

KARL-HEINZ BRAUN

Different religious approaches to the value of water

Different religious approaches to the value of water

Karl-Heinz Braun

Catholic Theological Private University Linz, Austria

1 Water isn't just water

Of course it is nothing new to the natural sciences that water is not just "water". But this is also true with respect to social, cultural and, above all, religious interpretations, where water is not defined on the basis of a chemical or biological analysis.

Given a time limit of only a half an hour, it is impossible to describe the relationships various religions of the world have with respect to the value of water. It is also impossible to explain their respective theologies adequately (whether those of Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or even natural religions).

My aim is also not to criticise any religious practice dealing with water.

I want to explain what they have in common in an anthropological, social or religious sense. It is necessary to comprehend the deeper reality of individuals' relationships to water¹.

Let me present a few points for better orientation and understanding.

2 Water has different values in the different religions

This is not only an obvious fact, but also a necessary differentiation in order to understand that the same water can be a different water, holy for one person, unworthy, perhaps even dangerous or completely unnecessary for another. At Buddhist funerals when some water in a little bowl is placed before the dead person, this bowl contains something from the cycle into which the dead person then enters.

For Hindus all water is sacred, but some sources of water are believed to contain "drops of amṛta - the nectar of immortality". Advocates of hygiene, having grown up in Western civilisation, may shake their heads in despair when they see pilgrims bathing in and drinking water from the Ganges River at Benares².

For Moslems, on the other hand, such water is not only dirty but also impure. Islam insists that clear water or, even better, clear flowing water is necessary for purifying the body and the soul³. Other acceptable kinds of water in Islam are rainwater, spring water, well water, water

¹ Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions*. Nouvelle édition entièrement revue et corrigée (Paris 1964) 165-187.

² Norbert C. Brockman, *Encyclopedia of sacred places* (Santa Barbara/California 1997) 295: Benares = Varanasi, "the eternal city" on the banks of the river Ganges. Here pilgrims come to drink from the water to receive eternal life in the next world.

³ For the prophet Mohammed such ritual washings were one half of one's faith since they were the key to prayer: Thomas Patrick Hughes, *Lexikon des Islam* (Wiesbaden 1995) 747; Koran, Sure 5, Vers 7: „O ihr Gläubigen, bevor ihr euch zum Gebet anschickt, wascht euer Gesicht, eure Hände bis zum Ellbogen, reibt eure Köpfe

from hail, water from snow and clear water from oceans and rivers. More liberal interpretations allow drinking water to be used for all religious ritual washings.

3 Water at the same geographic place has had different values during history

This is important with respect to the cultural transformations of history in the various steps of historical progress.

As an historian, with speciality in the history of Christianity, particularly church history, I am convinced that most of the various cultural developments enter deeply into human religious feelings and perceptions, more so than is often reflected upon or made the subject of discussion in the field of religion.

One of my fields of speciality is Historical Anthropology. Changes coming from the passage of time are a major factor of transformation. This is not only true for understanding social and religious images, but also for understanding the supposedly scientific constants. You would surely agree that not even plants in the Middle Ages contained exactly the same composition of substances as our plants today. They have evolved.

Not only religions and everyday reality are altered by the respective time factors; apparently unambiguously objective reality is also dependent on a variety of cultural agreements, which change throughout history.

At the same time every area of scientific theory and practice is subject to the danger of self-reference (see Niklas Luhmann).

In addition:

4 The "speed" of water (as a cultural and anthropological argument)

Here I am not referring to the speed of the flow of water, but to the speed with which the value of water has changed in our consciousness, in our way of thinking and in its concrete use. In historical and anthropological terms, for scientists water also has no static measurement, because their intellectual relationship to water changes with their tasks, their point of view and their perspectives. Even this change is not constant but is variable.

The speed with which scientists react also varies, as can be seen by the perception of units of time⁴. On the other hand this also reflects the factor of expectation with which scientific

feucht ab, und reinigt eure Füße bis zu den Knöcheln hinaus; habt ihr euch durch Beischlaf verunreinigt, so wäscht euch ganz. Seid ihr jedoch krank oder auf Reisen oder wart ausgetreten oder habt Frauen berührt und ihr findet kein Wasser, so nehmt reinen feinen Sand und säubert euer Gesicht und eure Hände damit“; John Bowker (Hg), Das Oxford-Lexikon der Weltreligionen. Für die deutschsprachige Ausgabe übersetzt und bearbeitet von Karl-Heinz Golzio (Düsseldorf 1999) 1072: Für den gläubigen Moslem werden zwei Waschungen unterschieden: „GUSL“, die vollständige Körperwäsche, etwa nach einem Geschlechtsverkehr, vor dem Freitagsgebet und vor Hauptfesten, auch Tote müssen vor ihrer Beerdigung gewaschen werden; „WUDU“ dagegen ist die kleinere Waschung (Gesicht, Mund, Nase, Hände, Arme bis zum Ellbogen, Füße bis zu den Knöcheln, das Kopfhair feucht abgerieben), um eine rituelle Unreinheit zu beseitigen.

⁴ For example how long a driver waits at a red light before driving on the green light varies. Vgl. Robert Levine, A Geography of Time (New York 1997); deutsch: Eine Landkarte der Zeit. Wie Kulturen mit Zeit umgehen.

results are demanded. With this short reflection, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that this acceleration of time is an essential factor of change with respect to dealings with water.

To simplify: The change in people's concept of water means they no longer draw water in order to enjoy it or to strengthen themselves or even for washing; they want to attain quick access in order to use water. In this way there is no real connection to water or through water, as is often the religious connotation. Instead there is only concern with consuming water, generally without any conscious thought. Often enough thoughts are somewhere else entirely while one flushes the toilet or stands under the shower to prepare himself for the next event.

These preliminary comments aside, I still would like to first address the issue of cultural factors. These are seen in the older religions, less often in modern religions which have just arisen in the last two centuries.

5 Water isn't just for drinking

For before, after, or during meals: It is not only a food for the purpose of maintenance of biological and physiological processes.

Water does not just have a purpose, it has a deeper meaning. There is perhaps a religious dimension beyond that of necessary, pure utility, often taken for granted.

Therefore:

6 "Holy" or "sacred" water is often not the same water as normal drinking water

Within the context of history this is very important. In almost all cases, "holy" or "sacred" water is another kind of water altogether! Whether it springs from a certain source at the foot of mountains, or has a special location on the banks of a river like Benares on the Ganges, or whether it is set apart through prayers and blessings by priests or by men or women, or whether it is given only at certain days in the year. Such a holy water can be touched, can be used for washing and can also be drunk. Yet it is often surrounded by taboos. Not all things can and may be done with this water! Only some special practices are allowed. Abuse is always punished.

Mostly, in the tradition of the "pre-modern" religions:

7 "Holy" water makes people and things pure

But watch out: This does not refer to the concept of hygiene, which first established itself in the nineteenth century. Religious purity is more of an inner purity. Purity, to begin with, was originally not an externally visualised purity, even if this aspect certainly was present. Ever since the "middle-class" or bourgeois nineteenth century, people have begun to deny the unwashed beggars a direct connection to God because they are not clean. In contrast, for the "pre-modern" religious mentality the exaggerated spruced-up person (decorated with

perfumes and otherwise cleanly washed with no unique characteristics of the individual human body remaining) would be the impure human being. He would lack that instinctive individual consistency which identifies the people within their group and which they recognise in each other.

But I do not deny that religious purity and cleanliness have a connection. Let me remind you of the ritual washings demanded of women during their periods, as found in Jewish tradition, Christian antiquity, Moslem tradition, and as mentioned by Isidor of Seville. Within the traditions of Catholic Christianity "churching" was common until the Second Vatican Council. This ceremony gave a special blessing to the mother of a newborn and newly baptised baby, in order to make her pure again, or rather to place her in this special, beneficial atmosphere which is created through holy water. Water served as the medium in this religious setting. Naturally a living creature, a place, or an object can be made pure or can become pure again with holy water.

8 Water makes you healthy

In all "pre-modern" religions there is a certain interdependency between religious salvation and health. Traditional religions did not, as so often in modern Western civilisations, only promise life after death. They provided help and experience for this world, and assisted human beings in understanding their connection to everything which is beyond human experience.

Water purifies that which comes before health. In this respect holy water should serve as a path to health. In many traditional religions people make a pilgrimage to holy places, where there are holy springs, holy wells, holy rivers or holy beaches. During their visits they combine prayer with drinking these holy waters (or bathing in them). This is for the greater, the eternal salvation, but also for current health, which they need now.

Part of the interpretation of this practice has separated the religious from the medicinal aspect in the course of history. This began approximately with the cultural differentiation process that came about through Humanism, the Reformation and also in the Catholic Church after the Council of Trent (1545-1563). This was when people began to distinguish between health care and religious rites. This secularised separation was quite distinct in Calvinism, the religion most highly influenced by intellectual impulses. Calvinism considered the connection between health and religious rites to be superstition. This separation put an end to the "material piety" of the late Middle Ages. Religion was now to be spirit, and therefore it was not to be confused with the material world.

Later in connection with René Descartes, who did not necessarily think that way himself, but rather just wanted to pursue this train of thought for the sake of argumentation, more and more of Western consciousness developed toward the direction of spirit and matter no longer touching or changing each other.

The Catholic Church however remained resolute in its understanding that the blessing of a priest or other holy actions could change matter or even reality, that God can, will, and does intervene in this world, that He provides help and salvation.

But this is no simple automatism. Here we have within the Western world the longest tradition of a primal religious interaction with physical elements, especially with water.

9 Water as the substance which carries the Spirit of God

Only a few religions support such superlative claims about experiences with water. Certain parts of Hinduism do, as does above all Christianity, and not only during its early and medieval manifestation.

Such statements, that water carries the spirit of God, reflect, to be sure, something of the original experience and may seem rather strange to us today. Theologically, however, they are thoroughly compatible with the biblical Gospels according to St. John. Especially the multidimensional theology of the Gospels according to St. John uses water over and over again in order to portray the multiple facets of the relationship of Jesus Christ to the believers. What water means is shown by the woman of Samaria meeting Jesus at Jacob's well. She sought "water to drink, but returned with living water"⁵ after her encounter with Jesus.

"Water symbolises Jesus, the message he proclaims and the possibility of new life he represents"⁶.

The way proceeds from that drinking water which supports life to that water which is more than every other water and from which every other water has its source. This water comes from God Himself⁷. It is the reality of God himself, as represented by Jesus.

"As a symbol of Jesus himself, water may serve as a sacramental symbol, but its meaning and function certainly transcend that."⁸

Especially the medieval interpretation of these theological teachings recognised in holy water the spirit which promised Jesus. The water itself was not the spirit, but rather the water carried the spirit.

In Western civilisation every blessed water, every sacred water has its origins in this theology. This holy water changes and vitalises. In an historical and anthropological sense one cannot make a clear separation between Biblical/Christian theology and pagan natural piety. Both interlink with each other like archetype and reform or like the basis of creation and the coronation of salvation.

10 The common rite with water binds together

The rites of initiation almost always involve water in the various religions. For the moment, let us ignore the question of whether this is in fact holy water, as for example in baptism in the Catholic Church, or whether, as in most Protestant denominations, a normal, everyday water is used. The person to be baptised is sprinkled with this water or even submerged in this water, usually in the name of God, the God of the trinity, and thereby becomes a member of a community of salvation in a church. Conscious participation in a rite of water creates a shared identity within this group.

⁵ Larry Paul Jones, *The symbol of water in the gospel of John* (= *Journal for the study of the New Testament* supplement series 145) (Sheffield 1997) 255.

⁶ Ebd., 225.

⁷ Ebd., 230: "Water symbolizes Jesus himself. He is the one who can end all thirst".

⁸ Ebd., 238.

11 Point: All human beings have a right to their own holy water

This refers to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its statements about freedom of religion and freedom to practice one's religion. Article 18 from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion". This includes "teaching, practice, worship, and observance" of religion also in dealings with water.

12 What about normal water?

Most religions lay claim to a certain competence of interpretation with respect to the everyday and to the scientific areas. Within the religious world water is understood to be a part of creation, a gift to humanity, not just as economic capital which only needs to be administered. All of this has definite consequences for the administration and the economics of water.

12.1 Water is there for everyone

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 22: "Everyone ... is entitled to ... through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organisation and resources of each State, the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality". Water, being indispensable for life, is covered by these rights and has become more and more dependent on this international cooperation. In a way, you can see in the historical perspective a secularised version of the Christian love of one's neighbour. This is also true for dealings with water resources. Other religions also are acquainted with similar rules of behaviour.

12.2 Even the technological dealings with water change the value of water (as anthropologically defined)

Because human beings move in varying cultural stages - however this does not mean that all non-Western cultures first have to go along with every nonsense of the West - and because all people move in varying cultures, their attitude toward water therefore also varies. Especially in cultures dominated by sensitive, religious ideas, the technocratic systematic methods using planning and calculation - instead of relationships and intuitions - are seen as a brutal approach to something which human beings did not create, with which, however, they deal as if they were the supreme creators of all things. I can understand when many people who did not grow up with the Western culture have the feeling that this is a cold and unkind way to act and therefore regard the water that results from such a treatment as dead water⁹.

Even the circumstance of whether water has to be taken from cold, metal, mechanical devices or is scooped up with the cupped hand changes the water, at least changes the perspective of people to this water. The fact that these feelings are generally given a religious interpretation shows simultaneously how closely piety is bound to its archaic perceptions and attitudes and that is indeed not a projection or mere wishful thinking¹⁰.

⁹ Cf. Mubabinge Bilolo, *La religion africaine face au défi du christianisme et de la techno-science: Présence Africaine* (1981) no. 119, 29-47.

¹⁰ For example: Most of my time I live in Austria. I say that there is a difference between eating a cinnamon roll made by hand by a baker and eating one that has been produced in a bakery factory. Test it yourselves! Perhaps you can also taste the difference. If you cannot believe my claim, make the blind taste test. Put on a

This, however, does not mean that a rational, responsible treatment of water is impossible. But it will also always be necessary to leave people certain niches, where they can experience more intense human relationships to nature, water, air and other precious riches of this Earth. It would be very wrong to eliminate human capacities with regard to treatment of water. The realm of experience, as defined by anthropology, belongs to the primary or secondary intelligence, whereas technocratic science and mentality are farther removed from the human experience. Naturally these abstractions, and they do not claim to be anything else, can offer solutions to problems which human intuition in its limitations cannot discover.

Maybe I can explain what I mean when I tell you what I experienced in the three years I lived in Rome. If you want a refreshing drink of water or water for an excellent minestrone soup, you do not get it from the technologically produced water out of the faucet which gives you such an intensive blast of chlorine that your eyes begin to water. Who can stand that? Rather, you go to the old Roman water pipes that the popes kept in good repair through the centuries. For newcomers to Rome this water can be a problem, as diarrhoea and other stomach disorders can result from various little creatures swimming around in these old pipes. But after living there for a while, you begin to appreciate this refreshing water travelling through over 30 kilometres of ancient trenches from the mountains to the city. And this is only one example from the area of drinking water, which, however, can be transferred well to religious practice with respect to water.

In conclusion

To be perfectly clear: Water is there for everyone - and if not, then it should be made available to all people, very simply for religious reasons. Water is something that human beings did not create, but rather it is something which all human beings and all living creatures should have available.

If you create a special relationship to water, then you are already within a context of a relationship which is not dissimilar to the religious. You feel a certain connection to water, a relationship with something that in its Latin roots "religio" means relationship or bond. This is not necessarily religion, but perhaps a preliminary step in that direction. Here is where contemporary, esoteric understanding can come in.

For some, this exquisite wetness might be understood as the gift of a great, giving God, the God who lets rain fall on all, whether good or evil. For most people in this world water - whether as a spring or even as an ocean - is related to God or to one of many deities. Just as God lets the rain fall on all of us, it is incumbent upon us human beings to make sure that water is available to all people.

It would behoove human beings to adopt something of this generous attitude.

We dare not forget that water is also the force of chaos¹¹. In the beginning, in various stories of creation, water was "tohuwabohu", Hebraic for "complete chaos". The biblical story of Noah and the great flood also shows that human beings cannot dominate the waters¹².

blindfold and try to determine a difference. However, sight and appearances also play an outstanding role with respect to water.

¹¹ Cf. Harald Haarmann, *Geschichte der Sintflut. Auf den Spuren der frühen Zivilisationen* (München 2003).

¹² Peter J. Harland, *The value of human life. A study of the story of the flood (Genesis 6-9)* (Leiden – New York – Köln 1996); Florentino García Martínez, *Interpretations of the flood* (Leiden – Boston – Köln 1999).

However, people need to make an effort to deal with water. For this I am grateful for your skill, expertise and continuing research.