belief in and use of holy water partly defined Christianity after the Reformation, even though the Church leaders claimed that these practices were heathen and diabolic.

In theoretical debates, a distinction is often made between the Great and Little traditions or between High and Low religions (Redfield 1956). On the one hand, world religions have a corpus of written, sacred texts and a literate priesthood, whilst, on the other hand, a non-literate laity exists which puts emphasis on rituals and practices (Goody 1986: 17). Hence, there is often a contradiction or tension between ‘the written tradition of the ascetic religion and the everyday social practice of merit-making combined with the rites of the “magico-animist”, the spirit cults’ (Goody 1986: 25). The difference between a Great and Little tradition is an analytical distinction, and a Great tradition is often a conglomerate of different local traditions (Furer-Haimendorf 1957: 135). The aim is therefore to assess ‘the development of religious syncretism, coexistence, adaptation, and the development of popular religious traditions’ (Insoll 2001: 19). Many scholars have taken the position that with the Reformation, Protestantism replaced Catholicism, but it should be remembered that this religious change was a gradual process that took a long time. The change from Catholicism to Protestantism can be seen as a kind of conversion, even though both traditions are Christian. In another context, Eaton has noted that ‘conversion’ is a difficult concept to use for religious change because ‘it ordinarily connotes a sudden and total transformation in which a prior religious identity is wholly rejected and replaced by a new one’ (Eaton 1993: 269). This

description highlights the problem with the bricolage of traditions existing in the post-Reformation era, where Catholic practices and beliefs in holy water together with pre-Christian rituals continued, despite the Protestant claim that this was idolatrous and diabolic. Religious change happens slowly because, as Eaton has suggested, such changes go through three phases, which involve 'inclusion', 'identification' and 'displacement' (Eaton 1993: 269). Thus the Reformation started or triggered off a long period of change where the established beliefs and practices were redefined and reinterpreted within the existing Christian tradition.

Thus, to argue that some beliefs and rituals are more or less Christian, based on the views of the orthodox, will be misleading, as Hinnells has argued with regards to Zoroastrianism: 'a religion is what it has become; that Zoroastrianism is what Zoroastrians do and believe when they consider that they are being Zoroastrian' (Hinnells 2000: 22). Equally, one may state the same of Christians and Christianity, and Duffy has taken the position that 'no substantial gulf existed between the religion of the clergy and the educated elite on the one hand and that of the people at large on the other' (Duffy 1992: 2). This may be true, but although the period has been labelled the 'Golden Age of Faith', there has inevitably been a huge variation in beliefs, and, more important from my perspective, there has been a great variation in ritual participation and use of sacraments and sacramentals, which contradicts the dogma of justification by faith alone. Despite the high religious separation between faith and rites – between predestination and sacraments – the Christianity of the laity could be quite different from the ideas and the religious prescriptions presented by the Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. Many of the controversies from the sixteenth century onwards between the Church and the laity, between the Protestants and Catholics, and even among the Protestants, were concerned with water: did holy water exist? If not, were the magical qualities that water was believed to possess actually the work of the Devil?

From one perspective it has been argued that the degree of belief in Satan is an indicator of religious confidence: the more you believe, the less need you have to project sins onto the Devil (Godbeer 1992: 97pp). From another perspective this highlights a contradiction in the Protestant belief system: strictly speaking, there is nothing but an omnipotent and transcendental God, and faith alone is the path

to salvation. Nevertheless, even Protestantism is a highly material religion, and the role of materiality in religion is particularly evident in holy water and how water embodies divine presence. In a brutal world where death and human misfortune haunted people in their daily lives, a good, benevolent and caring God would have been believed to protect his devotees. One way to help and safeguard his children would be to trust them with holy water, which they could use whenever they felt threatened by malevolent forces. This was how people perceived the potential benefits of holy water, although the Protestant Church leaders claimed that God would help believers through prayer alone.

Holy water is, therefore, one approach that may be used to analyse change and belief in the 'Golden Age of Faith'. Auguste Comte put forward the theory of the three 'ages of mankind', where water was the subject of a different creed and need: the cosmological age, the religious age and the scientific age. The cosmological age was characterised by the cult of sacred and magical fountains, where the healer and the water diviner were one and the same person. In the religious age, 'baptismal water alone was able to cleanse the body of sin and contact between the naked body and hedonistic water was forbidden' (Goubert 1989: 27). The age of science or industrialisation was characterised by professionalism and technical knowledge. Importantly, these three ages should not be seen as chronologically succeeding each other, but rather as parallel perceptions of how water has been conceptualised (Goubert 1989: 28). From this perspective the main discussion will focus on different types of water in what Comte labelled the religious age, which also coincides in time with the 'Golden Age of Faith'. Hence, a perspective emphasising the relation between religion and water may reveal new insights into societal and religious developments between 1500 and 1800, which may also address Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that the sacraments lost their force or magical capacities.

The Materiality of Spirituality: Texts in Contexts from a Water Perspective

In the interdisciplinary research field of material culture (Miller & Tilley 1996) the emphasis is put on how and why materialities work

and constitute social and religious structures, because 'Material culture is as important, and as fundamental, to the constitution of the social world as language' (Tilley 1996: 4). It is generally reckoned that text and material culture have different constitutive qualities and that material culture is in itself a separate, empirical source (e.g. Miller 1987; Tilley 1989; Olsen 2003; Fahlander & Oestigaard 2004). By focusing on 'the material', the aim is to highlight the complex nature of the interaction between social strategies and material culture (Miller 1985: 4), which also include the natural world. 'The study of material culture may be most broadly defined as the investigation of the relationship between people and things irrespective of time and space' (Miller & Tilley 1996: 5), and it is not fruitful to distinguish systematically between a natural world and an artefactual one (Miller 1994: 398), since nature is part of cultural and religious structures even when the materiality in itself is not modified or made into objects or tools:

The boundary between nature and culture, the distinction between the material and the mental, tend to ... dissolve once we approach that part of nature which is directly subordinated to humanity... Although external to us, this nature is not external to culture, society or history (Godelier 1988: 4-5).

Neither is it external, in our case, to religion. Religion can also be material without turning into idolatry. In particular water may deconstruct the belief in nature as a whole, but at the same time break with the postmodern stance where everything is just constructions, without material foundation, because water is nature, culture and religion at the same time, which makes water unique as both the particular and the universal (Tvedt & Oestigaard 2010a, 2010b), the mental and the material.

Religion can be analysed using different approaches. Traditionally the emphasis has been on sermons, doctrinal statements, the respective religions' institutions or leading figures, and has mainly focused on liturgical and sacred texts. Recently, however, attention has been directed towards the material forms and the use of materiality in religious practices. Religion is not simply abstract doctrines and dogmas, or something that has solely to do with reason and speech alone: it also involves material things, devotees and rites, because 'Religion is fundamentally material in practice' (Goa, Plate & Paine

2005: 4). In Christianity, as a transcendental and monotheistic religion, God is absolutely context independent and all-encompassing, but he locates himself in context-dependent situations (Huchingson 1980). These contexts are the physical and material world in which people suffer and struggle in their daily lives, and it is in this world that their religion operates. Moreover, the context-dependent situations are, to a large extent, different water worlds where God controlled the absence or presence of the divine, life-giving waters. Hence, 'history can be independent of theology, but theology cannot be independent of history' (Russell 1981: 12). Religious identities are negotiated through material culture, and syncretism is inherently an important agency in both the spread and development of religious identity. Thus in reality there will be notions of syncretism and religious dualism and multiple traditions coexisting (Insoll 2004a). Although 'syncretism' has often been perceived and condemned as implying 'inauthenticity' or 'contamination' of a 'pure' religion, it is important to stress that as an analytical tool for analysing religious change it is very useful because it describes 'the blending or fusing of different religious traditions or elements' (Insoll 2004b: 98).

This religious syncretism is sometimes evident in the Bible or in the letters from, between and against the dominant theologians such as Martin Luther and John Calvin; but most often certain dominant theological interpretations and dogmas have been presented as the one and only truth, and all others as diabolic or heretic. This is very much the situation during the Reformation – not only between the Catholic Church and the Reformers but also between the major Reformers such as Luther and Calvin or Zwingli. Therefore, it is necessary, and of interest, to analyse what the different parties involved in the Reformation and the periods after it said about holy water. Moreover, we should remember that the Church leaders' and the learned theologians' beliefs and arguments were not necessarily shared by the laity, who in ritual practice continued older and traditional forms of worship and belief. Hence, these two main parameters of actors will be analysed together in order to see how they coincide with or contradict each other. Although England after the Reformation in the period c. 1500–1800 is the main focus, it has sometimes been necessary to include other Continental parallels and contexts in earlier and later periods in order to proceed with the analysis. Together, it will hopefully present a picture of religious life

and practice, which has defined parts of Christianity, even though Protestant theologians may have labelled this as diabolic.

Thus, the question is: how successful was the Reformation in denying the sacraments any material role and in denying their working automatically (*ex opere operato*)? How successful was the attempt to desacralise holy water? It will be argued that belief in holy water and in the power of water survived and defined important parts of religious practice in England after the Reformation. This was despite the Protestants' rejection of holy water whereby they claimed that it was diabolic and the work of the Devil. Thus, the strength and pervasiveness of belief in holy water, and its magical effects and power, have to be sought not only in the historical context of England but also in water itself which has enabled these beliefs, since no other material element has created and maintained such strong religious and material embodiments. I will therefore start by describing references to water in the Bible and the differences between holy and evil water before analysing the changing beliefs with regards to the attributed qualities of the water used in baptism, and how these theological changes took place in England during the Reformation. I will continue by approaching the subject from another angle, namely how concepts of bathing, purity and hygiene developed and were associated either with God or with the Devil. Thereafter, the focus will turn to the ritual use and beliefs surrounding holy wells and water in general, and to how changing water worlds in the landscape, such as sudden floods, were perceived. Finally, these various practices and perceptions of water are analysed by approaching water through the relations and differences between science, magic and religion. Together, these approaches will enable a discussion of Max Weber's thesis that the Protestant ethic created a capitalistic spirit because magic was eliminated from the sacraments.