Water and World Religions
An Introduction

Terje Oestigaard
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Preface

This book is a hybrid and not an original work in itself, but based on my earlier works, which have been adjusted and partly rewritten and extended. In particular *An Archaeology of Hell: Fire, Water and Sin in Christianity* (2003), *Death and World Religions. Human responses to the inevitable* (2004), *Death and Life-giving Waters – Cremation, Caste, and Cosmogony in Karmic Traditions* (2004, 2005), and partly *Political Archaeology and Holy Nationalism – The Struggle for Palestine’s Past* (in press), are used in this book.

The *Master Programme in Water Resources and Coastal Management* is organised at Centre for Development Studies and Centre for Studies of Environment and Resources at the University of Bergen. As a part of this programme there is a course in *Water in History and Development*. The aim of this course is to broaden the understanding of water in world history and development processes. As a part of this course, I have lectured on water and religion, but there has been no easily accessible literature. The aim with this little book is therefore to give a short introduction to water and world religions. In such a format it is of course impossible to give a detailed account of all water rituals and variations within the religions, or even to give an elaborate presentation of the religions themselves. Still, I hope this book will be useful as an introduction to the subject.

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Introduction

The Kumbh Mela is a 42-day long pilgrim festival for Hindus held every 12 years in Allahabad, and although the exact number is uncertain, in 2001 it was estimated that 50-70 million people joined the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical, subterranean Saraswati River. On January 24 2001, which was the most auspicious day for performing the ritual baths, some 20-25 million people cleansed themselves of committed sins with holy water from the three rivers. The 2001 Kumbh Mela accounted for the largest congregation of human beings ever. They had gathered with one purpose only: to bathe in the confluence of Ganges, Yamuna, and Saraswati. The holiness of the water in these rivers will then erase sins and prepare the devotees for death. The water of the joining rivers encapsulates life from the realms before birth to the cosmic consequences after death. This shows the importance of religious water in society and cosmos (Tvedt & Oestigaard in press).

Water is the very essence of life. The life-giving waters are for the welfare of society. The water-worlds are an intrinsic part of the constitution and the development of religions. The pervasive role of water-worlds in society and cosmos is, however, rarely investigated despite its structuring function, which unites micro- and macro cosmos, creates life, and legitimises social hierarchies. The numerous and varied ways to express life and humanity are best sought through a comprehensive knowledge of the spheres where water is the main component. Water is a medium which links or changes totally different aspects of humanity into a coherent unit; it bridges paradoxes. The human body consists of water, and this biological fact is the logical point of departure for a journey into the world of waters. Without water humans will normally die within a day, but this trivial fact from a biological perspective is a social and religious cosmos. Water is the point of departure from which humans and consequently society begin. Water is a medium for everything – it has human character because we are humans, it is a social matter and it is spiritual substance, and still, it belongs to the realm of nature as a fluid liquid.

Since Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) there has been a dictum in social and human sciences that social facts can only be explained by other social variables (Durkheim 1966). C. P. Snow designated the scientific divide as the “two cultures” – a universe of humanities as opposed to the natural sciences (Snow 1966), and within post-
modernism the dogma of mind’s superiority over matter has been
forced to its extreme; there is nothing but language. When social
scientists have acknowledged nature as a relevant aspect in social
constructions, it has often been approached as a unified entity – as
one thing – The Nature. I aim to illuminate the interrelatedness of
culture and nature not as opposing categories but by emphasising
that there is neither culture nor nature as such, but different
interacting spheres of humans and materiality. Bodily fluid matters
in particular and water in general dissolve and transcend the
traditional dichotomy of mind and matter on the one hand, and
nature and culture on the other hand. Fresh water represents deep
ontological relations, and the water-worlds in a society create
opportunities for all kinds of constructions (Tvedt 1997). Fresh
water has a unique character of universality both in society and
nature, but it is always used in a particular way in the specific
constitutions of society and cosmos. The hydrological cycle links all
places and spheres together, and water transcends the common
categories by which we conceptualise the world. Moreover, the
physical character of water combined with its role as an historical
agent enables the medium to link the past with the present and the

The dual character of always being both culture and nature,
life and death giver, enables humans to spin webs of significance
around water in ways which no other element enables. Water is
everywhere, and that is why it is seemingly invisible, unless one
pays attention to it. Water is always in a flux. The fluid matter
changes qualities and capacities wherever it is, and it takes always
new forms.

Why, how, and when water is important to people is
culturally specific. Ideas and cultural traditions arising from water
are therefore at the central core of this world of waters. The dual
character of water as nature on the one hand, and the element man
needs to drink to live on the other hand, gives water a special role in
social and cultural constructions of the material world. What
emerges very clearly is how the transformative character of water,
which constantly changes from a solid state into liquid and finally
into air and back, is forcefully used in cultural constructions. This
can be seen in a more general perspective: The evaporation of water,
especially by cooking, highlights the transformative borders of
humanity. The difference between raw and cooked is what
distinguishes culture from nature. Humans create their bodies
through consumption of food cooked by water. A culture’s cuisine may be seen as created from water. It is culture, but also nature, it is never either/or, always both. It is everything in between the extremes, and it is possible to elaborate upon common binary oppositions by water as a medium. Dichotomies such as cold:hot, culture:nature, pure:impure are expressed forcefully by water, and the wide scale of differences and changing qualities are incorporated into cultural constructions.

Water is a paradox. Despite the fact that water is in flux and constantly changes form, the most striking feature of water is nevertheless the constant factor – it is always the same irrespective of the form it takes. Wherever the water is in the hydrological circle – whether this is in the sea, in the sky, in the rivers or in the air as rain – or whether the water is used for domestic purposes or as art in fountains, it is the same water. The natural character and quality of water is essentially the same everywhere. This common nature of water is always lying at the bottom of social and cultural constructions upon which new constructions are made and modified. Since the natural water is an integral component in innumerable spheres, the cultural dimensions in the world of waters cover most facets of humanity. There is a universal aspect common for all people throughout history, and because of this shared variable it is possible to compare humans cross-culturally regardless of time periods or social complexity. Nevertheless, the religious and cultural use of water in expressing essential truths of humanity and the relation between humans and gods differ within the world religions. But what is religion?

According to Talcott Parsons, Max Weber’s *The Sociology of Religion* is “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:lxvii). Weber himself says, “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, approaching religion is a difficult task.

In “Religion as a Cultural System”, Clifford Geertz argues that there have been no theoretical advances of major importance in the study of religion since Durkheim, Weber, Freud, or Malinowski,
because “no one even thinks of looking elsewhere – to philosophy, history, law, literature, or the “harder” sciences – as these men themselves looked, for analytical ideas” (Geertz 1973:87-88). Thus, according to Geertz, the anthropological study of religion is a two-stage operation: 1) it is an analysis of the system of meanings embodied in religious symbols, and 2) it is an analysis of how these systems relate to socio-structural and psychological processes (ibid:125). I will add, however, a third aspect; namely the material world in which humans live, because as will be evident, the everyday world is not only social but also includes ecological problems and possibilities, or materiality in a broad sense.

I will follow Geertz when he says that religion is a model of “reality” and a model for “reality” (Geertz 1973:93); it does not only describe the social order, but it shapes it (ibid:119). Thus, religion defines the “rules of the game”, at least in terms of cosmic and final answers and solutions. “But no one, not even a saint, lives in the world religious symbols formulate all of the time, and the majority of men live in it only at moments” (ibid:119). Most of the time people live in the everyday world of common sense. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between an everyday world and a religious world whether one uses terms such as sacred/profane, ritual/non-ritual, consecrated/non-consecrated, religious worldview/commonsense worldview, etc. As analytical categories such distinctions are useful; another question is to what extent these categories are ontological in nature. It is important to recognise that religion might be the key building block of identity (Insoll 2004a), and religion “can be conceived as the superstructure into which all other aspects of life can be placed” (Insoll 2004b:12). This does not imply some form of idealistic religious “totality” but rather an approach where all aspects of a given material culture can be structured by religion (ibid:13).

Mircea Eliade argues that religion as a phenomenon can only be understood on its own terms. Although this stance is sympathetic regarding the subject matter, rather than reducing religion to an epiphenomenon of other social, psychological, or material processes, nevertheless, by denying that religion can be understood from other perspectives one denies that religion has any ideological function in everyday life (Morris 1987:176-177). Eliade’s solution was to elaborate the differences between the sacred and the profane worlds, and in order to grasp the essence and structure of
religious phenomena he argued that comparative studies were necessary (ibid).

This separation between a secular and religious world is not Eliade’s invention. The distinction between the sacred and the profane goes at least back to Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* from 1915. However, rather than seeing the sacred and the profane as two separate worlds existing beside each other – one world for believers and another world for non-believers – I will argue that the world of everyday life for believers is practical, mundane, and “profane”, but it is a part of, and inferior to, another religious world which includes cosmogony and the divine Parthenon. Therefore, I will not restrict the profane sphere to non-believers and the sacred sphere to believers, but rather stress that in a religious world there are certain spheres where religious principles may guide and structure the social interaction, but the activities in themselves are not considered religious in nature, and hence, they belong to the “profane” sphere as opposed to the sacred or ritual sphere.

If religion both defines and shapes social order, I see ritual as an active interaction between humans and gods. Although not identical, the relation between religion and ritual bears some similarities to the relation between structure and agency. In order to elaborate this approach, one may distinguish between transcendental and cosmogonic religions. “In transcendental religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, where the omnipotence of a single god renders that god’s existence totally independent of his creation, sacrifice becomes merely a token of individual and collective human gratitude for the deity’s favours” (Trigger 2003:473). In cosmogonic religions, individual deities are viewed as dependent of humans and supported by humans through sacrifices, and hence, humans and gods depend upon each other (ibid).

There are two fundamental acts of worship; sacrifice and prayer (Feherty 1974:128). Broadly speaking, sacrifice is more common in cosmogonic religions and prayer in transcendental religions, although both types of worship are inherent in the respective religions. Both sacrifice and prayer as worship have certain characteristics. Firstly, it is humans who initiate this interaction with their gods. Secondly, because of the human initiative and engagement with the gods, humans are inferior and this interaction is asymmetrical. In a gift theory the gods give more
back to humans than what they receive from them, and thus, this interaction establishes a reciprocal but hierarchical relationship. Hence, it includes all aspects of human life from the cradle to the grave.

In sum, religion focuses on answering three main questions: 1) What becomes of us after death?, 2) How should we lead a moral life?, and 3) How and why were the universe, life, and human beings created? (Davies 1999). Humans turn to gods with their problems, and if these problems include the wrong types of water and nature in general, then these matters are divine concerns.

Death is life and life is death – this is the eternal round of birth and death. Eschatological and cosmological concepts of the life hereafter are embedded in culture and religion, but these notions are not sufficient when explaining why people are performing their rituals as they do. Humans live in and of the nature. The daily struggle for life and their coping with ecological realities and constraints are important elements incorporated in the performance of rituals.

Although death is inevitable for all human beings, there are some factors that may increasingly accelerate the process towards death without any mercy. Hunger and starvation are such processes. Whether there is too little or too much water or the precipitation comes like snow during the wintertime, the outcome of not controlling and incorporating these live-giving waters into the sphere of life and death is actually death. The consequence of incorporating ecological constrains into the rituals is a religious security from an absence of these resources that will cause death for a smaller or greater part of the society.

Water is good for imaginations because “Material imagination learns from the fundamental substances; profound and lasting ambivalences are bound up in them...[because] a matter to which the imagination cannot give a dual existence cannot play this psychological role of fundamental matter” (Bachelard 1994:11). Life and death are dependent upon water and have to be seen in relation to the hydrological cycle of river and rain. Water is a substance of life and death. The link with water is not broken even with death (Gurung 2000:148). Water and religion are intimately connected.

Thus, the aim of this book is to give a short introduction to the relation between water and religion. Today, there are five world religions; Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. As a comparative example Zoroastrianism is also included because
it sheds light on the development of Hinduism, and the concepts of water, fire, and purity differ from the other religions. Today, Zoroastrianism is not a world religion, but it is possible to argue that it once was. The criteria by which one designates a religion as a “world religion” are disputed, but they relate partly to historic importance, how many followers a religion has, and what type of deities that are represented and worshipped (see appendix).

Water and religion are inevitably connected to sin and defilement, and how to erase sin or how to prepare oneself for a life after death. To sin is to conduct actions and behave in a way which deviates from the path and laws laid down by God. Every human has a free will because he or she may choose to oppose god’s laws, but if a person does so, it has Otherworldly consequences, and he or she will be faced with a trial and subsequent judgement after death (Hertz 1996). However,

“Defilement is never an isolated event. It cannot occur except in view of systematic ordering of ideas. Hence any piecemeal interpretation of the pollution rules of another culture is bound to fail. For the only way in which pollution ideas make sense is in reference to a total structure of thought whose key-stone, boundaries, margins and internal lines are held in relation by rituals of separation (Douglas 1994:42) ... Holiness and unholliness after all need not always be absolute opposites. They can be relative categories. What is clean in relation to one thing may be unclean in relation to another, and vice versa” (ibid:9).

The main aim with purifying water rituals is to reduce the punishment in an Otherworld for conducted sins. Theories of punishment in the philosophy of religion have recently been borrowed from philosophy of law. There are two classic theories of punishment; the utilitarian theory and the retributive theory. The aim of the utilitarian theory is primarily to prevent further crimes and thus to maintain social order and society. According to this theory, the aim with punishment is the social ends; both particular and general prevention and protection against criminals. According to the retributive theory of punishment, justice requires and demands that wrongdoers are punished according to the crimes committed. It is possible to say that utilitarian theories of punishment are prospective and forward looking whereas retributive
theories are retrospective and backward looking. Utilitarian theories emphasise the social benefits in the future whereas retributive theories emphasise that punishment aims for nothing else than just dealing with past crimes. This distinction is not, however, that clear-cut in reality, because all theories deal with the future in some or another way (Lehtonen 1999:13-19).

Nevertheless, in this world water has the capacity to reduce misfortunes and punishments in another world. This quality of holy water is perhaps the most important aspect of water irrespective of religion.

It is impossible to give an account of all the variation among billions of people, and a solution to the problem is to present and analyse parts of the religions as they are presented and understood at the respective religions’ most sacred places. In religions there is both unity and diversity. Although there are some practices which are more common than others, within each of the world religions there are multiple local traditions. Thus, the chosen examples are only glimpses from around the world emphasising how water is a part of religion. Nevertheless, there are some general traits or aspects which return in a discussion of water and world religions:

- Purifying rituals.
- Preparations for death and further life.
- Theories of retributions for committed sins.
- Places where good deeds are rewarded and bad deeds are punished (Heaven and Hell).
- Eternal life.
- Sin and pollution.
- The qualities of holy water.
- The relation between water and fire as purifying agents.
- The relation between water and blood as purifying agents.
- Water as a medium linking this world to the Otherworld.
Hinduism

Ganga in India is the most holy river in Hinduism, and she stems mythological from Kailash (Darian 1978:1). She is eternally pure and cleanses sins. The holiest river in Hinduism concentrates the sanctity of all rivers: “Not only is the Ganges said to be present in other rivers, but other rivers are present in her” (Eck 1983:214). Ganges is the “nectar of immortality” which brings life to the dead cremated on the banks of the River of Heaven (ibid:215). “The Ganges is the liquid essence of the scriptures, the gods, and the wisdom of the Hindu tradition. She is the liquid essence, in sum, of Shakti – the energy and power of the Supreme, flowing in the life of the world” (ibid:219). Water symbolises the whole of potentiality as a source of possible existences (Eliade 1993:188).

According to Hindu tradition, a soul or an individual self has to be reborn 8,4 million times before it eventually attains salvation and reaches heaven. This circle of birth and death is called samsara. The soul is eternal but in this world it takes numerous bodies. Reincarnation is the process by which a soul leaves one body to take residence in another body. The death of a body is therefore the moment when this transference and replacement of the soul take place. The soul is eternal and superior to the body, and the body is seen as a material prison which limits the soul’s spiritual capabilities. To be born as a human being implies limitations because every living being will eventually die, and dying means non-permanence. A bodily reincarnation can never be perfect because the body will one day or another start to become sick, old and weak, which can only end with the body’s death.

The ultimate aim is never to be born again because then one is eternal, which means divine. This eternal state is characterised by being united with the cosmic energies. If one is able to escape an incarnation involving a material body or prison, it is impossible to die. It is the body which eventually will die and decompose, not the soul since it is eternal. The only things that separate this world and Heaven are materiality in general and the body in particular, which hinder the soul’s spiritual unity with the gods. Heaven is perfect; the body is not since it is mortal.

A soul can be reincarnated into any kind of material prison. The more sinful a person has been during his or her lifetime, the worse a reincarnation he or she will attain. Being born as a human is the most preferable body and way of being one can aspire to,
because as humans one can pray and improve one’s own spiritual path. If one is born as a dog or rat; or even worse – as an insect – the material condition of the body puts severe limitations on the soul’s spiritual possibilities.

The soul is a divine component embodied in any kind of living being, and it has the size of a fingerprint on a thumb. The “fingerprint” is a record or history which the soul keeps with it while being reincarnated millions of times. It is a record of what the soul has done, for instance when it was reincarnated and lived as a human with free will to do good deeds and pay homage to the gods. After death one brings along merits or demerits from previous lives which will determine what kind of being one will become in the next life, or in other words, what type of body the soul will gain, for instance a human body, a donkey body, and so on. This process, whereby one is penalised for bad actions and rewarded for good deeds in terms of different bodily incarnations, is the doctrine of karma.

**Varanasi – the cosmic origin and end**

The holiest place in the Hindu world and cosmos is Varanasi in India, which is also called Kashi or Benares. The town is located along the river Ganga where she flows northwards. The three most dominant and important gods in Hinduism are Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Shiva has numerous incarnations and materialisations, but the most common and potent is the **linga** or the phallus. Kashi literally means “luminous”. One of the primordial lingas – the linga of light – resides in Varanasi, and it gives the city the luminosity that reveals untruth and darkness.

In Hinduism it is believed that there are 330 million gods or facets of the divine – all of these are present in the city – and they can be unified and approachable by worshipping the linga. Varanasi exists in a constant stage of purity, whereas the rest of the world is decaying and deteriorating. The city exists beyond time – it is eternal. Varanasi was the place where the world and cosmos were created for the very first time, and ever since it has been as pure as it was during the primordial origin. The city stays in the Age of Perfection, whereas everyone else lives in the Age of Destruction, which is characterised by impurity, greed, and lust; in short, human imperfection.
Map of Indian sub-continent.
Ganga in Varanasi, India.

Manikarnika ghat in Varanasi, India.
The preferable death is a matter of where and when. Varanasi is the most auspicious place for a Hindu to die due to the sacredness of the city and the holiness of Ganga. Each year some 30,000-40,000 Hindus are cremated at the two ghats in Varanasi – Manikarnika ghat and Harischandra ghat. If a person dies in Kashi, then he or she may cross the river of samsara. The holiness of Ganga is so powerful that even the smallest drop of her water in Kashi cleanses and purifies the living and liberates the dead. Numerous pilgrims and old people come to Varanasi spending their last days of life waiting for their death to come. The preferred way of dying is with one’s feet immersed in Ganga, and dying at an astrologically auspicious date increases the positive merits. Ganga is the ultimate crossing-point between this and the Otherworld, and she ends the cycle of birth and death. A cremation at her banks whereby the ashes are immersed in the river ensures salvation.

Manikarnika ghat is perceived as the most holy place for a Hindu to be cremated. According to myths, Shiva cremated his wife Parvati at this very spot, and the original cremation fire from this pyre has been continuously burning ever since. In the temple just above the burning ground the fire is kept and guarded by an undertaker whose job is to superintend this primordial fire. It has never extinguished, and approximately each two hours left-over wood from cremations is brought to this fire, and hence, it is fuelled by cremations. The deceased’s son collects a fire from this temple by which he lights his father’s pyre, and each cremation is thus lit by the very fire with which Shiva cremated Parvati. The cremations burn continuously all day and night without interruption, and it is believed that if the cremation fires extinguish and there is an abruption in the cremations, then the world will collapse and a new world order will appear.

The sisters Kali and Ganga in Bangladesh

I will now move from India to parts of Bangladesh. There are two types of Mother Goddesses in Hindu Bangladesh – one gives life and the other takes life. Kali is traditionally seen as the Goddess of Death and destruction and Ganga as the almighty life-giving Mother of the World. The annual floods in Bangladesh are a re-occurring problem, incorporated into the low-religion of common people who
consider water and death to be associated with the taking and creation of life. Each year the river kills people and destroys the land, but the river and floods are also pre-requisites for a successful harvest and further life. Kali statues in particular, but also statues of other gods and goddesses, are seen to “die” each year when the divine spirit leaves the statue. These statues are seen as dead bodies and given water burials in Ganga, thus uniting the micro- and macro cosmos, nature and culture. The uncertainty of the environment is incorporated into the goddesses of life and death; too much water or too little water are seen as wrong waters for life.

Faridpur town in Bangladesh is located a few kilometres southwest of Padma – the Bengali name for the mighty river Ganga. Kali is traditionally seen as the Goddess of Death and destruction and Ganga as the almighty life-giving Mother of the World. The most popular deity in Faridpur is Kali. She is the supreme goddess, the Mother of the World. Ganga is also a Mother, but Kali is always the most powerful of them. Kali and Ganga are often seen as sisters, and Ganga may even be seen as a daughter of Kali. Even though water is the substance of life, it is also the substance of death.

A Hell filled with good things!

This characteristic of Bengal by Ibn Batuta in 1345 refers to the richness of the region but also the dangers of the mighty Ganga (Darian 1978:142). The river is a double-edged sword: it both gives and takes life;

“Bengal is literally a child of the Ganges. At one time, the delta lay beneath the water and the river touched the sea in one unbroken stream...Gradually the silt, carried down from the Himalayas along the Ganges Valley, began building up the land, dividing the river again and again...From that time until today, the fate of the delta has been tied to Ganga and its intersecting streams” (Darian 1978:135).

In Hinduism there is a masculine and a feminine theory of cosmos. According to the former everyone and everything stem from and are derived from Shiva, whereas according to the latter all gods and goddesses are forms of Kali. In Bengal the Mother is the Supreme Being and absolute force of the world. Shakti means power or force,
and this is a feminine energy, and the whole universe is a manifestation of shakti. This Universal Energy is manifested in The goddess (Mookerjee 1988:11). The primordial origin of the feminine force is evident in the Shiva-linga. The linga or the male principle is “…the ontology of existence, placed on the yoni as its pedestal, rises out of the yoni, the womb; it does not enter it” (Kramrisch 1981:242-243). Thus, the linga – the penis or male regenerative organ – is not prior to the womb or female principle, but antecedent to it. Everything starts and derives from the female forces in the universe. Mother is a priori and primordial. Mother goddesses are not only feminine and peaceful – this is only one side of the coin – in Hindu culture the other side is represented by Kali manifestations. Kali is cruel and ferocious – she is

“For armed, garlanded with skulls, with dishevelled hair, she holds a freshly cut human head and a bloodied scimitar in her left hands...her neck adorned with a garland of severed human heads dripping blood, her earrings two dangling severed heads, her girdle a string of severed human heads, she is dark and naked. Terrible, fanglike teeth, full prominent breasts, a smile on her lips glistening with blood, she is Kali whose laugh is terrifying... She stands on Siva, who lies corpseslike beneath her” (Krsnananda 1934:310-311).

Kali is most often associated with blood and death – the two most polluting realities in the Hindu culture (Kinsley 1989:128). Kali controls everything and everyone, no one can escape her power and therefore it is best to surrender to her power and become a devotee of her. As a Universal Mother she protects her children and grants their desires (Olson 1990:37). Although Kali is slaying demons, she is also a threat to stability and order because she becomes so frenzied on the battlefield, usually drunk on the blood of her victims, that she starts destroying the world she is supposed to protect (Kinsley 1989:120).

Both Kali and Ganga are mothers – Kali Ma and Ganga Ma. Kali and Ganges are sisters, but Kali is perceived as the firstborn and the most powerful of all gods and goddesses. All water is perceived as water from Ganga. Kali is the supreme Mother who encompasses all the powers of the world. Mother Ganga is perceived more as a personal goddess, who removes a person’s sins if he or she prays to the river and takes holy baths, whereas Kali destroys
sins and evils in the world on a cosmic level. Kali kills and destroys enemies of peace and humanity in the world, and she will protect the humble people who pray to her. Kali is the one nearest the Godhead, and therefore she is the most efficient and sacred mediator to god. A sacrifice to Kali is the best, fastest and safest way to get immediately divine access, godly grace and wishes fulfilled. Despite her fearful imagery, Kali is worshipped and loved as a Mother, and she enlightens and creates rationality among humans so they can live peacefully together. The general opinion is that Kali is not taking life but giving life. Kali is justice, and she kills those who are harmful to her and society in general.

**Shashan Kali and Chinnamasta**

The popularity of Kali conveys epitomes or embroiderings of some fundamental truths in Hindu tradition (Kinsley 1977:5), and if it was not for her extraordinary popularity one would have characterised her as an “extreme case”, but she is not (ibid:82). Kali is everything. Kali is the only goddess that has enough power to save the World from the evilness, the sins, the disaster and the calamites that constantly threaten and kill common people. She is a mother for her devotees. The most terrifying forms of Kali are Shashan (or Smashan) Kali and Chinnamasta. Kali prefers to live on the cremation ground. The cemetery marks the end of the bondage to material world and the entrance to liberation. Kali is the gateway to the final destination – release from *samsara* (ibid:143-144).

Chinnamasta is on the cremation ground standing on the copulating bodies of Kama and Rati – the god of sexual lust and his wife. Chinnamasta has decapitated herself, and jets of blood spurt from the neck, feeding two female attendants with blood, but also her own severed head (Kinsley 1989:162). Life, sex and death are inseparable (ibid:173). The Hindu and the Buddhist Chinnamasta is the same, and she represents the unconditioned reality. She drinks her own blood, and the severing of her own head symbolises the destruction of the illusional belief in a permanent self (Benard 1994:96). Chinnamasta’s two attendants begged and prayed to her for food; “We are overpowered with hunger, O Mother of the Universe! Give us food so we may be satisfied, O Merciful One, Bestower of Boons and Fulfiller of Desires”.

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Chinnamasta.
The goddess smiled and severed her head with her fingernails (ibid:7). This is primal sacrifice and renewal of the creation. The goddess sacrifices herself and the mother's blood feeds her attendants. Chinnamasta is the food and the feeder; she eats herself and is consumed by others. The dichotomy of giver and receiver disappears – she is the sacrifier, the sacrificed and the receiver of the sacrifice (ibid:9). The head is the essential part of the body. Without the head, no being or identity. It is from the head or the mouth the “seeds of sound” as language come from, emphasising the spiritual qualities (Kinsley 1997:153). Other vital and life-giving parts of the body might be sacrificed. The goddess Pattini – a Kali type of goddess at Sri Lanka – mutilates and sacrifices one of her breasts (Obeyesekere 1984:478). Sacrifices of the most vital forces are the most pro-creative and vital offerings. One’s own death may give life to others, but especially in mother-child relations the death of mothers might be lethal and at the same time vital. Life is death and death gives life, and in these sacrifices life and death forms a unity where death:life :: life:death.

Shashan Kali is the cemetery or cremation Kali, and this is another fearful manifestation of Kali. She lives only on cemeteries, and she has numerous followers, who include ghosts and malignant spirits. Kali devotees are not only humans, but include everyone from ghosts to gods. A human body is not necessary for being a Kali devotee. The cemetery is therefore a dangerous place for humans. The ghosts depend on and live in skulls, and human skulls are therefore most often a part of the Shashan Kali temples. When humans offer food, fruits and incense to the skulls, the ghosts are fed and pleased, and the human devotees pay homage to the ghosts who also worship Kali.

**Rivers of milk, food, and blood**

Food symbolism is often a part of water symbolism. Rivers are not only goddesses but also mothers who protect and feed their children (Feldhaus 1995:82). The mother-hood aspect is also apparent in the names of the Himalayan Mountains, which feed the rivers with water. The Annapurna range with its five peaks rising from 7000 to above 8000-metres means “She is Plenteous of Food”, and she fills the devotees with food. As a mother she gives everything freely, not
only “food” in a narrow sense but as a giver of life – the very essence of life including spiritual “food” (Eck 1983:161).

The rivers of India are “Mother Rivers” and the nurturing waters are compared to milk of cow-mothers (Eck 1983:73-74). The river nourishes and fertilises the land through which it flows. Ganga’s maternal character is especially seen in her nourishing aspect, and her water is sometimes called milk or the drink of immortality. She nourishes her children with water as a mother feeds her infant with milk (Kinsley 1989:194). In Rig-Veda 2.35.4 the birth of Agni – fire – is described; “Three women, goddesses (the three mothers of Agni are the waters of the three worlds) wish to give food to the god so that he will not waken. He has stretched forth in the waters; he sucks the new milk of those who have given birth for the first time”. Water has a maternal character and as feminine water it is associated with milk. The connection between water and milk appears as soon as water is extolled fervently, and as soon the feeling of adoration for the maternity of waters is passionate and sincere (Bachelard 1994:118). Water and milk become identical since they are vital life-givers. Goddess Ganga is worshipped as a source of life and regeneration. She is also one with all life-giving waters or fluids in their many facets, including semen (Darian 1978:81). The close association between mothers and birth leads to even further metaphorical elaborations of water. Kali is described in a Tantric text as “standing in a boat that floats upon an ocean of blood. The blood is lifeblood of the world of children that she is bringing forth, sustaining, and eating back. She stands there and sips the intoxicating warm blood-drink from a cranial bowl that she lifts to her insatiable lips” (Zimmer 1962:213).

In the Chinnamasta goddess it is as the blood has been transformed into milk feeding the devotees (Kinsley 1997:161). In another context, Marie Bonaparte in her *Edgar Poe* writes that: “It is not difficult to recognize this water as blood...a body whose blood nourished us even before it was time for milk, that of the mother who sheltered us for nine months” (Bachelard 1994:59). The feminine creative principle is “the world from her womb” (Mookerjee 1988:23). Kali subsists on the blood of her victims and the animals offered her, and she is the mad mistress of the universe (Olson 1990:34). Blood is a beneficial and vital fluid (Benard 1994:102). In this sense blood is more vital than water: it is intensified life giving water.
All pro-creative fluids whether it is milk, sperm or blood can be imagined, explained and understood from water metaphors. A river is a continuous flowing source for such metaphorical elaborations. As a river it is more than just physical water: it is spiritual water, nourishing water of the fields, feeding milk for children, and blood in the veins of the devotees. When Chinnamasta sacrifices her head and feeds her devotees with her own blood, it might be interpreted as an extreme type of motherhood. If a mother cannot feed her children with water or milk, she has only her own blood to give. “Normally” (in the sense that it is not normal to sacrifice oneself and feed one’s children with blood), this is a destructive way of feeding: Immediately after she has fed her devotees with her own blood, she will die herself, and then her children will die since they are without Mother. However, Chinnamasta solves this problem through the cosmogonic act of sacrifice by which she also feeds herself with her own blood. Thus, this is one of the most ultimate and primordial forms of regeneration through sacrifice by extreme aquatic symbols and metaphors. The relation between cemeteries and sex is a symbol of the living creation. Chinnamasta represents the truth that “life, sex and death are part of an interdependent, unified system...life feeds on death, is nourished by death, and necessitates death and the ultimate destiny of sex is to perpetuate more life, which in turn will decay and die in order to feed more life” (Kinsley 1997:157).

Castes in India – a socio-ritual organisation based on transactions of water

Turning to society, the caste system is a social organisation based upon transactions of water. The caste system is the most persistent social organisation that has been created; it still exists, and it is at least 2500 years old. The caste system is normally seen as a hierarchy, and as such, it is the distinctness of each group and their separateness and distance from each other that is crucial. The caste system in practice and social interaction is best illustrated by whether or not a person accepts water and food from another person, and as such creating and maintaining spatial hierarchies. On the one hand, there are scholars advocating “caste ideologies” in different South Asian settings. The underlying assumption is that there is a coherent and systematic set of indigenous ideas and values, which give meaning to a broad range of social institutions.
There are other scholars emphasising interaction and transaction whereby castes exhibit features of “bio-moral substances”, which have to be understood in relative categories of purity and pollution. Castes are as such inevitably connected to “coded substances” (McGilvray 1982).

Religion is most often an integral part of explanations of the caste system, its origin, function, and hierarchy. The problem is, however, to relate text to context. Ideological and religious foundations of castes are based on Sanskrit texts. The most prominent of these are Bhagavad-Gita and Manu. The Bhagavad-Gita (Bg) distinguishes four castes: “Brahmanas, ksatriyas, vaisyas and sudras are distinguished by the qualities born of their own natures in accordance with the material modes (...)” (Bg. 18.41). The duties and the qualities are further described:

“Peacefulness, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, honesty, knowledge, wisdom and religiousness – these are the natural qualities by which the brahmanas work. Heroism, power, determination, resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity and leadership are the natural qualities of work of the ksatriyas. Farming, cow protection and business are the natural work for the vaisyas, and for the sudras there is labour and service to others. By following his qualities of work, every man can become perfect” (Bg. 18.42-45).

Thus, there are four classes in the hierarchical order: (1) the sacerdotal and learned class, the members of which may, but not necessarily be, priests, (2) the regal and warrior caste, (3) the trading and agricultural caste and (4) the servile caste, whose duty is to serve the other three.

In the “coded substance theory” the stress is put on the non-duality of South Asian social thought; “South Asians do not insist on drawing a line between what Westerners call “natural” and what they call “moral” things; the Hindu moral code books are thus filled with discussions of bodily things, while the medical books at many points deal with moral qualities” (Marriott and Inden 1977:228). Moral qualities are thought to be altered by changes in the body resulting from eating certain types of food, sexual intercourse, and participation in rituals. When a Bengali woman marries it is believed that her body is transformed as well as her inborn code for conduct (Inden and Nicholas 1977). “The code for conduct of living
persons is not regarded as transcendent over bodily substances, but as immanent within it", and as such “bodily substances and code for conduct are thus thought to be not fixed but malleable, and to be not separated but mutually immanent features: the coded substance moves and changes as one thing throughout the life of each person and group. Actions enjoined by these embodied codes are thought of as transforming the substances in which they are embodied” (Marriott and Inden 1977:228).

In order to understand how the transactions of sin occur, a metaphor may illuminate this process: the body is a “vessel”. This “vessel” metaphor is crucial in the understanding of castes as transactions of coded substances. A pure person that has been defiled by temporary impurity, basically through consumption of water or food, has to purify his body (“vessel”) through subsequent rites. Therefore, all interactions and transactions of substances are potentially dangerous because they may involve defilement of one’s purity. Each substance has a value, an entity which in theory and practice is both morally and religiously defined, and society is structured around the different transactions that are hierarchically regulated through sanctions and taboos.

Thus, pure people cannot receive water from impure people. Water and people are one – they are indistinguishable. The fluid character of water enables constructions which equalise humans with their exteriors. The body is a bio-moral substance, which can be transferred to water. A sinful or polluted person transfers his or her qualities to the water in both positive and negative ways. It is possible to cleanse oneself but also to pollute others. The clarity of fresh water enables notions of purity and pollution, which are inevitably bound up to the water as an organism.

Although the caste system as a social principle is abolished in theory and by law, the actual social practices communicated and differentiated by the use of water are long lasting processes difficult to change. The pervasive role of water in society as a structuring principle and means of controlling people works and functions because water is a very efficacious metaphor and symbol when people explain themselves and the world they live in.
Zoroastrianism

Mary Boyce argues, “Zoroastrianism is the most difficult of living faiths to study, because of its antiquity, the vicissitudes which it has undergone, and the loss, through them, of many of its holy texts” (Boyce 1979:xiii). Zoroastrianism can rightly claim to be the oldest of the world’s prophetic and revealed religions (Clark 2001:1), and it had probably established itself on a firm basis in Western Iran by the eight-century BCE (Boyce 1992:125). Zoroastrianism was the state religion in three Iranian empires which flourished almost continuously from 6th century BCE to 7th century CE, and the religion dominated parts of the Near and Middle East. Today Zoroastrianism is reduced to a minority religion practiced by people scattered mostly in Iran and India (Boyce 1979:1). Zoroastrianism is named after its prophet Zarathushtra, who in ancient Greece was known as Zoroaster (ibid:2). Zoroaster lived probably around 1200 BCE. The date of Zoroaster until quite recently was supported of being 600 BCE. This date is artificial and calculated among Hellenistic Greeks (Boyce 2002:19). The “traditional” date 258 years before Alexander, which is mentioned in classical writings, is a Greek construction. It evolved among the Greeks with the fiction that Pythagoras studied with Zarathushtra in Babylon. Another equally improbable Greek date places Zoroaster 6,000 years ago (Russel 2002:29).

The Zoroastrian scriptures are known collectively as “Avasta”, which probably means something like “Authoritative Utterance” (Boyce 1979:3). The Avesta as a whole is accepted to composite a body of texts of the “eastern” Iranians. They belonged to proto-Indo-Aryans or proto-Iranians and their Andronovo culture is characterised by a settled pastoralism. The earth was soft for hoe cultivation through the seasonal floods and the pastures provided good grazing. Some wheat and millet were sown but stockbreeding was the main source of livelihood. Bones of sheep, cows, and horses have been found in abundance as well as bones of camels whereas remains of wild animals are relatively few (Boyce 1992:34).

The development of Zoroastrianism is partly the history of the separation from Brahmanism or a proto-type of what crystallised into what we later called Brahmanism. Both religions share numerous features and cosmological concepts, and the elements which Zoroastrianism and Brahmanism retained in common must have been firmly exposed before 2000 BCE since it is held that the
Iranians and the proto-Iranians drifted apart around at that time (ibid:52). The relation between Zoroastrianism and Brahmanism is, however, obscure. There are strong similarities between the Avesta and the Vedas, and both stress (1) the cosmic laws which prevail in nature, (2) the importance of sacrifice, and (3) the order of morals. Some scholars have even concluded that both sacred texts were derived from the same source, and therefore, the comparative study of Indo-Iranian mythology, religion, and language developed (Dange 2002). In the Zendavesta the Iranian cosmology presents a body of belief and a type of gods closely related to those of the Water Cosmology in India. Thus, Ahura Mazda corresponds to Varuna, and the Zendavesta actually gives a better picture of Varuna than can be found in The Vedas themselves due to the change in ranks of Asura and Deva which took place in India (Coomaraswamy 1931:17). There are also striking similarities in the Parsee and Hindu sacraments, especially regarding initiation and wedding (Jamkhedkar 2002).

Zoroastrianism has been categorized as a monotheistic religion, and fundamental to the issue whether a religion is monotheistic or dualistic is the origin of evil. In a monotheistic religion one supreme exalted God contains all characteristics of a divine being. Dualism, on the other hand, has been understood in different ways. It states that reality has a twofold nature, and that there co-exists two fundamentally opposite forces of good and evil. It is difficult to say categorical whether Zoroastrianism is monotheistic or dualistic because it is a unique combination of both; “it is dualistic within an overall context of exalted monotheistic” (Clark 2001:7); it proposes ethical dualism but an eschatological monotheism. Evil, some claim in Zoroastrianism, is a definite force bent on destruction and deprivation (ibid:9), but others claim that it is merely the absence of good. Evil has no existence per se.

Zarathushtra proposed radical ideas regarding these matters, but the only remains of the prophet’s own ideas are seventeen short hymns know as the Gathas. They were passed on orally for centuries before they eventually were written down in the sixth century CE (Clark 2001:16). The original Avesta canon consisted of twenty-one books of which only one remains – the Vendidad (which means “Law against Demons”) – together with some scattered portions and fragments from the other books (JamaspAsa 2002).
Zarathushtra.
It is an ecclesial law book of the Zoroastrians and it specifies in great details the laws of purity and religious penance, and stresses the importance of the Tower of Silence – dhakma – for the obsequies. All the extant manuscripts of the Vendidad can be traced to the manuscript written by Homast Shadan of Hormazd of Seistan, who is known to have lived before 1185 CE. When the complete manuscript was written is uncertain, but most likely it may have been written and compelled in the early part of the 12th century (Mirza 2002:168-170).

Today, the Zoroastrian religion is declining, and the majority of the Zoroastrians belong to the Parsees. The community of Parsees in Bombay, which I will focus on, counts some 54,000 people with another 25,000 elsewhere in India and perhaps some 40,000 other places in the world (Luhrmann 1996:31). Despite living in a Hindu environment, the Zoroastrians have until now managed to maintain their religion, including the traditional funeral practice and the fire worship.

**Purity of the life-giving elements**

Ahura Mazda is Wise Lord or the Lord Wisdom. Elaborate precautions are required to prevent the good creations of Ahura Mazda from being contaminated. The good creations are the seven holy immortals (Hinnells 1981:13):

1. The Wise Lord (Ahura Mazda) – Man,
2. Good mind – Cattle,
3. Righteousness – Fire,
4. Kingdom – Sky,
5. Devotion – Earth,
6. Health – Waters, and
7. Immortality – Plants.

Fire is the son of Ahura Mazda. The god is invisible and an abstract concept, and for laypersons to grasp and understand the concept of God fire is a representative; a living object and substance which attracts their attention. Since fire is a natural element it is not idolatry, which is a grievous sin in Zoroastrianism. Ahura Mazda encompasses everything, but the complete totality as it appears in the divine creation is difficult and impossible to understand for
humans, and the seven creations are aspects of the totality, which highlight the creation. *Amesha Spenta* are hymns to the seven creations, and each of the elements are like an arm of Ahura Mazda. Despite the emphasis on the elements and the seven creations, Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion. The importance of water is not merely expressed in the hymns of the deity, but more importantly in the role water has as a life-giving element in the creation of the world. The elements are, in the true words, elements of the single totality.

In Hinduism good and evil are relative forces stemming from the same source. In Zoroastrianism evil is generally believed to be the absence of God, and it is clearly separated from the good creations. As darkness is the absence of light, evil is perceived as the absence of God, who is good. It is, however, important to stress that evil has no separate existence on its own; absence of light is nothingness and not a force existing in itself.

God is light, of which fire is the most omnipotent symbol. It is important to stress the nature and character of fire as a divinity. It is not a chemical but a spiritual and living fire that is perceived as God, and it may guide and give answers to inquiries regarding religious matters. Literally speaking, the religious fire is the true son of Ahura Mazda; it is the “enlightened” – that is what a fire does – and it may indeed reveal miracles. There are, however, different levels or degrees of sacredness immanent in fire as an element. Even though all fire is sacred – and that is why cremation traditionally is seen as a terrible and grievous sin – the divine presence is not simply a matter of the presence of fire. If a Parsee house is burning, fire-workers will of course extinguish the fire without this being interpreted as a divine offence. The importance is the ritualistic fire. Without a sacred fire it is impossible to conduct a ritual, and in every home there is an oil lamp representing the existential spirit of fire bringing faithfulness, joy, prosperity, and happiness to the family.

There are approximately twenty fire temples in Iran and about one hundred in India, of which eight are cathedral fire temples. In Bombay there are 44 fire temples of which four contain cathedral fires. The cathedral fire temples are the most holy fires or divine manifestations of Ahura Mazda. There are three levels of consecrated fire for worship of which the house fire is the most simple.
Maneckji Seti Agiary in Bombay.
This fire does not necessitate five prayers a day, which the two other sacred fires require. The next fire is the chapel or agiary fire, which consists of four different fires. The different fires represent the priests, warriors, traders, and farmers, and it takes three weeks to consecrate this type of sacred fire. The last and the most sacred fire – the cathedral fire or *Atash Bahram* – consists of sixteen different fires and it takes 14,000 hours of prayers to initiate and consecrate it. Among the sixteen fires is also the fire from a Brahman corpse being cremated. The cremation fire is actually the fire of Ahriman – the Devil – included and overpowered in the ritual that consecrates the cathedral fire, and hence, the fire encompasses everything and it is perfect. The cathedral fires cannot be moved or separated. The fire has a corporeal identity – a body – which is made through the meticulous rites, and it is impossible to make another fire from this fire and as such create a new cathedral fire. The only way to make such a fire is by building it up gradually through the 16 fires, consecrated by 14,000 hours of prayers, which finally comprises a divine body of spiritual fire. The oldest existing cathedral fire is located in a fire temple in Udvada on the Indian west coast north of Bombay. This fire has been continuously burning for 1000 years and each day prayers have been uttered five times. The fire cannot die since it is a spiritual fire, and if it disappears, then the divine spirit has flown away.

The Zoroastrian cult is mainly concerned with protecting the life-giving elements. Water is together with fire the two most vulnerable and venerated elements in Zoroastrianism. Fire and water are distinctive and separate creations which cannot be mixed. The sacredness of water is a consequence of the protection of the Good Creations. The earth was holy because humans owed to it their whole corporeal existence.

*Extreme purity is one of the cores in the Zoroastrian teaching and practices, and there were special rules concerning water and fire with particular relation to the faith.*

Most often people use water for everything that is impure, but for the Zoroastrians the cleanliness of water in itself had to be protected. Whereas other religions use water as the primary purificatory and cleansing agent, Zoroastrianism sees water as a secondary purifying agent. It is possible to use only after ablutions have been performed with unconsecrated bull’s urine. The use of water to wash away dirt and impurities is seen as a heinous sin because then water is exposed to demonic impurities (Choksy
Consequently, nothing impure is allowed to be in contact with a natural source of water such as a lake, stream, or river. “If anything ritually unclean was to be washed, water should be drawn off for this purpose, and even then, this was not to be used directly, but the impure objects should first be cleaned with cattle-urine, and then dried with sand or in sunlight before water was allowed to touch it for the final washing” (Boyce 1979:44). The belief in cattle urine as a purifying agent must have evolved during the millennia spent by the ancestors of the Indians and Iranians as nomads herding cattle on the Asian steppes (Boyce 1977:92). Water “promotes the well-being of mankind and animals, refreshes them in the heat, and influences the growth of plants, the fertility of the fields and the luxurious green of the meadows”, and water did not enjoy any much inferior worship than the fire (Cama 1968:129).

In all fire temples there is a sacred well in front of the altar containing holy water. Water, and in particular rivers, are worshipped, and each month the origin of the water divinity is celebrated. However, water goes to sleep at night and therefore the devotees cannot pray to waters during the nighttime because it will wake it up. Life-giving water in all its facets is incorporated into the Zoroastrian cosmology but in different ways than the Hindus do. Since they did not primarily believe in reincarnation, water and life had to be separated from the sphere of death, in fact protected from the pollution of the putrefying flesh. When humans are not reborn into this world in an endless cycle, water cannot be fundamental in funerals regarding fertility and future successful harvests. This does in no way mean that they were not occupied with the future fertility, rather the contrary, and it was therefore of uttermost importance to protect the earth, water, and fire from being polluted by corpses.

Similarly, the purity of fire was guarded with the highest respect. Fire was identified as the creation of the Spirit of the all-regulating Order, in other words, all cosmic, social, and moral spheres (Boyce 2002). The natural deities consisted of the classical elements such as fire, water, earth, and air, together with the sun, moon, and stars. The sun was the most precious of the gods, and the fire had the second highest position as the light on earth. Fire has a double position; on the one hand it was an object of adoration, and on the other hand a medium and vehicle for the exhibition of honour to other deities and cults (Cama 1968:127). “The fire, according to its nature, is pure and purifying; it is, therefore, a sin, on which the punishment of death is set, to bring to
it anything at all impure, to blow it out with the breath of the mouth, or to bring it at all in contact with the dead, to burn a corpse with it” (ibid:127-128). Still, the Zoroastrians may reject that they are “fire worshippers” because they say that they only worship God. Fire is a means of fixing their thoughts, and to pray in front of the fire is nothing more than to pray in front of an icon or a crucifix (Boyce 1977:68).

The protection of the good creations from pollution and defilement is to a large extent a matter of protecting the creations from human excrements and death. All substances leaving the body are seen as dead matter, and as such impure (Choksy 1989:78). Human faeces can be used as fertiliser but only after four to six months of open exposure, and faeces from non-Zoroastrians can never be used since they are not abstaining from any foul matters, and everything is mixed in their excrements. Cow dung has been preferred as manure since the cow is seen as a pure animal (ibid:88). Impure water cannot be used for drinking, purification, or cultivation (ibid:12). This has always been a dogma among Zoroastrians. 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). Regarding cremation as a funeral practice, the Persians forbid it, as a God cannot feed on the body of a man (Herodotus III. 16), and Strabo also refers to burning a corpse as a crime punishable by death. Burying the dead in the earth is “much like a man who has a scorpion or snake in his tunic, thus it is also with Earth, and when one exhumes a buried corpse, it is delivered from its sorrow” (Menant 1996:78).

Ecology of death

In Zoroastrianism everything which harms men, animals, and crops – the good earth – is polluting and sinful. The activities and practices that pollute may change, but what has been a stable chronotope is the sacredness of the elements. The belief that the elements are eternal and forever pure may have its rationale in its simplicity from which everything can be related to, and originated from. The Zoroastrian religion is, in short, an ecology of death, and the ecological concern for the elements were given by the prophet
Zarathushtra. If the corpse is buried, then the *nasai* will contaminate the earth. If the body is burnt, then the contamination will desecrate the fire; if the corpse is given a water burial, then it will pollute the water. None of the seven holy creations of Ahura Mazda must be polluted during funerals. Moreover, exposure is the most cost-effective funeral practice seen from an ecological point of view limiting the use of natural resources.

Burials of the dead bodies will occupy useful land for cultivation and cremations use wood, which could be used for domestic purposes. According to the Zoroastrians, what distinguishes their religion from tribal and shamanistic religions, which also worship the elements and holy creations, is the definite ethical basis laid down by Zarathushtra. Despite the pastoral nomadic point of departure, the religious codex is an ethical awareness based on a deep concern for the ecology. Humans are God’s first good creation, and hence, humans have a responsibility for the protection of all the other creations. There is also an important egalitarian element in the practice of exposure. Whether a person is rich or poor the funeral practice is exactly the same. Today everyone may be given an air-burial although there are disputed cases where a Parsee has married outside the community. Two centuries ago there were restrictions regarding those who committed suicide, which was understood as an even more successful victory of the evil. Murderers and women who were menstruating when they died were also secluded and kept in a separate enclosure.

The main function of the *dakhmas* is first and foremost to expose the dead body to the sun, and secondly to let the corpse be devoured by the vultures. Fire encompasses everything and represents all divinity. Fire is the most important element, and the Zoroastrians protect its grace and divinity. The sun is similar to fire, or it might even be seen as identical. Fire is the Son of God. In the *dakhmas* the corpses are exposed to the sun prior to the vultures. Thus, the sunlight starts the decomposition before the vultures fulfil the job.

The exposure to the sun is interpreted as a cosmic consumption of the body. The sun brings the dead back to its origin by the process whereby the sun’s rays digest the body. The sky represents the unlimited dimension and it is interconnected through the sun, which triggers off the process which releases the soul. Even though fire and sun represent the same creative force,
there are fundamental differences when applied in funerals. Whereas fire comes in direct contact with a body the sun does not. The sun can burn from a distance far away but the fire can only burn directly and as such it becomes contaminated. Seen from this approach, the corpses are exposed to a non-contaminating “sun-cremation” instead of a fire-contaminating ordinary cremation.

During the monsoon and periods of rain there is less sunlight at work and the decomposing process is slowed down, and the exposed might come in contact with water. However, water appearing in the form of rain is not polluted when it touches the dead body. The water is in its natural element and humans do not deliberately cause the contact with the corpse, and hence, also in this case the purity of the element is safeguarded.

One of the main problems today during the air-burials is the shortage of vultures, which has created both practical and theological challenges. Theologically, when the corpses are left within the towers the sun has to do part of the decomposing, which originally was the work of the vultures. In other words, this means that the many corpses are simply lying rotting within the towers, with insufficient numbers of vultures to consume the flesh. Three-four bodies are brought each day to the towers and the few vultures still residing in the forest do not have the capacity to devour 100-120 corpses a month. The practice of air-burials is not working properly. The lack of a sufficient number of birds has given rise to changes in the funeral practice, and therefore some Zoroastrians prefer to either bury or burn their deceased.

The main reasons for the decrease in number of vultures are contamination and air pollution, together with increased and dense urbanisation. A few years ago the Parsees started to discuss how they could solve the problem, and one idea was to import more vultures to the forest, but the idea was abandoned since these vultures would also have suffered from contamination as well. The forest surrounding the dhakmas belongs to the Parsee community. Recently, through their political connections, the Zoroastrians have been able to make the area, in which the towers are located, into a non-flying zone. Moreover, since the sun is the most important divine agency in the funerals, there has been made an arrangement of sun-cell projectors in the towers which concentrate the sun upon the corpses.
It is impractical to move the corpse in accordance with the sun’s movement, and the cell-project has been an efficacious means for securing sufficient sunlight on the dead bodies.

There are diverse and conflicting opinions regarding cremation as a funeral practice within today’s Zoroastrianism. Nowadays cremation starts gaining popularity among a minority of the Parsees, and some estimate that between 2 and 5% of the Parsee population are being cremated. The controversies are escalating and have to be seen in relation to the expanding town and modern and Hindu influences. Particularly since the Parsees cannot solve the problem of the lack of vultures, the practice of air-burial whereby the corpses are rotting and decaying in the dhakma is seen by some as barbaric and desecrating. Those who want to cremate their descendants may do so, and this practice is perceived unproblematic among some priests. Each person is judged according to his or her good or bad earnings during their lifetime. If a person has committed more bad than good actions, then he or she will fall from the bridge into hell. Liberal theologians argue that it is the deeds conducted during the lifetime and not the choice of funeral practice which determines the soul’s destiny. The cremation fire is different from the fire venerated in fire temples, and consequently, cremation as a funeral practice does not pollute fire as a divine element. On the other hand, conservative and orthodox Zoroastrians claim that the soul of a deceased who is cremated will inevitably go to hell, and indeed, even the relatives who allow their dead to be burnt will be sent to hell when their time comes. They argue that if modernisation implies forsaking the traditional theology, then the recent changes are not progressive. Moreover, the Zoroastrians who are cremated are not burnt at a separate Parsee cemetery but at Hindu Ghats. The corpses are, they claim, not even properly burnt but only “cooked” in the electric crematoriums due to power shortages and disruptions, and consequently, neither the dead nor the descendants have dignity and honour. The deceased’s ashes are mixed with other people’s ashes, including Hindus’ remains, and they waste valuable resources either in terms of electricity in the crematorium or wood from forests for the construction of the pyres.

To sum up: when people are not adhering to the ecology and the rules that protect the elements as put forward by the prophet, the balance of the system is interrupted. Without ecological balance misery is brought, but this is not evil per se. A state characterised
by misery is a life with the absence of water and the good creations. Thus, paying respect to the elements is a fundamental ethic in the Zoroastrian ecological cycle, and the character of the elements might be seen as identical to the character of an angel. Abstract ideas are materialised and personified, and by this process meaning and values are seemingly embedded. Therefore, everything abhorrent to the good creations is often conceptualised as evil (Mistree 1982:14), but again, it has to be seen as absence of good rather than a creative (or destructive) force by itself. Life is not only birth and death, or different modes of body disposals, but a way of being a human living a moral life, and “a fundamental purpose in the lives of all human beings is to establish and maintain the purity and well-being of the creator order in which they live” (Kotwal & Boyd 1982:xv).

Ecological concerns are an intrinsic part of the Zoroastrian religion and philosophy because by removing “bad polluting things from the soil and keeping it clean, it gives health to mankind. If we do not do that, we spoil the health of people and so are guilty [...] Water is one of the best gifts given by God to mankind...That is why our religion commands us not to allow any dirty things in water [which] are necessary for the constitution of life...to injure persons and cause them pain is a very sinful deed. A person who does so is worthy of hell” (Kotwal & Boyd 1982:108).
Buddhism

The historical Buddha was a prince of the Sakhy tribe in Northern India. Siddharta was born in Lumbini in Nepal, and although the exact dates of his birth and death are uncertain, he is often assumed to have lived from ca. 566 to 486 BCE. As a prince he lived a life in luxury protected from the real world, but at the age of 29 he renounced the worldly life. Buddha chose to be king of the religious world instead of the profane world.

Buddha rejected parts of the Hindu philosophy and particularly the Brahmans’ elaborate rituals and sacrifices. He established a monastic organisation and “distilled” and perfected the Hindu religious thoughts and doctrines. Although the Buddhists do not deny the role of gods, they occupy a significantly smaller part in Buddhism than what they do in Hinduism.

Buddhists believe in karma, but in a slightly different way than what the Hindus do. The Western concept of an individual soul or “I-personality” does not correspond to the Buddhists’ ideas of a “soul”. In Buddhism the universe is seen as a constant flow of movements regrouping. There are five basic categories of cosmic “energies”; physical phenomena, emotions, sensory perceptions, responses to sensory perceptions, and consciousness. Any human being is only a temporary combination of these categories. Compared with Hinduism, from a philosophical point of view one may say that a rebirth in Buddhism is more “impersonal” since this is a consequence of the five categories which are regrouped; it is not the same “soul” which re-enters new bodies. It is, however, the consequences of previous actions that result in new constellations of the cosmic energies.

In other words, actions produce reactions, which are cosmic in their nature. Since actions or constellations of energies regroup, and because mind and matter are identical, former actions take other forms which include new births of humans and beings in general. Hence, the regrouping of the cosmic energies is determined by what other people (and creatures) have done previously, and the new constellations re-materialise into humans, rats, insects, and so on. Thus, it is not an “I” who is reborn in a strict sense, but the next rebirth is a result of previous actions which I and others have done, recreating cosmos and the world.

The Buddhist Nirvana has to be seen in this light. Nirvana is enlightenment, but it is not a “heaven” in a traditional
understanding of the term, but more a state of “nothingness”. Since former actions cause reactions – according to the karma doctrine – the aim is to exhaust all karma, meaning reactions from what has happened earlier and what people have done. Only by doing so one may attain an eternal state of “being”, which is “nothingness”.

The “heaven” in Buddhism is therefore a mental state where there is no pleasure or pain; it is nothing but the state of complete zero. It is the total dissolution of everything. Anything else will imply some kind of matter or action, which again is not eternal because it will cause reactions. It is only the state of zero which can be eternal. Nirvana is therefore a cosmic dissolution of the consequences of every kind of action, because they will by necessity cause impermanent reactions. Therefore, the enlightened state of being does not correspond to become a god in Hinduism, but it is a state of “nothingness” where the five categories or cosmic energies are not regrouped anymore. Only a place where nothing happens can be eternal.

This is a philosophical explanation of the religious order, but most often common people have a more direct feeling of the relation between former actions and future rebirths, and conceptions of heaven and hell as physical places are common. Therefore, the term “soul” will still be used since it makes comparison possible, and because it is commonly understood to signify the spiritual essence which is reborn. Moreover, in practical and daily life among Buddhists there are explicit beliefs emphasising that one is punished or rewarded according to what one does in this life and what one has done if former lives.

There is an old Tibetan saying which says, “Don’t wonder about your former lives; just look carefully at your present body! Don’t wonder about your future lives; just look at your mind in the present!” Thus, there is a difference between the high and the low religion. Among common people there are ideas of the same soul being reborn, and some say that a soul takes 8,4 million reincarnations, others say 840,000, before it attains Nirvana.

Water worlds and culture – regions and religions

Religion is not epiphenomena of nature although materiality and the world people live in are included in religious perceptions. Fredrik Barth once started with an approach assuming “that there
Buddha Swayambu, Kathmandu, Nepal.

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is a real world out there – but that our representations of that world are constructions” (Barth 1989:87). Ecological constraints can be necessary but not sufficient conditions for natural symbolism in rituals. We need therefore “to focus [on the real world], a natural world, a human population with all its collective and statistical social features, and a set of cultural ideas in terms of which these people try to understand and cope with themselves and their habitat” (ibid). The physicality of the world is materiality in a wide sense which both include material culture and nature. People create and apply “cultural constructions in a struggle to grasp the world, relate to it, and manipulate it through concepts, knowledge and acts. In the process reality impinges; and the events that occur consequently are not predicated by the cultural system of representations employed by the people, though they may largely be interpretable within it […]” (ibid).

Water is a transformative means to other ends, and these aims vary according to religion, economy, and ecology. Water in the forms of river and rain when applied to death rituals highlights some general principles of life-giving processes as perceived and incorporated into the cultural realm. Phenomenologically speaking, the materiality and environmental diversity constitute a major part of a person’s life-world from which social constructions are founded. The karmic doctrine is not merely eschatological and philosophical, but integrated in the actual world people live in. The shared ideological superstructure has to be incorporated into, and adapted to, a micro-environmental and particular context.

Culture and nature are not separable entities, but rather mutually dependent and interacting spheres from which humans spin webs of significance and interpret both their natural and cultural world. Meaning is something a person confers on an object or an event, not something enshrined in that object or event – it arises in the act of interpretation (Barth 1993:170); it is the premise for and the outcome of practices. Therefore, turning to Nepal, and more particularly Western Nepal, I aim to see how the problem with the life-giving water is solved, literally speaking, on the top of the mountains.

There are approximately 70 glaciers in the Himalayas and they represent the largest body of ice outside the Polar ice cap, and hence, communities which are dependent upon this melt-water for their primary production are highly vulnerable to changes in the glaciers’ extent (Vetaas 2002). Kaligandaki River is located in
Dhaulagiri Zone in Western Region of Nepal in the North, and the river is the border between Gandaki and Lumbini Zones in the South. Kaligandaki River rises in the High Himalayas on the Tibetan plateau, following steep courses cutting across the geological grain of the country on the Terai Plain. Between Dhaulagiri (8176m) to the West and Annapurna (8091m) to the East the river cuts one of the deepest gorges in the world. At the widest point of separation, the peak-to-peak distance is only 32 km, with the river flowing at an elevation of 2000-2500 metres. The gorge is over 6,000 m deep, and it is dangerously prone to landslides, especially since earthquakes are common.

The Himalayan mountain range in Nepal represents in certain areas a cultural, ritual, and religious border dividing Hinduism and Buddhism, although in other places in Nepal the religions co-exist (e.g. Gellner 1993). Muktinath is a holy pilgrimage site for both Hindus and Buddhists located at an elevation of 3800 m., and the place is “near the extreme northern edge of Hindu influence in this part of the Himalayas and at the same time is near the extreme southern edge of Buddhist and Tibetan influence” (Messerschmidt 1992:30). This area is situated in the rain-shadow behind the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri peaks with an annual rainfall of 200-400 mm a year. In front of the mountains, next to Baglung Bazaar, the river runs at an elevation of 800 metres. Baglung Bazaar is only 20 km west of the Lumle village in air distance; a village at 1610 metres above sea level, receiving between 4000 and 6000 mm of rain each year, and the air distance between Muktinath and Lumle is less than 60 km. In summary, the Himalayan range separates the Tibetan and Buddhist regions in the north in an arid rain-desert virtually unaffected by the monsoon rain, whereas the Hindu regions south of the mountains are situated in a highly humid and fertile area, creating some of the world’s steepest gradients regarding both elevation and precipitation.

**Rainmaking death rituals at Tore cemetery in Manang**

Today, Manang village is a small mountain village with 391 inhabitants and 120 households (CBS 1993:83), located at an altitude of 3550 metres in Manang district in Gandaki zone, Western Nepal. The climate is arid with an annual precipitation of
approximately 400 mm. In front of the village lies the Gangapurna glacier. During the last 150 years the glacier has decreased and retreated approximately 1800 metres, and due to the increase of melt-water Gangapurna Lake in front of the glacier is less than 40 years old. The cemetery in Manang, Tore, is located at the Gangapurna glacier’s end-moraine. According to the local lore, the cemetery is at least 200 years old, and the end-moraine was deposited during the Little Ice Age, which in the Himalayan region ended around 1850. Thus, the cemetery was made in front of the glacier’s snout, and the funerals were performed directly in front of the enormous masses of cold ice.

Brian Fagan argues in *The Little Ice Age* that although many are suspicious about incorporating climatic changes, and with good reason, due to the often inherent deterministic environmentalism, it is nevertheless important to stress such changes. Rather than perceiving the little ice age as a deep freeze, it represents an irregular seesaw of rapid climatic changes, and for a population living on the margins, small seasonal fluctuations might be the difference between life and death. The famines in Ireland are such examples. Therefore, “…human relationships to the natural environment in short-term climate change have always been in a complex state of flux. To ignore them is to neglect one of the dynamic backdrops of the human experience” (Fagan 2000:xv).

The decreasing glacier enables a discussion of why and how micro-environmental changes such as increased amounts of melt-water may or may not be incorporated into symbols, rituals, and cosmology, and at which level or scale ecological and environmental changes might become a part of the broader culture and religion. But the problem can also be addressed in another way: why should a religion which basically deals with eternal entities and answering questions beyond this world incorporate natural, cultural, and non-eternal objects that are commonly described as *maya* – illusion?

Tibetan Buddhism has four main funeral practices: 1) air-burials, 2) water-burials, 3) cremations, and 4) inhumations. Some places they may also bury the deceased inside the wall of a house (Peissel 1968, Boeye & Marullo 1995), but this funeral custom has not been practised in Manang. Traditionally cremation was for lamas only.

Nowadays the majority of the deceased are cremated, but poor people that cannot afford cremation may be given air- or water burials. Inhumation as a funeral practice is basically for persons
who died from contagious diseases. There are several reasons for the change from air-burials to cremation as the common practice. An awareness of the responsibility of being up-stream people contributed to the decline of water-burials since they polluted the rest of the river. The increased tourism has also impacted the decline of air-burials, but the main reason is the immigration of Manangians to Kathmandu. The majority of Manangians do not live in Manang but in Kathmandu, and in 2035 BS (1978 CE) a crematorium was opened at Kang Gompa next to Vishnumati River. In the capital the traditional practice of performing air-burials was impossible and cremation succeeded as the common funeral practice. Although lamas and high-status people were cremated when common people were given air-burials in the village, gradually cremation became the dominant and preferred mode of disposal among everybody. Thus, the change in the funeral practice in Manang was partly due to the migration of the majority of the village’s inhabitants to the city where the practice of air-burials could not precede, and the change in Kathmandu had a feedback effect on the funeral practice in the village.

In Manang, the deceased is cremated in a special crematorium, which is the foundation of a chorten. A chorten is a small stupa, and a stupa is a funerary mount or a Buddhist ancestral monument. Every stupa or chorten symbolises the original stupas were the bone-relics and ashes of Buddha are buried. Three chortens in a row symbolise the Three Jewels in Buddhism; Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Buddha is the Enlightened one, Dharma is the essence of the religion, or the teaching of how to achieve the enlightened state, and Sangha is a community of worshippers or a monastic order of monks and nuns (Thurman 1994:14-15).

Only 20-25 years ago air-burials were the most common practice. A lama appointed two persons outside the family to cut up the corpse. The deceased was chopped into small pieces and given either to the birds or to the river, and these two modes of deposition were equally praised. The deceased’s skull could in some cases be saved and used by the lamas for pujas or worship, and even today a skull-bowl from an air-burial is used as a drinking cup for ritual purposes in the oldest gompa in Manang. One of the deceased’s thighbones was often used for making a flute, and during rituals the lamas commonly use such flutes today.
Manang and Gangapurna glacier.
When the lamas used the thighbone flute during air-burial funerals, it was for calling upon the gods to have them make rain. Hence, the practice of air-burials was a rainmaking ritual. Two decades ago, there was a common belief among the lamas and the laymen that if the deceased was cremated the smoke from the funeral pyre would reach the sky and heaven. The gods would become angry and hot tempered because of the smell of the burnt human flesh and they would penalise the people by not giving them rain. During the wintertime, however, everyone was cremated because then the aim was to get the gods angry in order to avoid precipitation, which would come as snow. In short, air-burials were performed during the spring, summer, and autumn in order to create rain, whereas cremation was the proper funeral practice during wintertime for avoiding snowfall. The relation between air-burials and cremations was a matter of controlling the amount of precipitation.

Rain compelling rituals have been an intrinsic part of funeral rites in Tibet (Waddel 1958:499). Special lamas are engaged and specialised in the rainmaking enterprises (Woolf & Blanc 1994), and concepts and mythology relating to rain are pervasive in the Tibetan religious culture. The idea that a noise made on mountain peaks and passes will bring down rain has been common (Bell 1928:8). The Tibetans call hailstorms “The War of the Elements” and ascribe them to the fighting between Wind, Fire, and Water, and hail has been believed to fall chiefly in countries where the inhabitants are quarrelsome, or in countries where many illegitimate children are born (ibid:43-44). Rain-bringing prayers and services held by priests have been held to be of vital importance. House building was prohibited in May and June because those who constructed houses made offerings to the gods in order to prevent rain from falling, since the house under construction would have been be damaged by rain. But if they stopped the rain, then they harmed the neighbours’ cultivation and harvest, and it was therefore forbidden to build houses during these months (ibid:38-39).

The anthropologist Stan Royal Mumford lived among the Gurungs of Gyasumdo in the villages Bagarchhap and Taje from 1981 to 1983, which is in Lower Manang. He emphasised the death cult of the Gyasumdo Gurungs and analysed the spiritual part of the soul’s liberation. Although there are local differences and variations, all the Gurungs in Manang are culturally related and share the same mythological origin of a migration from Tibet. On the one hand, the Tibetan destiny largely depends upon the karmic
past and the psychic preparation during lifetime, but on the other hand, the Gurung destiny after death in the Taje village was also dependent upon relations of reciprocity among relatives. The deceased could not find its way without marriage and progeny and the subsequent alliances between the clans (Mumford 1989:181). The marriage between man and woman on earth had its equivalence and model in the cosmological marriage of a clan from the upper world and a clan from the underworld. The link between these two domains, a long pole called the “pillar of the world” was set up alongside the house while the corpse was prepared for the funeral (ibid:180). The main funeral practice and mode of corpse disposal was water burial by which the corpse was cut up and given to the Marsyangdi river, but they could also bury the deceased. As a general rule, water burials were for the poor people, whereas the rich were given cremations. At that time, they did not perform air-burials because there were no vultures left in the valley (ibid:204).

Nevertheless, the practice of air-burials was deeply rooted in mythology and tradition, a fact which reveals some striking aspects of the life-giving rationale behind cutting up the corpses as a mode of disposing of the deceased. The practice of corpse cutting was expressed in some of the texts where the goddess “cuts off the top of the skull. Then she peals the skin down off the body and spreads the skin on the ground. With her sword she cuts the body into small bits, placing the pieces on the skin in a Mandala pattern of Mount Meru and the four continents, it becomes the total offering of wealth” (Mumford 1989:206). The body is the most auspicious and vital offering to the gods:

“The chopped pieces are gathered up and put into the severed skull cap. The skull is imagined to be a huge cauldron heated over a fire that cooks the pieces of meat. “Countless Khandromas” (Skt. Dakini) come to distribute the food throughout the tree world of the cosmos, while chanted mantras multiply the amount of flesh, blood, and bones so that it “never ends”. As the corpse is distributed it takes on a variety of forms to meet every conceivable need, as well as pay back every debt that...has [been] accumulated from the past” (ibid).

One of the lamas expressed the reason and the meaning of the text in this way;
“Imagine that your corpse has been turned into healing medicines, fine clothes, precious jewels, all kinds of grains, and domestic animals: horses, cattle, elephants. Then it is transformed into forests, flowers, and wealth of all kinds. Nothing is lacking. Indeed, your corpse has been transformed into the Wish-granting Tree itself, along with mansions, gardens, gems, and all desirables to satisfy the five senses” (ibid).

The corpse is not merely a waste product but a precious source for new life, and the immanent powers reside in the flesh. “Cut pieces” of corpses were also identified with the distribution of rice cakes to the other villages in Gyasumdo. All realms and regions in cosmos and the world receive their share, and nobody must be excluded. The practice of air-burials renews the wealth of the world and everyone that lives within it. The direct image of this process is that both invited and uninvited guests come and devour the flesh, which is visualised as food on a banquet. The renounced body is the one that is distributed. After the disposal the process of the guidance of the soul starts, which is dealt with particularly in the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

River and rain – The waters of life and death

When incorporated into death rituals water in the forms of river and rain highlight general principles of life-giving processes, and why and how these creative forces are actively incorporated into further life. Even though water is one of the five elements and is worshipped as holy and as a life-giver, it is the outcome of this creative force and power that has social and cultural relevance for humans.

As a cultural construct water is always a means to an end. The two dominant qualities of water as a life-giver are, on the one hand, water for drinking, and on the other hand, water for food, which basically means fertile crops and a successful harvest. Water can appear in many forms, and I will lay emphasis on water in the forms of river, rain, glacier, and glacier-lake. Whether or not certain forms or qualities of water are incorporated into death rituals depends upon the degree of the necessity of this form of water for
further life, or more precisely, will the absence of this type of water result in death? Water may have the possibility to be integrated as a life-giving process in death rituals if it works according to the dichotomies presence:absence :: life:death. It is a matter of how dependent humans are on the main or the exclusive source of water for further life. If the absence of one type of water is, whether it is as a river or rain, a collective death-giver in the society, then it is of the utmost importance to control this water resource and to incorporate it into death rituals as a source of life and avoidance of death.

From an ecological approach the importance of river and rain can be seen from a southern perspective and a northern perspective. The names of some of the Himalayan Mountains illuminate the southern perspective and the importance of rivers. The Annapurna range with its five peaks rising from 7000 to above 8000 metres means “Full of grain”, Dhaulagiri, an 8000-metre peak, means the “White Mountain”, and the 7000-metre peak Gangapurna means “The Ganges is full”. In short, when the mountains are full of snow, the rivers will be full of water, and the harvest successful with a lot of grain. Thus, the water is a life-giver and life-sustainer. The majority of the Hindu texts and scriptures are developed on the Indian continent rather than in Nepal itself, and thus emphasise the importance of rivers for successful harvest and further life. The names of the mountains illuminate the dependency on the annual precipitation in the mountains for the amount of water in the rivers. “The monsoon rains constitute the pivot of the agricultural year...the abundance or scarcity of rain during this period determines whether or not this year's crops will be bountiful...In the context of agricultural production, then, temporal and climatic auspiciousness is manifested in “wetness”, which ramifies into “fertility”, “succulence”, and “plenty”. “Dryness” during this season is “untimely” and hence connotes “sterility”, “harshness”, and “scarcity” “(Pugh 1983:45). The good rains provide the waters in the rivers.

Seen from the northern perspective and the Buddhists in the rain-shadow, droughts due to absence of water in the rivers are hardly thinkable, since the glaciers support the rivers continuously with water. However, these rivers are almost impossible to irrigate because of the steep valleys, and they are therefore to some extent “useless” from an agricultural point of view.
River and rain in a life-giving water perspective.
Hence, life and death depend upon the amount of precipitation – as much rain as possible during the summer time may give life, but equally important is to have as little snow as possible during the winter time because the snow may cause death. This may also explain why the increased melt-water from the Gangapurna glacier and the recent Gangapurna Lake has hardly influenced the ritual practices, and why these types of waters have a minor role in death rituals: these waters give neither life nor death. Rain is the crucial water form because, on the one hand, the absence of rain is a death-giver in form of harvest failure, but on the other hand, the presence of snow during wintertime may also be a death-giver. One key to answering why the qualities of the deceased and death are closely linked to water, food, and fertility for the living, may be found in the karma-theory. Salvation is only available to humans living in the realm of samsara, or in other words, only humans that are subject to rebirth can be released from the round of birth and death, and attain nirvana (Long 1977:78). Even though salvation or release from samsara is the ultimate aim, one may assume that the majority of the souls are still within the circle of birth and death.

The incorporation of the hydrological circle is of the uttermost importance for understanding the development of actual practices and cosmologies, which work not above, behind, or apart, but within the natural world. Materiality in broad terms constitutes religion as it is experienced in this world because, ultimately, it is what distinguishes this world from the Otherworld. The hydrological cycle is not merely a natural process but also a religious transformation of procreation. The natural world is the materiality which the body of myths refers back to, and vice versa. The hydrological cycle is not only a means by which fertile fields are created, it is also the very process by which the soul is transferred from the earth up to the gods and thereafter reincarnated in a living creature or human. The hydrological circle links micro- and macro cosmos both naturally and spiritually.

**A glimpse of heaven**

The life-giving rains are on a general level the most prosperous gift that a body can become. On a divine scale, however, there are even more precious outcomes. Holy men and sadhus in general conduct
their own death rituals when they are alive, and hence, they are not cremated and there is no mourning period, and they attain heaven.

The funeral of Milarepa, the renowned Buddhist yogi, was particular spectacular. Milarepa (ca. CE 1052-1136) was a famous yogi and poet in the Buddhist world. He was the greatest of all the Tibetan Buddhist sages, and Milarepa founded one of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, which is the Kagyu school of Buddhism. This school of thought is a part of Mahayana Buddhism, and it emphasises meditation as the path to enlightenment. Milarepa himself meditated for twelve years in a cave close to Manang village in the high-Himalayas in Nepal, living on nothing but nettles. By these penances he was able to transcend his body and let the soul fly away.

Milarepa died at the age of 84 at sunrise on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month under the ninth lunar constellation, and he passed directly into Nirvana. The funeral pyre was transformed into a celestial mansion,

“The flame at the base took the form of an eight-petaled lotus blossom, and the curling tips of the fire unfolded into the eight auspicious emblems and the seven royal insignia. Even the sparks took the form of goddesses bearing many offerings. The chants of worship and the crackling of the dazzling fire sounded like the melodious tones of various musical instruments, such as violins, flutes, and tambourines. The smoke permeated everything with the fragrance of perfume and, in the sky above the funeral pyre, young gods and goddesses poured a stream of nectar from the vases they held, and offered abundant delights for the five senses” (Lhalungpa 1979:182-183).

The cremation was completely transparent. Some saw the relics of the corpse as a huge stupa of light standing in the cremation cell, some saw sacred implements, golden rays, offerings beyond imagination, yet others saw the expanse of empty space. The dakinis carried away all the sacred relics, including the ashes, leaving nothing to the humans because the spiritual awakening is the most important of all relics (ibid:184). Spiritual awakening and fragrance, perfume and nectar poured by gods and goddesses – this is heaven – in the normal world the life-giving waters are the most precious a human body can be transformed into.
Apart from Zoroastrianism, turning from the Eastern world religions – Hinduism and Buddhism – to the Western world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – notions of the eternity of life take different forms. In karmic religions the human (or animal) stage – basically living as a creature on this earth – plays the major part of the religious existence and it is a part of the total divine plan for cosmos. Eternity is eternity in all religions, but in Hinduism and Buddhism the earthly stay may include up to 8,4 million bodies, periods, or stages. In the Western world religions the stay at the earth is reduced to one; and that is to live as a human being for one life only, and what one does as a human has severe personal consequences for one’s destiny for the rest of eternity. Depending upon whether one conducts good or bad deeds, one might forever be sent to either Heaven or Hell. Whereas the karmic doctrine is a meticulous and fine masked system of relative punishments for limited sins and offences, the Western world religions offer only two options regarding the deeds committed: either Heaven or Hell.

Whereas the Eastern religions offer millions of lives on earth with the inherent pain it is to live in materialised bodies, the Western religions offer only one life. The divine system of rewards and punishment therefore differs substantially. Whereas the former religions penalise the souls with endless new reincarnations with all the suffering that implies, the latter religions send them to Heaven or Hell. It is very hard to come to Heaven in the Eastern world religions because one has to exhaust all the karma acquired through numerous lives, which necessitates hard dedication and meditation for years. In the Western world religions the entrance into Heaven seems to be easier since whatever a human is doing – and one has only one life – the possibilities to conduct both good and bad deeds have to be limited.

Another difference between the Eastern and Western world religions is what distinguishes Gods from humans. In the Eastern religions the difference between God (or eternity) and mankind is basically a matter of time. There are no substantial differences between being a human and a god. The latter is perfect; the former is not. In the Western world religions there is a qualitative difference between humans and their gods. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monolithic religions, which means that the religion’s respective gods are primordial and essentially made of a different stuff than
the humans, or even if they are made of the same substance, they can never be identical. The gods have made humans in their best moulds, so to speak, but they can never be assimilated into the Almighty One. In Heaven, they have to live beside their God; they are not absorbed into the divine, cosmic unity.

The reason for this is the belief in resurrection. In the Western world religions heaven is populated by perfect beings in perfect bodies, whereas in the Eastern world religions it is the materiality of the humans which separates them from the cosmic whole. Thus, the Western religions are oddly fleshly in the Otherworldly spheres whereas the Eastern religions are purely spiritual. The belief in resurrection has fundamental consequences for both the development of eschatology and performance of actual funeral practices.

**Beliefs and the rabbinic Judaism**

Today the belief in resurrection is crucial in Judaism, and it has implications for the modes by which one may dispose of the corpse in the religion. Throughout most of history Jews have buried the corpses of their deceased. The belief in resurrection is radically different from the Eastern world religions. In Judaism it is not only the soul which will attain the heavenly sphere, but the embodied being. The dead will attain a new body when resurrected, and whereas the Otherworldly existence in Hinduism and Buddhism is characterised by the spiritual existence only, in the Western world religions from Judaism and onwards, both Heaven and Hell are populated by humans with bodies. The spiritual world is not solely immaterial but material and bodily defined. The Western world religions are particularly corporeal and concerned with the body.

All forms of Judaism have its origin in the Hebrew Bible, but Judaism is more than the religion of the Old Testament. Judaism in the cultural sense includes a variety of laws, ethics, worships, and beliefs, within an overall religious framework. In a strict sense, the Torah is the most authoritative of the Jewish scriptures, and it is usually designated to those texts revealed by God to Israel through Moses. On the other hand, although “The Five Books of Moses” is the core of the Torah, it also refers to the rich tradition that evolved through the ages including the various religious practices.
The Western Wall or the Wailing Wall is the only remaining part of the Second Temple of Jerusalem. This is the most important religious place for the Chosen People and their Promised Land.
Judaism as a term denoting the religion is partly misleading. The most accurate term substituting Judaism is Torah. When the Old Testament as a text was written and composed is a controversial subject, but it is evident that the Hebrew Bible consists of different texts of various dates. After the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE Judaism developed in a new direction. Most of the contemporary Judaism has evolved from the rabbinic tradition that arose in Palestine and Babylon from the first century CE.

The rabbinic Judaism advocates that God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai a twofold Torah; one is the “The Five Books of Moses”, and the other is the orally transmitted Torah which has been passed on in an unbroken tradition from Moses to the rabbis. This knowledge was eventually compiled by the Jewish sages into the Mishnah, the Talmuds – one is Palestinian and the other is Babylonian – and various collections of biblical interpretations. The Babylonian Talmud was probably edited in the 6th century CE, and it became the most important, sacred text for rabbinic Judaism.

Interpretations of the Bible

Approaching early Judaism is difficult. The Exodus is fundamental in the biblical tradition as one of the foundations of Israelite faith, referred to in retrospect throughout the Bible more often than any other event of Israel's past. But the problem is whether the story is merely a product of later contemplation, mainly of a theological nature, or an event of any historic credence (Malamat 1997:15). William A. Ward says that there are hints here and there indicating that something like the Exodus happened, though on a much smaller scale, and that there is not a word in any text or any archaeological artefact that lends credence to the biblical narrative as it now stands (Ward 1997:105). “This suggests that the actual events themselves – those little kernels of history embedded in there somewhere – were minor, since they have left no traces except in the record of the people to whom they happened. The historical kernel of the Exodus may have been only one family peacefully migrating from Egypt to Palestine” (Ward:109).

According to the Old Testament scholar Thomas L. Thompson, “It is only as history that the Bible does not make sense” (Thompson 1999:210), and “to use the biblical traditions as the
primary source for the history of Israel’s origin, is to establish a hopeless situation for the historian who wants to write critical, rather than anachronistic, history” (Thompson 1987:26). “The problem is not that the Bible is exaggerated or unrealistic, and it is certainly not that the Bible is false. The writers of the Bible are surprisingly realistic and truthful. In their own terms – which are not the terms of critical historical scholarship – they express themselves well about the world they knew” (Thompson 1999:104). His conclusion is that “Today we no longer have a history of Israel. Not only have Adam and Eve and the flood passed over to mythology, but we can no longer talk about the time of the patriarchs. There never was a ‘United Monarchy’ in history and it is meaningless to speak of pre-exilic prophets and their writings […]

We can say now with considerable confidence that the Bible is not a history of anyone’s past. The story of the chosen and rejected Israel that it presents is a philosophical metaphor of a mankind that has lost its way” (Thompson 1999:xv).

Thus, if Thomas L. Thompson represents one of the parts in the debate, the other part perceives the Bible as a history book, or more precisely, the biblical writers were not concerned with the question “What really happened?”, but with the question “What does it really mean?” For them and for the original readers the Bible was “His story”, an interpretation of certain happenings as seen through the eyes of the faithful (Dever 1990:7). In short, is the Bible a collection of songs, myths, and stories dated to the second century BCE or is the Bible a divine revelation describing historical events which can be dated to the second millennia BCE? This is where the theological debate stands, which will not be elaborated further upon. The main point is that for this discussion the question regarding the authenticity of the Bible as a divine revelation does not really matter.

Myth is “the expression of unobservable realities in terms of observable phenomena” (Schniewind 1953:47). Common for all mythological systems is that the most important stories and narrative re-occur in several different versions (Leach 1969:7). Regardless of whether the myths refer to historical facts or not, the myths that are the least probable often have the greatest importance (ibid.). Whenever a corpus of mythology is recited in its religious setting it is felt to be “real” and present. The participants and observers do not need to be fully aware or conscious of the content and the message that is communicated, but still, the
message and the meaning are there in a quite objective sense (ibid:22). “Myth proper lacks a chronology in any strict sense, for the beginning and the end must be apprehended simultaneously” (ibid:28). This in no way means that the myth is not seen as true. “Any honest man who writes or edits a history believes that what he writes is true, and in the case of a religious history he may well believe that in displaying this truth he is inspired by God. But clearly he cannot believe that what he writes is the *whole* truth”, Leach argues, “What he records as the truth is only that part of the totality of things which he considers “important”, and it is plain that what constitutes historical importance can vary very greatly both from place to place and from time to time” (ibid:43). Thus, the outcome of history and mythology may be quite the same, and following Lévi-Strauss; “I am not far from believing that, in our societies, history has replaced mythology and fulfils the same function, that for societies without writing and without archives the aim of mythology is to ensure that as closely as possible – complete closeness is obviously impossible – the future will remain faithful to the present and to the past […] the gap which exists in our mind…between mythology and history will probably be breached by studying histories which are conceived as not at all separated from but as a continuation of mythology” (Lévi-Strauss 1995:42-43).

The Chosen People and the Promised Land: A water perspective

From the very beginning water has played a crucial role in the identity of Jews and the history of Judaism. The history of humanity starts with water. “And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads” (Genesis 2:10). “And no plant of the field was yet on the earth and no herb of the field had yet grown: for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth” (Genesis 2:5). But more importantly, the history of Judaism is the history of water, famines, wars and rivers, walls and wells.

Following the history of the Exodus (if it happened), it is commonly dated to have taken place in between 1558-1238 BCE. It was probably caused or initiated by a climatic change. Whereas Canaan became more humid, Ethiopia became dryer, which brought a fall in the level of the Nile, causing famines in Egypt.
“At the same time it caused dust/rain storms to penetrate into Northern Egypt, destroying crops, polluting the Nile, and causing plagues. This gave the Hebrews the opportunity to escape serfdom, as the desert of Sinai, which separated their land of enslavement from the Land of Promise, became less hostile as the more frequent rains over this land held the promise of an increased water supply and better grazing” (Issar 1990:105).

The Promised Land was not only a land of freedom, but also a land of water. After the story of the “Ten Plagues” comes the story of the crossing of the Red Sea, in turn followed by the story of the wandering in the desert of Sinai. The term “sea” in the Bible refers to a body of standing water as opposed to “flowing” water, and thus, lakes and even large water tanks such as that of Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem were called seas. The story of the Exodus is the story of a migration in the desert.

“The kings came and fought, then fought the kings of Canaan in Taanach by the waters of Meigiddo; they took no gain of money. They fought from Heaven, the stars in their courses fought against Sisera. The river of Kishon swept them away, that ancient river, the river Kishon” (Judges 5:19-21).

When the people of Israel first moved to the Promised Land they are reported to have been accompanied by an anomalous hydrological event: The River Jordan stopped flowing. The tribes could cross its bed without wetting their feet. According to Joshua, “That the waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon a heap very far from the City of Adam, that is beside Zarethem, and those that came down toward the sea of the plain, even the salt sea, failed, and were cut off: and the people passed over right against Jericho” (Joshua 3:16).

Most Canaanite towns were built near water sources, in most cases springs, but also wells. In later periods rainwater was collected in artificially plastered, watertight cisterns, but during the Canaanite period this practice was restricted to areas where the rock layers were naturally impermeable (Issar 1990:130). Such arrangements supplied by collected rainwater could be enough for a village or a small town. Nevertheless, it would not have been a secure supply for a larger town, particularly not for a long period of
siege for instance preceded by a dry winter. Hence, all of the big and fortified cities are found near springs, and some of them use various tunnels in order to provide a safe water supply even in times of war (ibid:131). Following Issar in his quotations (ibid:141),

“And the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and all his might, and how he made a pool, and a conduit, and brought water into the city, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah?” (II Kings 20:20).

“When Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come and that he intended to make war on Jerusalem, he consulted with his officials and military staff about blocking off the water from the springs outside the city, and they helped him. A large force of men assembled, and they blocked all the springs and the stream that flowed through the land. "Why should the kings of Assyria come and find plenty of water?" they said.” (Chronicles II 32:2-4).

“This is the story of the boring through: whilst (the tunnelers lifted) the pick each towards his fellow and whilst three cubits to (be) bored […] And the water started to flow from the source to the pool twelve hundred cubits. A hundred cubits was the height of the rock above the head of the tunnelers” (The Niqba inscription).

After David conquered Jerusalem, his successor Solomon was a king of peace and construction, which basically involved two aspects; fortifications including walls and fortified gates, and water supply systems (Issar 1990:143). The history of the Jews and Judaism is to a large extent the history of the struggle against the absence of water, which even today is crucial in the region. The Bible has documented the stories and the struggles for water and safe water supply; that is the Promised Land, which after all was better off than the neighbouring countries. But the notion of water is much more than just a description of absence of water; the Bible is a holy book describing what is conceived to be the most essential for the religion.
Immortality through progeny and collective punishment

During The First Commonwealth (until ca. 539 BCE), in the Hebrew Bible the belief in an individual life after death had almost no religious importance. Although there are some references which may indicate an afterlife, there is not developed a system of personal punishments for sins conducted by humans. It seems that God punished the humans’ disobedience collectively with plagues, fevers, conquests, famine, and exile, rather than with individual repentance. A collective system of rewards and punishments in this life rather than in an Otherworldly realm cannot imply a heaven or hell. Moreover, it is not mentioned any particular destiny which awaits a person at the moment he dies. In other words, the ethics and the moral codex a person had to obey and follow was not due to Otherworldly penalties but due to the consequences his children, lineage, and society would face after his death. In short, the emphasis was on the lived life and not the life that was to become. It was a vital religion for life and the living. The best thing to do was to live a good and honest life because then the offspring would attain a good life.

Following the early scriptures, immortality therefore has to be seen more as a consequence of the succession of future generations than a belief in a supernatural and personal afterlife. The death of an individual would not bring him closer to God, and there were no places for Otherworldly rewards or punishments. One’s social and moral behaviour was not a part of the religious worldview in terms of retributions or awards after one died. They were penalties or prosperities given to the community in general. It was the welfare of society that was at stake, not the individual’s destiny. The righteous man protected his progeny through righteous deeds, whereas evildoers harmed his posterity and the descendants were punished in future generations. There was no life after death, and immortality was progeny through one’s children. God’s wrath extended beyond the individual and harmed his family and society.

The Deluge has to be seen in this light. God’s divine wrath harmed everyone and erased all humans from earth but with one exception; Noah. In Genesis 6:13, Yahweh warns Noah: “The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth”. The Deluge killed everything and everyone who was not onboard the Ark.
The Deluge. From Doré 1884.
The Flood cleansed the sins of the world, and some Church Fathers stated the Flood was a “baptism of the world”. The world emerged purified from the Flood.

Erasing all life on earth but one pair of each species is a way of harming society in general, and only Noah’s progeny continued to live after the flood. Thus, there were no needs for other penalties for the rest of humanity because they were dead and could never be immortal. What heinous sins made God that angry, and why he had to erase all the animals on earth except but one pair of each kind, are other questions. The importance is that God’s wrath was solely upon this world, and there were no Otherworldly penalties. After the Flood, God regretted and promised that he would never curse the earth again, and if the human beings in the future became wicked, he would only annihilate the wicked part. Thus, this promise might be the origin of Heaven and Hell. The eschatology of punishment turned from this world to an Otherworld.

There might of course have been other understandings regarding the relationship between life and death or Otherworldly penalties, but if such beliefs were culturally and religiously important and incorporated in society, one would have expected that references were made to these practices and beliefs in the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, the absence of a heaven or hell does not solve the problem of death. There are some difficulties regarding what happened with the dead at this early stage of the development of the biblical tradition. The Bible speaks of a destiny where the deceased is “sleeping with their fathers”. This may indicate that there was a place where the ancestors lived after death, but it may also mean nothing more than that the dead followed their forefathers and that they were buried in a grave.

Another common biblical expression is that the departed “goes down to she’ol”. The term she’ol has normally been designated to an underworld realm, and it has later been equated with Hell. However, in some biblical passages she’ol has no associations with death at all, and it may imply that sinners would face an early death rather than being punished after death. Moreover, the dead were buried beneath the surface of the ground, and thus, it may have indicated a kind of underworld realm without that necessarily implying torments; definitively not eternal torments. Thus, the earliest references may indicate that to die and to become buried was a neutral and natural process rather than a moral process.
relating these worldly actions to divine realms of atonements or grace.

Still, there are other passages which describe a more frightening realm or state of being, and among them is 1 Samuel 28, which is a tale describing life after death. Here it seems that there are ghosts roaming around in some lower realms, indicating the existence of different realms which hosted the good and the bad ones after death. Nevertheless, there are lingering doubts about how to interpret such a passage, and overall such beliefs did not play a major part in the Bible.

In other words, even if such notions existed, they were not fully developed and incorporated into the cultural and religious spheres. Hell may nevertheless have originated from such popular beliefs among common people, and one reason why such beliefs developed is probably the feeling of unjust among the Jews. Throughout history, the Jews have been one of the most deprived people that have suffered from political and religious harassments and oppressions.

**The development of the belief in resurrection**

During the Babylonian exile and The Second Commonwealth (539 BCE to 70 CE) the eschatology of Judaism crystallised, and the ideas of Otherworldly punishments and rewards became more explicit. The Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judea and destroyed Solomon’s temple, and the Jews were exiled in Babylon. These events may have altered changes in the beliefs that history would provide and guarantee justice in terms of the righteous and the wicked ones.

In the post-exile period there was developed a sense of individual responsibility for one’s actions which transcends the inter-generational responsibility for good or bad deeds. Particularly Jeremiah and Ezekiel emphasised that the departed is only judged for what the person has done during his or her lifetime, and not for what the ancestors have done prior to him or her.

Nevertheless, there were still no explicit notions of personal retributions in an Other-worldly Hell, or what Hell would look like. The eschatology was in progress, emphasising that in history there are some periods that are more formative than others.
From the Hellenistic period (4th century to 1st century BCE) and onwards, the belief in resurrection of the dead and judgement in an afterlife became common among the Jewish people. The beliefs in immortality, particularly for the martyrs in times of persecution, seem to have been a response to the catastrophes and sufferings the Jewish people faced. It is also within this historical context one may understand Messiah. Messiah as the Son of David was believed to come and save the world and in particular the Jewish people.

Some believed that the wicked would be punished in the grave prior to the resurrection and the coming of Messiah. Being buried was nevertheless the intermediary stage where one had to live before resurrection whether one was punished or not. The World to Come was Paradise, and it was seen as identical to the Garden of Eden.

Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden after having eaten the forbidden fruits which revealed wisdom and knowledge of good and evil, and hence they became mortal. Thus, the knowledge of being – a person or a human with a beginning and an end – implies death and sins, and it represents a disobedience to God’s wish. Also the concepts of Heaven developed. Although the original Garden of Eden has been seen as a place on earth, paradise became seen as a supernatural place in the divine realms. Thus, Heaven moves from being on this earth as a garden to a super terrestrial realm beyond and behind the human world.

Paralleled with the development of a paradise, notions of Hell became elaborated. Gehenna became the place where sinners were punished. Although Judaism developed concepts of both Heaven and Hell, particularly the notions of Hell differ substantially from the later Christian beliefs of this place as a locale for eternal punishments.

And as mentioned earlier, the Deluge plays a crucial role in the eschatology. A theme which will be discussed in detailed as a part of Christianity, is baptism, which originated with Judaism:

“In the fifteenth year of the rule of Tiberius Caesar...A word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the desert. And he went into all the region around the Jordan river, proclaiming a baptism of repentance which led to the forgiveness of sins”
(St. Luke 3:1-3).
The baptism of Jesus. From Doré 1884.
Ablution and ritual washing

Ablution and washing are important religious practices in Judaism, and “cleanliness is next to godliness”. There are three kinds of ablution or washing recognised in the Bible and the rabbinical laws: 1) washing the hands, 2) washing the hands and feet, and 3) immersion of the whole body in water.

Although the washing of hands is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, this form of ablution is the most frequent and most completely practiced by Jews. Before meals where bread is consumed, the hands have to be clean and the appropriate benediction recited. Similarly, before any prayers ablution is required.

The ritual use of water necessitates that the water fulfils certain criteria. It must be in a natural state and not previously used for any other purposes. It must not be discoloured or mixed with other substances. Importantly, it must be poured out by a human, and the natural flow of water is not sufficient. This has a scriptural basis which describes the pouring of water upon the hands by one person to another, and this is fitting for the disciple to do for his master. If there is no water, the hands should be rubbed with a dry, clean substance, for instance a cloth. The washing of both hands and feet is prescribed by the Mosaic Law for those who perform priestly functions.

The washing of the whole body is the most frequent form of ablution which is mentioned in the Scripture. According to the rabbinical interpretation, the only valid water for immersion should stem from a natural fountain, a stream, or a ritual bath. Today, the most pious observe the ritual immersion for the sake of ritual purity. The numerous sects of the Hasidism are particularly concerned with the ablutions. The immersion of the body in water historically has its origin in baptism.

Ablution strives for holiness and communion with the Deity, and it has a twofold purpose: 1) to cleanse the body physically and ritually from impurity in order to reach a higher stage, and 2) to prepare the body for a higher degree of holiness. Thus, one may be able to approach God in a proper and pure condition.
Christianity

It was Augustine (354-430) who finally consolidated the idea of original sin after long disputes among the Church Fathers. When Eve tempted Adam and he ate the apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, they were expelled from Paradise. The consequence was that not only Adam and Eve became mortal, but so did all their descendants. The original sin was thus the loss of immortality, and hence the original sin was transmitted from generation to generation through procreation. In Genesis (2:15-17) it is written, “The Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden”, saying: “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die”.

Since sin is such a crucial concept in every aspect of Christianity, in order to understand the role of death and various rites it is necessary to look at the Otherworldly spheres where sinners were penalised, which are Hell and Purgatory. An important factor in the history of Christianity is the late development of these concepts. These images do not occur with any strength before the end of the twelfth century, and they reach their climax in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As seen within Judaism, the concept of Gehenna is dubious, and it is difficult to pinpoint the exact meaning of it. Even though there are a few references to some kind of a Hell in the New Testament, which basically mentions a “lake of fire” where the wicked will be punished, Hell as it appears in medieval Europe has hardly any scriptural foundation.

Purgatory is a hell of limited time duration and intensity, and the development of Hell and Purgatory are parallel processes. There are several factors which characterise the traditional, Christian Hell. The most remarkable thing is how evil and painful it is. Compared to other religion’s places of retribution, the Christian Hell is unique regarding the kind of cruelty and torments the dead suffer. In the history of ideas, it is the world’s most perverse and pervasive metaphor. In no other culture or religion has the fear of an Otherworldly penalty played such a role as it has in Christianity. In 1253 the church made a formal promulgation of the doctrine of Purgatory in a papal letter, but the intellectual thoughts of Hell were not elaborated thoroughly. Purgatory occupied a central place in the theological works of Thomas Aquinas, who died in 1274, but
even the greatest of the theologians of his time could not finish this eschatological construction. Hell and Purgatory, or the ideas of purging by fire, were not even firmly consolidated at the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Dante’s books on *Inferno* and *Purgatory* give an idea of what the Otherworldly penalties would be like. In his writings it is clear that the retributions will take place in a three-dimensional locale, but Hell as the eternal crematorium was not firmly established as a doctrine. Dante combines both fire and water as purifying and purging elements. The departed one is first penalised by ice cold torrential storms, then some boiling and burning, back to ice, and so forth. In Dante’s world both water and fire were Otherworldly remedies for purification and purgation. The developments of the ideas of Hell and Purgatory as crematoriums were in progress, but not finished.

The view that humans contained original sin had consequences for the development of the sacraments and how death was perceived, and indeed, Christianity as a religion. Particularly baptism became important in order to rescue and temporarily save the children who were born with sin.

**The meanings of baptism**

“The inward and spiritual grace in Baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God’s family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit” (The Book of Common Prayer). Baptism signified the entry of a newborn baby into the membership of the Church, and this act was necessary to turn the infant into a full human being. By the thirteenth century baptism was expected to take place within the first week. According to the Church, the ceremony was absolutely necessary for salvation, and children who died before baptism were usually consigned to limbo, where they usually would be perpetually denied the sight of the vision of God.

And according to some theologians, the children were also subjected to the torments of the damned. Therefore, at the baptismal ceremony the children were exorcised because of the obvious implication that they previously had been possessed by the Devil, they were anointed with chrism meaning a consecrated oil and balsam, and finally, they were crossed in holy water. The social
significance of baptism as a formal reception of the child into the community was one thing, but it was also believed that the child was “better off” after the initiation rite, and indeed, baptism was perceived to be essential if the child was supposed to physically live at all. Moreover, stories are told about blind children whose sight was restored by baptism. Superstitions regarding the power of water were generally and commonly agreed upon (Thomas 1971:36-37).

Baptism and other sacraments are remedies against sin. According to the common custom of the Church, Baptism is given to children recently born because they are actually born in sin passed on by their origin. On the other hand, it is possible to argue that Baptism is not given to cleanse them from sin, but rather to initiate and admit them into the Kingdom of God, to which there is no admission without Baptism. This has its Scriptural evidence in John where the Lord says: “Except a man be born of water, and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Therefore, if un-baptised children cannot reach the kingdom of God, there must be some sin in them (Aquinas 1975a:214).

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Water carries things far away, water passes like days. But another reverie takes hold of us to teach us the loss of our being in total dissolution. Each of the elements has its own type of dissolution, earth into dust, fire into smoke. Water dissolves more completely. It helps to die completely (Bachelard 1994:91).

God’s will is not for the death of men, even not for sinners, but rather for life, as stated by Ezekiel (18:23, 32): God will not the death for the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live. Thus it is possible to interpret that it has been the will of God that only the most perfect man should be subject to death (Aquinas 1975a:226).

Regarding the spiritual generation which takes place in baptism, one must consider that the generation of a living thing is a kind of change from non-living to life. But man in his origin was deprived of spiritual life by original sin...and still every single sin whatever which is added draws him away from life. Baptism, therefore, which is spiritual generation, had to have the power to take away both the original sin and all the actual, committed sins...because the sensible sign of a sacrament
must be harmonious with the representation of its spiritual effect, and since washing away filth in bodily things is done more easily and more commonly by water, baptism is, therefore, suitably conferred in water made holy by the Word of God (ibid:250).

Water has special capacities and powers that enable the element the task of cleansing. Satan is exorcised at the time of baptism, and the idea of death and resurrection is a part of baptism. The immersion in water is a liminal or transitional phase in which the initiate renounces Satan, swears to ally himself with Christ and recites the Credo, and by this, the transitional period ends (Gennep 1960:76, 94).

 [...] by generation a thing acquires a form, it acquires at the same time the operation consequent on the form and the place in harmony with it. For fire, as soon as generated, tends upward as to its proper place. Accordingly, since baptism is a spiritual generation, the baptised are forthwith suited for spiritual actions...we say that “Baptism opens the gate of heaven”. One should also consider that one thing has but one generation. Hence, since baptism is a spiritual generation, a man is only baptised once (Aquinas 1975a:251).

Therefore, those who are baptised once must not be baptised again. Eliade writes “Water symbolizes the whole of potentiality; it is...the source of all possible existence”. Water will always exist, but never alone since water is germinative, and containing the potentiality of all forms:

Immersion in water symbolizes a return to the pre-formal, a total regeneration, a new birth, for immersion means a dissolution of forms, a reintegration into the formlessness of pre-existence; and emerging from the water is a repetition of the act of creation in which form was first experienced. Every contact with water implies regeneration: first because dissolution is succeed by a “new birth”, and then because immersion fertilizes, increases the potential of life and creation (Eliade 1993:188).
Immersion is at an individual level death, it resolves the past, and water possesses the power of purifying and regenerating. What is immersed “dies” and new life rises from the water. “Water purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past, and restores – even if only for a moment – the integrity of the dawn of things” (ibid:195).

There are reasons to believe that the efficacy of water to cleanse religiously once upon a time was connected and originated from veneration of deities resident in water. Various myths emphasise that the waters contain the blood of the deities, and since blood is the principle of life, the transference of the life force of a god that died in the water could be thought to have passed on to a fish or other animals, things or water in itself as a medium. Waters were imbued with the force and vital energy of gods, and therefore water was holy and regarded as consecrated (Beasley-Murray 1962:3).

“He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost” is the record of Mark (1:8); “He will baptize you with Holy Spirit and Fire”, write Matthew (3:11) and Luke (3:16). Fire might be a symbol of the Spirit, but few advocate this interpretation. The use of fire denotes judgment. In regard of John the Baptist, as Mark says; “I baptize you with water...but he will baptize you with Holy Spirit”, or as in Luke; “I baptize you with water...he will baptize you with Holy Spirit and Fire”. The Spirit is an agent comparable with both water and fire. Since the “baptism with water” is the prospect of the Messiah’s baptism “with Spirit and fire”, the eschatological action “represented in John’s baptism is joined by the power of God to the eschatological action of Messiah’s baptism: the will of God effectively expressed in the first and to be manifest in the second binds the two together” (Beasley-Murray 1962:35-43).

**Baptism with fire and water**

Water and fire are distinctive elements, but sometimes they fulfil a similar function, and sometimes they are most useful when they are combined. Water cleanses and fire purges. The baptism of fire is in the New Testament called baptism in the Spirit, and this baptism is distinct from water baptism. Water baptism meant cleansing from sin and full involvement in Christ – His death and burial as well as His resurrection of life. But the baptism of fire, which normally directly followed it, meant the fanning of the flame of God’s love
within each baptised Christian, and the overflowing of the power of the Spirit in outward manifestations as well as inward assurance” (Harper 1970:3).

The phrase “baptism by fire” occurs only seven times in the New Testament, but other phrases which may be equivalent such as “receiving the Spirit” and “the gift of the Spirit” appear more frequently. The baptism by water was spoken of by John the Baptist as different from the baptism of fire. To some extent Christ is the agent in both water and fire baptism because Man is subsidiary in both. But the agency of man is stronger in water baptism than in the baptism of the Spirit. The baptism of fire is related to the day of Pentecost since six out of seven references directly refer to it. The 120 disciples experienced the baptism of the Spirit, and this had nothing to do with water baptism.

1 Corinthians 12:13 “For by one Spirit are we all baptised into one body...and have been all made to drink into one Spirit”, and thus many interpret the baptism of fire as an initiation into the Body of the Christ, and furthermore, it must refer to water baptism. Others regard the “baptism of Spirit” as meaning regeneration, or that it is the work of the Spirit which makes them children of God, but this is probably wrong (ibid).

**Baptism and death**

All men who are baptised in Christ Jesus are baptised in His death. The connection between baptism and the death of Christ is seen throughout the passage Rom. 6.1-11: “We died to sin”, “All we who became baptised to Christ Jesus became baptised to His death”, “We suffered a burial with Him, through baptism, unto death”, “Our old man became crucified with Him” and “We died with Christ and believe we shall live with Him”. The connection between baptism and Christ’s death and resurrection can be summed up in three interpretative approaches:

1) In baptism the believer suffers a death and resurrection like Christ’s – he experiences a death from sin and resurrection to righteousness.

2) The death and resurrection of the baptised are the death and resurrection of Christ on the cross because there are no
other deaths than the death of Jesus. If we are baptised in His name, then we are also buried when He was buried.

3) Baptism is a “dying” for sinful passions and conducted by renunciation of self and a “rising” to a new life for the glory of God by the Grace of the Spirit of Christ. The essence of baptism is to achieve a new moral way of life.

All these approaches and understandings of baptisms have essential truth and none is complete in isolation from the rest. Immersion is a sort of burial, emergence is a sort of resurrection, and as an early British Baptists put it, to be baptised is to be “dipped for dead in the water” (Beasley-Murray 1962:131-133).

The martyrs were “blood-baptised” because on the one hand such “baptised” martyrs increased the number of dead who stand in God’s peace, and on the other hand, they remained in Christ’s service. “Paul dies daily in his service for Christ – he is nerved by the resurrection to suffer to the uttermost even as the martyr is strengthened for his baptism in blood” (ibid:189).

Since the once and for all baptism of blood of Christ on the cross, and the once and for all baptism of the Church of Spirit at Pentecost are correlative, the baptism of Christ might be perceived as the baptism of the Church. Baptism is an entry into the eschatological order of the new creation. Baptism was instituted after Christ’s will since the cause precedes the effect, and Christ’s will precedes the institution of the sacraments. This is especially true for baptism since all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death. Baptism can also be conferred with blood, and it seems to be more appropriate to the effect of the baptism since it is written in the Revelation 1:5 that he “washed us from our sins in his blood” (Aquinas 1975b:9-13).

It does not seem that baptism of blood is the most powerful of the three because baptism of water imprints a character and baptism of blood does not. Thus it cannot be more powerful than baptism of water. Baptism of blood is ineffective without baptism of the spirit which takes place through charity: If I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. But baptism of the spirits achieves its effects without baptism of blood – it is not only the martyrs who are saved. Therefore baptism of blood is not the most powerful (ibid:51).
Augustine compared the different types of baptism in this way: “The one baptised confesses his faith in the presence of a priest; the martyr before his persecutor. The former is sprinkled with water after his confession; the latter with blood. The former receives the Holy Spirit through imposition of the bishop’s hands; the latter is made over into a temple of the Holy Spirit” (ibid:53).

**Fire and water in Hell**

In *Glossa Lombardi* it is explained how the sinful body might be destroyed. “By baptism the old man is crucified and the sinful body is destroyed, not in such a way that in a man’s living flesh the concupiscence with which he is filled from birth is suddenly taken away and no longer exists, but rather that the same concupiscence which was present in him from birth may not work to his harm at death” – and for the same reason other penalties of this life are not taken away. It is also explained in *Glossa Lombardi* about the two types of punishment of sins; “the punishment of hell and temporal punishment. Christ has completely abolished the punishment of hell so that the baptised and truly repentant are not subject to it. But he has not yet entirely done away with temporal punishment, for hunger, thirst and death are still with us. But he has overthrown its reign and dominion and finally on the last day he will utterly destroy it”.

The development of Hell and Purgatory triggered off other theological questions that needed to be solved. Sin is not a straightforward explanation for understanding Hell and Purgatory. Humans are born with sin, and sin is an inevitable part of the human existence on Earth. Fire became the ultimate means for purging and purifying sin after death. Either the persons went through Purgatory or stayed in Hell – fire was the means by which sins were purged by a painful process in an otherworldly existence. In this world, fire could not have the same position as a purifying agent. It was basically God’s role to judge the living and the dead, but the Church had also a responsibility to cleanse sin in this world. Witch burning was the most extreme way of handling this problem. The worst sinners were burnt on the stake and denied access to Heaven.
Canto XIV. Torture in Rain of fire. From Doré 1876.

Canto XV. Brunetto Latini accosts Dante. From Doré 1876.
But for common people who were born with sin and had committed less grave sins, other purifying agents and means were necessary in this world. There is some kind of a coherent system relating these purifying agents to each other, and the means possible to use for cleansing sin in Christianity. This is mainly the relation between fire and water. The relation and the capacity between these two purifying processes were developed and clarified by, among others, Thomas Aquinas. This world is connected to the world beyond and vice versa.

Fire came to be utterly important in the symbolic system of Purgatory and became the ultimate symbol of the doctrine par excellence. But in the earlier versions of Purgatory, belonging to the prehistory of the Middle Ages, fire is coupled with water. The symbolic pair of water and fire for Hell and Purgatory is represented in the different locales where the penalties took place; one fiery, the other damp, one hot, the other cold, one in flames, the other frozen. The trial where the deceased were subject to Purgatory was not a simple passing through fire, but involved passing in succession through fire and then through water (Le Goff 1984:9).

Baptism had a crucial role in proving witches in the European Medieval period. The water-test or float-test was the ultimate test during the witch-craze. If the woman did not float, it was believed that the holy water accepted her. If the water rejected the woman, then she was a witch, and burnt on the pyre. It was commonly agreed that the Devil was allergic to holy water, and wherever his influence was suspected, water was an appropriate remedy.

**Christian water cult**

Water cult worship continued for centuries after the pagan period, and it was common in every kind of daily action and purpose. Its magical and spiritual cleansing effect was wanted in all spheres. Considering holy water, there were some theologians who though it was superstitious to drink it as a remedy for sickness or to scatter it on the fields for fertility. This had its religious basis in the words of the benediction, and the church’s orthodox view said that there was nothing improper about such actions if they were performed out of genuine Christian faith.
Left: The water-test or float-test. Note the women in the right corner. She does not float because the holy water is accepting her. The water rejects the other woman and she is therefore a witch. Unknown province and time.

Right: Water-torture of witch. Unknown province and time.
Thus, periodically, holy water was carried around so that the pious could sprinkle their animals, homes and fields. In 1543 when a storm burst over Canterbury the inhabitant ran to the church for holy water to sprinkle on their houses to drive away the evil spirits in the air. At about the same time, sick parishioners were recommended to drink holy water as a help to recover. In the seventeenth century Jeremy Taylor commented on the Irish that “although not so much as a chicken is nowadays cured of the pip by holy water, yet upon all occasion they use it, and the common people throw it upon children’s cradles, and sick cows’ horns, and upon them that are blasted, and if they recover by any means, it is imputed to holy water” (Thomas 1971:30).

The distinction between magic and religion was one often difficult to make (ibid:30). The pagan magical wells became “holy wells” and associated with saints, but they were nevertheless employed for magical healing, and this type of water was even sometimes believed to be peculiarly suitable for use in baptism. The medieval Church acted as a repository of supernatural powers which could be dispensed to the faithful to help them in their daily problems. It was inevitable that the priests, set apart from the rest of the community by their celibacy and ritual consecration, should have derived an extra cachet from their position as mediators between man and God. It was also inevitable that around the Church, the clergy and their holy apparatus there clustered a horde of popular superstitions, which endowed religious objects with a magical power to which theologians had never laid claim (ibid:32, 48).

The Ark and the Deluge

The question of the Ark is another problem that also has relevance regarding sin and some concepts of Hell. This problem lasted for a much longer time than the other theological questions because it was connected to the scientific worldview, or more precisely, the Flood changed the scientific worldview. In Genesis 6:13, Yahweh warns Noah: “The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with earth”. In II Peter 3: 5-7, it is written;
The Ark. From Doré 1884.
by the word of God...the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished; But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.

The equation of the ark and the Church is reflected in the Anglican rite of baptism:

Almighty and everlasting God, who of thy great mercy didst save Noah and his family in the ark from the perishing water...We beseech thee, by thine infinite mercies, that thou wilt mercifully look upon this child...that he, being delivered from thy wrath, may be received into the ark of Christ's Church; and being steadfast in faith, joyful through hope, and rooted in charity, may so pass through the waves of this troublesome world, that finally he may come to the land of the everlasting life [...](Cohn 1996:30).

Rather than the Flood being perceived as a hostile and destructive force, it became a “type” of the saving rite of baptism. This theme occurs frequently in the writing of the Fathers. Again and again the world emerges purified from the Flood. The Flood cleansed the sins of the world, and Cyprian makes the comparison explicit by stating that the Flood is “that baptism of the world”.

The fact that the Flood rose high above the mountains signified for Augustine that the sacrament of baptism rises high above the wisdom of pride – “the ark which saves from the Flood as prefiguring the Church, the Flood itself as prefiguring the saving rite of baptism”. During the seven days between the closing of the ark and the onset of the Flood, both humans and animals that were not taken in stayed around the Ark. 700,000 humans had remained impenitent. When the Flood began, these people tried to storm the Ark, but the wild beasts attacked and killed many of them. But an even worse destiny befell the rest. The waters of the Flood were boiling hot. Only in this way could the sinners be appropriately punished. The generation of the Flood was tormented like the people of Sodom, although the latter were consumed by fire. After the Flood, God promised that he would never curse the earth, and if
the human beings in the future became wicked again, he would only annihilate the wicked part (ibid:30-37). Seen from the human’s point of view, the appearance of Hell was therefore natural and obvious.

Although the Deluge is normally connected to the Flood of water, as late as the seventeenth century it was also believed that there would be a Deluge of fire in the future at Doomsday. The doctrine that the world would be destroyed by fire was an old one going back to ancient times, and especially the stoics. Thomas Burnet argued in *The Theory of the Earth – The Third Book* from 1690, that this theory probably stemmed from the barbaric people, and then probably derived from Noah, the father of all traditional learning. He writes about the Deluge of Fire (ibid:305), imaging that if we could look down upon this burning World from above Clouds, and have a full view of it, in all its parts, we should think it is a lively representation of Hell it self...Here are Lakes of fire and brimstone: Rivers of melted glowing matter: Ten thousand Volcano’s vomiting flames all at once. Thick darkness, and Pillars of smoke twisted about with wreaths of flame, like fiery Snakes. Mountains of Earth thrown up into the Air, and the Heavens dropping down in lumps of fire...But if we suppose the storm over, and that the fire hath got an entire victory over all bodies, and subdued every thing to itself, the Conflagration will end in a Deluge of fire: Or, in the Sea of fire, covering the whole Globe of the Earth.

Thus, the relation between the Deluge of water in the past and the Deluge of fire in the future may perhaps be seen in relation to baptism by fire and water. Baptism of water and the Deluge cleansed humans of sins in the beginning, and the baptism of fire and the Deluge of fire will eventually purge the humans’ sins at the end of this world. The Deluge of water is a collective baptism cleansing the humanity when entering Earth, and the Deluge of fire is a collective purgation for the humanity as a whole. The same principles and ways of thinking are invoked in both these processes, showing that the relation between water and fire has been crucial in Christian thought up until recently.
Islam

The prophet Mohammed (570? –632) is the founder of Islam. He was born in Mecca, which is the holiest place in Islam. In Mecca the Kaaba is located, which is the holiest shrine for Muslims. It is believed to have been built by Abraham, and in the south-eastern corner is the Black Stone, which is believed to have been given to Abraham by the archangel Gabriel. In 622 Mohammed emigrated and took refuge in Medina, which is the second holiest place for Muslims, and this event marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. It was in Medina the prophet died and his tomb is located in the Mosque of the Prophet. The third holiest pilgrimage site in the Muslim world is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which is believed to stand on the ruins of Solomon’s temple, or the First temple. The Dome of the Rock houses the stone from where Mohammed ascended to Heaven and Allah.

There are two main branches in Islam; Shia and Sunni. The different branches represent the constitutional crises which emerged after the death of the prophet: how should the successor be chosen?

The Shia Muslims claimed that the successor should come from the bloodline of the prophet, and that he should descend from Ali who was the cousin and son-in-law of Mohammed. The Sunni Muslims argued that the caliph should be chosen through election.

As with all religions, there is variation between the different branches, and only some general outlines will be mentioned. Islam as a religion shares many of the same beliefs and moral codexes, which are common in Judaism and Christianity, and Islam departed from this origin. Although Muslims believe in the original messages as given by God to the Jews and the Christians, they claim that both Judaism and Christianity as religions distorted the original knowledge which was revealed by God. Hence, God sent another prophet to reveal the truth one more time – and for the last time – and that was Mohammed. The Qur’an is the sacred book which contains these truths as revealed by Allah through Mohammed; the Qur’an is truly God’s own words.

The Muslims also believe that humanity descends from Adam and Eve, but their view differs substantially from the Christian ones. Although Adam ate the apple and committed sin in paradise, from where Adam and Eve then were expelled, in Islam God has forgiven their sins after they made repentance.
The Dome of the Rock. The place where Mohammed ascended to Heaven, Jerusalem.
It is believed that the expulsion was a result of satanic deception rather than a deliberate disobedience of God’s laws. In Islam God created humans with the best means possible in cosmos, and they are his viceroyys on earth. Humans are therefore not born with sin, but as humans they have the possibility to commit sins. Hence, as creatures of Allah humans have a moral duty to serve their God. This is imperative, and disobeying this obligation is a heinous sin, which has severe consequences in the Otherworld.

Nevertheless, there is no original sin in Islam, and descending from Adam and Eve is an honour and grace, and not a fall as within Christianity. Thus, the notion of original sin differentiates the religions, and although the Islamic Heaven and Hell bear resemblances to the Christian ones, the Islamic conceptions also have other particular characteristics, which will be described later. Nevertheless, even if there is no original sin, people become contaminated and purifying rituals are vital to Islam, and in particular the daily ablutions.

**Water in the Qur’an**

"We made from water every living thing" (21:30). This powerful statement in the Qur’an sums up the importance of water in Islam. The word “water” occurs more than sixty times in the Qur’an, “rivers” over fifty and “the sea” over forty, whereas “fountains”, “springs”, “rain”, “hail” etc occur less frequently (Haleem 1999:29).

Humans are dependent upon God’s gift. The statements concerning water frequently begin with “It is God...It is He Who...”, and hence, it reminds humans that the origin of fresh water is with God and not humans (ibid:30):

“Consider the water which you drink. Was it you that brought it down from the rain cloud or We? If We had pleased, We could make it bitter: why then do you not give thanks?” (56:68-70).

The benefits of this divine gift are also pointed out:

“We send down pure water from the sky, that We may thereby give life to a dead land and provide drink for what We have created – cattle and men in great numbers” (25:48-49).
Pollution and ablution

The Islamic purity rules form a system which possesses a logic. The goal is purification, which includes seven elements or terms (Reinhart 1990:3-4):

a) Three terms are signifying contamination: defiled, affected, and precluded.
b) Two terms are signifying specific rites of decontamination: ablution and washing/lustration.
c) One term is signifying the state of intense, in some sense abnormal, purification produced by rites of decontamination.
d) Contamination is linked to decontamination by water or fine sand/dust/topsoil.

The rules of purification are based on the Qur'an, particularly 5:6:

“O you who are faithful! When you undertake ritual worship, then wash your faces, your hands to the elbows, rub your heads and legs to the ankles. And if you are precluded [from ritual worship etc.], cleanse. If you are sick, or on a journey, or one of you come from the privy, or you have had [physical] contact with women, and you do not find water, then take good topsoil and rub your faces and hands with it. God does not want place a burden on you but He wants to cleanse you and complete His benefaction for you, perhaps you will acknowledge your obligation”

This passage implies three ritual situations: firstly, before a ritual one must cleanse oneself by washing the face and the hands to the elbows, and rub the head and legs to the ankles. This purifying ritual is called “ablution”. Secondly, if one belongs to the category of those precluded, one must “lustrate”. Thirdly, in the absence of water (which is implied in “cleanse” and “water”), both the ablution and the lustration have to take place by using fine sand. Hence, within the logic of purification sand shares some characteristics with water. Purification is therefore not cleanliness in a hygienic sense but rather in a ritual sense (Reinhart 1990:5-6).

Ablution releases Muslims from ritual restrictions, and ablution is one of the most prominent and dominant features of Islamic ritual life. Muslims pray to Allah five times each day, and
before the prayers they have to be purified. The ablution involves a number of aspects:

1. To declare that the purpose is for worship and purity.
2. To wash the hands up to the wrists three times.
3. To rinse the mouth with water three times.
4. To cleanse the nostrils of the nose by sniffing water into them three times.
5. To wash the whole face three times with both hands.
6. To wash the right arm three times up to the far end of the elbow and then do the same with the left arm.
7. To wipe the whole head or any part of it with a wet hand once.
8. To wipe the inner sides of the ears with the forefingers and their outer sides with the thumbs. This should be done with wet fingers.
9. To wipe around the neck with wet hands.
10. To wash both feet up to the ankles three times beginning with the right foot.

Thus, the ablution is completed and the devotee may start his prayers. As long as the ablution is valid, he may say as many prayers he wishes. However, there are certain processes or acts which nullify the ablution:

1. Defecating.
2. Menstruating or bleeding.
3. Vomiting.
4. Falling asleep.
5. Losing one’s reason by taking drugs or any intoxicating stuff.

If any of these occurrences happen, the ablution must be renewed before a devotee can pray in a Mosque.

There are two types of ablution, the minor ablution and the major ablution. The minor ablution involves the cleansing and purification as mentioned above, and the major ablution requires the full washing of the body. A major ablution is necessary after sexual intercourse, at the end of menstruation, and confinement or childbirth (Haleem 1999:32-33).

Ablution is described in the Qur’an as a means of physical, psychological, and spiritual purification and uplifting, and hence, it
is stated in the Qur’an that God “sends down water from the sky to cleanse you” (8:11), and as the Prophet said, “Cleanliness is part of faith”. Cleanliness is a means to complete one’s faith, the perfection of God’s brilliance, and the gateway to prayer and reading the Qur’an and hence to attain God’s love (Haleem 1999:33).

As indicated, it is possible to substitute water with fine sand if one cannot find an appropriate kind of water or only has sufficient water for drinking, or cannot afford water of fear of harm by using water because of wounds or diseases, or from physical harm in war or from wild beasts (Reinhart 1990:17). The desert environment has made religious possibilities, but also put restrictions on the use of water and practical substitutes.

**Absence of water**

To waste water is a sin and there is a prohibition on excess and wastefulness in using water; “Eat and drink but do not be excessive; He loves not the extravagant” (7:31), “Do not squander [your substance] wastefully, for the wasteful are the devil’s brother” (17:26). And it is forbidden to monopolise water because it is a good which has to be shared among men and animals (Haleem 1999:39).

The absence of water is often more important than the presence of water when people incorporate the water-world of daily life into society and religion. A desert environment produces peculiar effects on thought and imagination. The less water that exists, the more dependent you become on the reliable and safe water sources. Thus, the control of water in desert water-worlds has a structuring function in all spheres of social and religious life.

This relates to the scientific debate of methodological collectivism or methodological individualism – the difference between determinism and free will (Watkins 1973, Gilje & Grimen 2001). All ecological studies are situated in between the extreme methodological collectivism and the extreme methodological individualism. In the heydays of material determinism an ecology of technology was advocated (e.g. Parsons 1977:28). Friedman, among others, has criticised such approaches as vulgar materialism and mechanical materialism which envisages social forms as mere epiphenomena of technologies and environments, either as a direct cause or by some economic rationality which makes institutions the product of social optimalisation (Friedman 1974:456-457).
The desert Wadi Rum, Jordan.
Implied by the term "epiphenomena" is that social forms are caused by, or emerge out of (perhaps as a sort of by-product), the interactions of environment and technology (Rappaport 1979:45).

On the other hand, one may reject a deterministic approach because “although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact, indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock” (Schama 1996:6-7). I will therefore stress the feedback, or loop mechanism, between culture and nature. They are inseparable, and cultural constructs are not merely a matter of arbitrary relations between the signifier and the signified.

Water matters. The relation between absence and presence of water give rise to cultural and religious constructions. The drama of the rise of Islam was staged in a desert setting. The Qur'an is filled with images of deserts in a nomadic environment. Mohammed was a caravan driver of Beduin training, Mecca was a typical desert town of trade and pilgrimage, and Medina was a date palm oasis (Norton 1924). Without incorporating the desert environment and the absence of water one may not understand the development of Islam and the particular water rituals.

**Bangladesh – Muslims in a flood environment**

Returning to Bangladesh, which is the third largest Muslim country in the world after Indonesia and Pakistan, the lives that Allah gives include the water world of floods, which turn the plains into nothing but water (Gardner 1997:18). Bangladesh is often flooded and seventy percent of the country is covered with water each year. The rivers give life but also take life, and the relation between life, death, and water is intricately interwoven and structured around the goddesses Kali and Ganga.

With a population of almost 130 million living in Bangladesh, the terms “Muslims” and “Hindus” are not self-explanatory. In a country where the majority is poor and illiteracy is widespread, questions concerning what it actually means to be a Muslim or a Hindu, and what kinds of rituals they observe, are crucial. There is a huge variation within both Islam and Hinduism, and in certain spheres there is a tremendous similarity in ways of thinking, praying and believing within the two religions. Hinduism is not
necessarily opposed to Islam, and vice-versa – the religions may co-
exist and even give contributions to each other – and Faridpur is
such a place where Muslims and Hindus live peacefully together
(Oestigaard and Alam 2002). One of the reasons for this co-
existence and syncretism of two religious paths is found in the
history of Faridpur, and there is a strong Hindu influence
penetrating the Muslim culture and religion.

Outside Rajbari town, the neighbouring town of Faridpur,
Muslims living by the riverside are also committed to the river. They
pray and make sacrifices to Ganga trying to control the forthcoming
flood, for the avoidance of diseases, and for the protection from
winter storms when fishing. If Ganga saves them after they have
prayed to the river goddess, then they may offer coconuts, salt, and
rice in accordance with their promises. Only Muslims live on the
south side of the river, whereas on the northern side there are
Hindus too. The Muslims living along this part of the riverside do
not give blood sacrifices to Ganga, and Kali is in general less
important for these Muslims. According to them, when they pray
and make offerings to Ganga, they follow the Muslim religious codex
for worship. There are, however, great local and regional differences.
Along other parts of Ganga’s riverside Muslims worship Kali as well.

The physical environment is a “typical” or perhaps “extreme”
Hindu environment. Hinduism’s emphasis on water worlds with a
rich body of water metaphors and myths is ecologically very fitting
for the environment in Bangladesh. Islam as a religion, on the other
hand, is very “unfit” for this ecology. The Qur’an originated in a dry,
desert environment. Thus, the ecology of Islam’s high-religion is
adapted to deserts and the lack of water, whereas the low-religion
has incorporated the totally opposite water world in Bangladesh. In
this situation it seems natural that Muslims have adapted parts of
the Hindu religion’s water-world, which has solutions to the
problems the dramatic changes of water represent for humans.

**Heaven and Hell**

Throughout the world Muslim funeral rites show a high degree of
uniformity. The funeral practice is rather simple and rapid, and
there are small variations between the funerals of men and women.

When a person is born, the first words a Muslim hears are
the invocation of the Divine Name, and this is also the last thing a
person says or hears when dying. The face of the dying person is turned towards Mecca. After death occurs the body is washed. A ritual prayer is given on the cemetery or in the mosque, and sometimes it is uttered in the home where the relatives mourn the dead. The deceased is carried on a bier by men, and the funeral procession follows afterwards.

The corpse is placed in the grave, and most often a coffin is not used. The grave is normally directed towards Mecca. Although the normal way is to direct the head towards the east, among some Shia Muslims the feet have sometimes been directed towards the holiest place in Islam.

It is believed that the dead is ordered to sit up when the angels enter the grave. They ask him who or what is his Lord, his religion, and his prophet, and the correct answers should be God, Islam, and Mohammed. If the deceased answers correctly, the angels will open a door through which the dead can see Heaven and feel the comforting and sweat breezes from Paradise. If he answers wrong; the door to Hell is opened and the wicked starts to feel the pains from the lower realms, or the angels may even start to beat the wicked with iron rods. After the initial retributions or awards the dead fall into a state of unconsciousness until the final day of judgement.

How the spiritual realms are during this stage is not clear. There are many stories suggesting that the dead is met and welcomed in the tomb by other departed souls. This may suggest that there is a separate spiritual world existing after death but before resurrection. Thus, there are uncertainties related to whether the soul alone, the soul and the body, or only the body, reside in the grave until resurrection. What happens at the final end is clear: the bodies will be resurrected before entering Heaven or being punished in Hell.

Both Heaven and Hell consist of seven different layers or realms. Starting with Hell, the uppermost level is the least torturous, and then there is an increasing degree of torment the further down in Hell the wicked descend. Some of the lower realms are characterised by scorpions as big as mules and snakes the size of camels which torture the damned, and all suffer by fire. Thus, there is an elaborate system of relative punishments relating to the seven layers. The sirat bridge crosses over the shallowest level at the top of Hell, and there are numerous beliefs that those who are
destined for the uppermost levels in Hell after a certain time may re-enter the bridge and eventually pass on to the other side.

The Qur’an is explicit regarding which deeds will result in the Fire; lying, corruption, adultery, murder, etc, but the most heinous of all sins is the denial of God, his prophet, and the reality of Heaven, Hell, and the Hour. Hence, the questions by the angels Munkar and Nakir in the intermediary period check whether the deceased deny the existence of God or not.

The most intriguing aspect of the Muslim Hell compared to the Christian Hell is that the degree of punishment is meticulously adapted to the heinousness of the sins. In Islam there is a kind of calibration of the different deeds and sins, and the atonements and rewards are reflected in the eschatology in both the lower and upper realms.

Heaven, too, is characterised by seven levels, and Paradise is normally referred to as Gardens in plural. The internal order of the different gardens is disputed, but according to some, the Garden of Eden is directly under the throne from which the four rivers of Paradise flow. The joys awaiting the departed in the Gardens are elaborately described in the Qur’an; delicious food and wine, companionship of young virgins for males, and so on. Whether these joys are meant to be understood carnally rather than in a spiritual way is uncertain, but at least the punishments in Hell are undoubtedly connected to the physical bodies and flesh. But what does Heaven look like?

**Gardens and Heaven on earth**

The most spectacular manifestation on earth of the divine beauties in Heaven is Taj Mahal in Agra, India. The splendour of the white marble monument, which shines in different colours throughout the day, makes the Taj Mahal mausoleum one of the wonders of the world situated in the middle of an enormous garden. It is perceived to be the most beautiful building ever built, and it was made out of love and devotion.

The Taj Mahal was built between ca. 1632-1654 by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his deceased wife. His beloved, Arjumand Banu Begam, better known as Mumtaz Mahal, died in 1631, and the emperor grieved for years due to the loss of his wife.
Taj Mahal, Agra, India.
Her sarcophagus is located in the centre of the octagonal hall whereas the sarcophagus of Shah Jahan, who died in 1666, is located next to it. An enclosed garden surrounds the mausoleum, which is a Muslim symbol of Paradise. The pathways which lead to the Taj Mahal is centred around a large pool surrounded by fountains, flowers, and symmetrically aligned cypress trees, which are symbols of death.

Persian gardens in general and garden tombs in particular are often described metaphorically as being like Paradise. On the entrance gateway to the palatial tomb of Shah Jahan’s grandfather Akbar, the last words that one is supposed to read before passing trough to the walled garden beyond are: “These are the gardens of Eden, enter them to live for ever!” (Begley 1979:11-12). This is similar with Taj Mahal. The final words of the gateway inscription are

"O thou soul at peace,
Return thou unto thy Lord, well-pleased and well-pleasing unto Him!
Enter thou among My servants –
And enter thou My Paradise!"

The tomb gardens were conceived as symbolic replicas of the gateway and the gardens of the celestial Paradise, and according to Islamic tradition, Mohammed entered Paradise through its gateway during his heavenly ascension (ibid:13).

Moreover, the four water channels in the Taj Mahal complex are meant to symbolise the four flowing Rivers of Paradise, which are mentioned in the Qur’an and the Hadith literature. The raised marble tank in the centre of the garden is most likely seen as a replica of the celestial tank of abundance promised to Mohammed and seen by him when he ascended to Paradise (ibid:14). Finally, the Taj Mahal mausoleum in itself bears resemblances and is probably intended to be a replica of the heavenly Throne of God, which is located directly above Paradise and from where God will sit and judge on the Day of Resurrection. Directly beneath the terrace of the throne, God created the celestial Gardens of Paradise (ibid:15-18).

The Muslim love of gardens may stem from the desert environment in which they have lived, where aridity and water scarcity were the greatest threats to life.
In the Qur'an Paradise is described as bountiful gardens with shade and water everywhere. In one medieval text the Heavens were described as such:

“There are seven gardens. The first of them is the abode of the garden and it is of white pearl. The second is the abode of peace and it is of red sapphire. The third is the garden of refuge and it is of chrysolite. The fourth of them is the garden of bliss and it is of white silver. The sixth is the jannat al-firdaws and it is of red gold. And the seventh of the gardens is Eden and it is of white pearl. This is the capital of the Garden and it is elevated over all the gardens...”

The Gardens of Heaven are beyond human comprehension, and even the most spectacular monument on earth cannot visualise the splendour of Heaven. However, the symbolic intimacy of life, death, and Paradise, which is expressed in the Taj Mahal monument, gives a glimpse of what the Otherworldly life in paradise must look like.
Acknowledgements

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Publications used for this book

As indicated in the preface, this book is based on my earlier works, which have been compiled, adjusted, and partly rewritten and extended. They include:


Parts of the general introduction to the world religions are based on Death and World Religions – Human responses to the inevitable (Oestigaard 2004), which is a popular book without references in the text. Some of the references in this book include:

Literature


The book of common prayer: and administration of the sacraments and other rites and ceremonies of the Church according to the use of the Church of England, together with the Psalter or Psalms of David pointed as they are to be said or sung in churches, and the form and manner of making, ordaining and consecrating of bishops, priests and deacons. London.


Nepal.


Princeton, New Jersey.


Appendix: Defining major world religions

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_religions

Major world religions have been distinguished from minor religions using a variety of methods, though any such division naturally reflects a particular bias, since many adherent of a religion are likely to consider their own faith "major". Two methods are mentioned in this article, number of adherents and the definitions used by classical scholars of religions.

Defined by population

One way to define a major religion is by the current number of current adherents. The Christian Science Monitor used a separate standard, examining only organized religions. The newspaper listed the following in 1998 as the “Top 10 Organized Religions in the World” based on descending level of population:

Christianity
Islam
Hinduism
Buddhism
Sikhism
Judaism
Bahá’í Faith
Confucianism
Jainism
Shintoism

Historic “Classic” View

Major religions have also been identified based on their perceived importance, whether theological or temporal. This sorting has been generally been the preserve of Western, Christian scholars, so lists of classic major religions betray this bias. Early Christian scholars, the earliest known classifiers of major religions, recognized only three religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Paganism (which they considered to encompass every other religion). Views evolved during the enlightenment, however, and, by the 19th century, Western scholars considered the five major religions to be Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. As the exposure of Westerners to other religions increased, five other religions were added to the original five: Confucianism, Taoism,
Jainism, Shinto and Zoroastrianism. Later, the Bahá’í Faith was added to this list, resulting in eleven classic religions:

Bahá’í Faith
Buddhism
Christianity
Confucianism
Hinduism
Islam
Jainism
Judaism
Shinto
Taoism
Zoroastrianism

Modern Western definitions of major religion come from the classical definition, often expanding on “Christianity”, and omitting Jainism and Zoroastrianism. An example is this list found in the New York Public Library Student Reference:

Bahá’í Faith
Buddhism
Confucianism
Hinduism
Islam
Judaism
Orthodox Eastern Church
Protestantism
Catholicism
Shinto
Taoism