

“Why, then, do you not give thanks?”

WATER... A SACRED SYMBOL IN THE WORLD'S FAITH TRADITIONS

Adapted from material written by Paula Abrams, info@thewaterpage.com

Water has a central place in the practices and beliefs of many religions for two main reasons. Firstly, water cleanses. Water washes away impurities and pollutants; it can make an object look as good as new and wipe away any signs of previous defilement. Water not only purifies objects for ritual use, but can make a person clean, externally or spiritually, ready to come into the presence of worship. Secondly, water is a primary building block of life. Without water there is no life, yet water has the power to destroy as well as to create. The significance of water manifests itself differently in different religions and beliefs, but it is these two qualities of water that underlie its place in our cultures and faiths.

Bahá'í Faith

For the Baha'i Faith, respect for creation in all its beauty and diversity is important, and water is a key element of creation. The Baha'is place great importance on agriculture and the preservation of the ecological balance of the world. Water is a fundamental resource for agriculture. It is essential to the functioning of all ecological communities and plays a key role in the life support systems of the planet. Water is essential to life itself, which is why it is so often used in spiritual symbolism.

Christianity

Almost all Christian churches or sects have an initiation ritual (baptism) involving the use of water. Baptism has its origins in the symbolism of the Israelites being led by Moses out of slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea and from the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. After Jesus' resurrection, he commanded his disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19-20). Baptism is a symbol of liberation from the oppression of sin that separates us from God. It is believed that baptism does not in itself cleanse one from sin, but is rather a public declaration of one's belief and faith in Christ and a sign of welcome into the Church. The Catholic Church,

however, believes that a real change occurs at baptism—it is more than just symbolism—it is at baptism that Catholics believe that the stain of original sin is removed from the individual.

Hinduism

Water in Hinduism has a special place because water is believed to have spiritually-cleansing powers. To Hindus all water is sacred, especially rivers, and there are seven sacred rivers: the Ganges, Yamuna, Godavari, Sarasvati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri. Although Hinduism encompasses so many different beliefs, most Hindus share the importance of striving to attain purity and avoiding pollution. This relates to both physical cleanliness and spiritual well-being.

Islam

In Islam, water is important for cleansing and purifying. Muslims must be ritually pure before approaching God in prayer. Some mosques have a courtyard with a pool of clear water in the centre, but in most mosques the ablutions are found outside the walls. Fountains symbolizing purity are also sometimes found in mosques. In Islam, ritual purity (called *tahara*) is required before carrying out religious duties, especially *salat* (worship).

Judaism

In Judaism, ritual washing is intended to restore or maintain a state of ritual purity and its origins can be found in the Torah. These ablutions can be washing of the hands and the feet, or total immersion which must be done in “living water”—the sea, a river, a spring or in a *mikveh* (the ritual bath). The ritual washing of hands is performed before and after meals and on many other occasions. In ancient times ablutions were practiced by priests and converts to Judaism as part of the initiation rites. Priests had to wash their hands and feet before taking part in Temple services.

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Aboriginal

The Karajá people who live on the banks of the Araguaia River in central Brazil tell the following creation story. It has been adapted by Scarboro missionary Fr. Ron MacDonell from the Portuguese version found in the Mensageiro (Messenger) magazine (Jan/Feb 2004) dedicated to the service of indigenous peoples.

“In the beginning, the Supreme Being, Kanaciúé, created the Karajá people. They lived as aruanã fish in the waters of the river. They did not know about plants or animals, nor about the sun or the moon. The Karajá were immortal and lived very happily.

However, they faced a constant temptation. At the bottom of the river was a bright, luminous hole. The Creator had prohibited them from entering the hole, under pain of losing their immortality. The Karajá would swim around it, admiring its brilliant light, which shone on their many-coloured scales. Yet however much they tried to look through the hole, the bright light prevented them from seeing the other side.

One day a daring Karajá violated the taboo and entered the hole, arriving on the sandy banks of the Araguaia River. He was amazed at the beauty of the river and the jungle, the birds and the animals, and the hot sun. He stayed all day and into the night, enthralled by the light of the moon and the stars. In the morning, he returned to the watery depths and told his companions about the beauty of the world he discovered. The Karajá decided to ask Kanaciúé, the Creator, to be allowed to live in the other world. He agreed, but warned them that they would lose their immortality. The Karajá passed through the hole of light, and ever since then, they have lived in the earthly paradise they found on the banks of the Araguaia River.”



Shinto is Japan's indigenous religion and is based on the veneration of the *kami* (deities believed to inhabit mountains, trees, rocks, springs and other natural phenomenon). Worship of the *kami* always begins with the act of purification with water. Inside all sacred shrines are troughs for ritual washing.

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