

An Enquiry into Water from an Inter-religious, Inter-cultural and Inter-disciplinary Perspective

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Introduction

Water holds ancient symbolic meanings dealing with the subconscious and depth of knowledge. Water contains all the mysteriousness of the unknown. Who can explore the murky depths of the ocean? Who can predict what to expect there. No wonder even the very experienced oceanic explorers are overwhelmed by their findings from the deep. No doubt, water holds endless mystery to humanity as it represents that which is definitely there, but cannot be seen.

Water as a Womb symbol

The symbolism of water has a universal connotation of **purity and fertility**. Symbolically, it is often viewed as the source of life itself as narrated in countless creation myths in which life emerges from primordial waters. Albert Szent-Gyorgyi has put it eloquently: “Water is life’s mater and matrix, mother and medium. There is no life without water.”

Water has furthermore been known to be a womb symbol: an emblem of birth, fertility and feminine-ness. This association comes from a variety of ancient flood myths and from ‘water springs life’ concept.

In Greek philosophy, water was believed to be the original substance that all things were made from. The sharp-eyed ancient Greeks understood the power of transition water holds. From liquid, to solid, to vapor - water is the epitomal symbol for metamorphosis and philosophical recycling.

The Native Americans considered water to be a symbol of life and linked the symbol to many creation myths. And for the ancient Egyptians their adored Nile river is akin to the birth canal of their existence.

Philosophical Perspective

Water is an intangible element of life and we interact with it each and every day. What is the water we usually see falling down from the gray sky, the one we see flowing out of the tap, and the one we know flowing strongly in great rivers communicating to the human family? Water is simply harmonizing itself

with the law of nature. It entrusts itself fully to God. Surrender is one of the strong messages from the flowing water.¹

right philosophy of life can be learned from true contemplation of water. Water is shapeless and formless and is pure in its original form. The sparkling water can challenge persons to be transformers and givers². It is graceful and cool and has the unique quality to adapt to any element and flow to any corner. Water goes by the path of least resistance, allowing the flow to be the guide. John O'Donohue has aptly summarized: "I'd love to live the way a river flows carried by the surprise of its own unfolding."

Water Commons

Water is a global issue, and it affects all of us. Access to clean water is not just a human rights issue. It's an environmental issue, an animal welfare issue, a sustainability issue. On July 28, 2010, the United Nations General Assembly declared that access to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation is a human right, though 900 million people don't have access to safe water and 2.6 billion don't have access to basic sanitation.

Control over water implies control over people, and that water privatization is the number one instrument of control. In the face of the ongoing privatization of water, today, there is a growing request to defend the idea of a water commons³. And the question is: can we connect a water commons to community ownership? Water is a powerful means to keep philosophy actively involved in public life. It can connect philosophy to everyday life. In this way philosophy can significantly involve with public policy.

Water is a key to how we live in our World. The misuse of water has resulted in the rise in sea levels leading to several beach erosion, coastal destabilization, added infrastructure expenses and a suite of building codes and regulations designed to anticipate the impacts of future global warming and subsidence. These symptoms of stress inform us that our current mode of life is not the right way to live and it is not sustainable. In his *Negative Dialectics* (p.364) Adorno says that shock is what compels us to philosophize and to throw light on truth. This is a worthwhile process and why not initiate it by returning to our history of the way we have dealt with water? From a careful analysis of water we come to a new history of ecology.

A New History of Ecology

The philosophy underpinning state/nation building through the domination of nature is a risky one. Irrigated water development is now seen as buying national prosperity and security at the cost of disastrous ecological damage. We have slowly come to accept that excessive regulation of the rivers for human use is the fundamental cause of the ecological damage we see all around us. The stark conflict between the widely different views of water and nature informs the public debate over the water politics we are currently living in different parts of the world.

Water is the ecological basis of all life in the world. It is important to defend water as a shared public good. It is only by viewing water as a commons, and precisely from the ecological perspective of water, that we are able to identify the hidden costs of irrigated agriculture. The ecological perspective when taken into consideration will propose an alternative principle for resource allocation to the market's efficiency principle. Water scarcity has become a market opportunity for water corporations for money making by selling more water. Dr. Karl Maret predicts that water will become the currency in the new century. Meanwhile researchers of water mysteries struggle for funding.

Psychological Perspective

Water produces amazing psychological effects. According to a recent study conducted by **John Bargh** and Idit Shalev of Yale University, **physical warmth can actually compensate for social isolation**. They discovered that people “subconsciously self-comfort against loneliness through the use of warm baths and showers.” Laura Schenck M.A. opines that this is the first study to show that “we subconsciously administer our own tonic of physical warmth to compensate for social rejection.”⁴

Above and beyond the physical and mental benefits, bathing in a water fountain provides psychological well-being too. When getting to bath in a water fountain, there is a sense of relaxation and rejuvenation that oozing water makes possible for the physical body. The experience of a refreshing feeling leads to a sense of calm and peace. All other sounds and noises are masked by the sound that springs from a water fountain. This in general leads to a stress-free mental state and psychological contentedness⁵. Hot water is a good means. It relaxes the joints while increasing circulation to reduce muscle spasms. Richard Kradin, M.D. affirms: “Relaxation in a warm bath might have similar effects to other forms of relaxation protocols. It really needs to be studied.”⁶

Study of water from a psychological perspective has helped to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the human person. For example “Piaget’s work on children’s intellectual development owed much to his early studies of water snails” (Satterly, 1987:622) .

Religious Value of Water

Water is attributed important symbolic and ceremonial properties in almost all the world’s major religions.

In the bible we read: “The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters” Genesis 1:2.

The Koran states, “From water we have made all things.” Water plays an essential part in Islam.

Buddha gave little significance to water and his teachings mainly emphasized the “mental” aspect of world enlightenment.

The Hindus consider all water as sacred, in particular rivers. It is an essential element in practically all rites and ceremonies. Water is a sacred element in Hinduism and The Hindus believe that the Ganges River (in India) is sacred. Its waters are used in puja (worship) and if possible a sip is given to the dying. Water is utilized in Buddhist funerals, caused to flow till overflowing into a bowl placed in front of the monks and the dead body. In Christianity water is used in various rites including baptism and washing. In Islam, water is used for ablutions. Small pools of water are found within or just outside all mosques because worshippers must be pure for prayers. 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. ”In the Qoran, the ideas of Mercy and water in particular rain are in a sense inseparable. With them must be included the idea of Revelation, tanzÄ«l, which means literally a sending down. The Revelation and the rain are both ‘sent down’ by the All-Merciful and both are described throughout the Qoran as ‘mercy,’ and both are spoken of as ‘life-giving.’⁷

In almost all religions water is believed to have spiritually cleansing powers. Pilgrimage is very important to believers of all religions. Holy places are usually located on the banks of rivers in Hinduism. Funeral grounds are always located near a river. Every temple has a pond near it and devotees are supposed to take a bath before entering the temple.

In Judaism ritual washing is proposed to restore or maintain a state of ritual purity and its origins can be found in the Torah. These ablutions can be washing the hands, the hands and the feet, or total immersion which must be carried out in 'living water', i.e. the sea, a river, a spring or in a mikveh. The ritual washing of hands is performed before and after meals and on many other occasions.

The Red Sea is noteworthy in Jewish history because its parting by Moses was a miraculous event at the beginning of the Exodus which enabled the Israelites to escape from the Egyptian army that was chasing them. The Israelites experienced God's love for them as He allowed Moses to part the sea so that they could walk safely to the other side on dry land, while the Egyptians drowned as the sea came together again.

The connotations of water in Zoroastrianism are a combination of its purifying properties and its importance as a basic life element. Zoroastrians believe that pollution is evil and that water, when pure, is sacred. Water is sacred itself and so must be kept from being polluted although water is used in purification rites and rituals. The blessedness of water is very important to Zoroastrians. In midsummer the holy day of Haurvatat is celebrated. Characteristic of the day is people pray and make offerings by the seashore or any natural water. In daily life Haurvatat is observed by keeping water unpolluted and being temperate and self-disciplined. Haurvatat is the embodiment of what salvation means to the individual.

The Taoist tradition considers water as an aspect of wisdom. The concept that is highlighted is that water takes on the form in which it is held and moves in the path of least resistance. And therefore the symbolic meaning of water speaks of a higher wisdom all humanity can aspire to acquire.

New Life

In the New Testament, water symbolizes a number of things. For example: new life, becoming a child of God "Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God"(John 3:5). Here the reference is to baptism by immersion in water. Other texts that will shed more light on this theme are: Romans 6:1-4, Acts 22:16, Acts 2:38, Romans 6:1-4, Acts 2:47, Col. 1:16; Gal. 3:26-27, Ephesians 1:21-22.

G. Burge (1987:97-99) comments that the Johannine Gospel is the only New Testament writing to mention living water. The metaphor of the living water illustrates two things:

- The valueless institution which Jesus replaces in his person.

- The newness Jesus brings.

A careful analysis of the creative and dynamic dialogue between Jesus and the woman at the well (John 4:7-30), reveals yet another significance of water. Jesus, as their dialogue progresses communicates to the woman something she has never heard before: “Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.” The woman at the well responds with a profound request: “Sir, give me this water, so I will not be thirsty nor come all the way here to draw.”

The Word of God

What is this water which symbolized eternal life? It was the Word of God which Jesus taught the woman at the well. The Word of God is the pure water for which our souls thirst. This is beautifully expressed by the Hebrew writer: “let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:22).

Water is a symbol of salvation for the Christian. Water is a sign of God’s care and concern, God’s providence, God’s Word, God’s salvation. Although there is no mystical or magical power in water, it stands as a symbol for these things. The rainbow which is made up of water reminds us of God’s unfailing and unconditional love.

A New Relationship

It is a life lived in relationship with God. Those who “drink” Jesus’ teaching will have the Spirit (living water) welling up in their hearts as Jesus promised the Samaritan woman in Jn 4:13-14. The water from Jacob’s well could certainly extend life for a while, but the living water from Jesus would issue into life everlasting which, according to the Johannine perspective refers to life lived in relationship with God. Such a life is the basis for healthy relationship with self and others.

Conclusion

In making this comparative study of water and its rich significance in the major religions, cultures and in philosophy and psychology, we learn to appreciate the unique strong points of our own traditions and to see that each tradition has its own outstanding features.

If we wish to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue and to benefit everyone, we need eventually to learn the entire spectrum of use, significance and symbolism of water in various religious traditions and how they all fit together so that we are able to teach people of different inclinations and capacities.

Inter-religious Implications

The context of dialogue is the arena of life, the daily struggle for bread, clothing, rest, justice, peace and love. We meet each other as fellow-travelers in the above mentioned concerns of life. Water being an element of common life can very well facilitate dialogue of life.

Reflections on water will help to bring into inter-religious dialogue women's experiences, voices and theoretical views. "Women who engage in inter-religious dialogue have the enriching experience of encountering sisters from all places. They are able to acquire a new self-knowledge born out of viewing themselves from a perspective of such a diversity."⁸ The feminine contribution will help:

- To assume responsibility to nurture life more consciously
- To uphold the sacredness of life at all times
- To get to know deeply the spiritual treasures of each religion
- To stand by as persons and as communities

By exploring the meaning and significance of water in various religions from an inter-religious, inter-cultural and interdisciplinary perspective a larger and more coherent picture emerges which opens the view and the inter-relatedness of different themes. The symbolic description of water has genuine potential and deserves to be explored and studied further. Water definitely has functional and inter-religious implications too. From an inter-religious and interdisciplinary perspective with a metaphoric reference to water we bring to the forefront certain characteristics of water; its attributes like freshness, pureness, innocence, graciousness, tenderness, peace and tranquility. Whether in the fabulous bathhouses of Rome, along the sacred shores of the Ganges, or at the holy spring of Zamzam in Mecca, humanity has sought for millennia the healing powers of water for spiritual, psychological and physical growth.

End Notes

- 1 Cf. <http://thesoulsanctuary.us/2009/05/the-philosophy-of-water/> (accessed on 18/11/2011).
- 2 Cf. <http://marketingdeviant.com/water-philosophy/> (accessed on 18/11/2011).
- 3 <http://www.sauer-thompson.com/archives/philosophy/000070.html> (accessed on 18/11/2011).
- 4 <http://lauraschenck.com/psychological-studies/warm-water-alleviates-the-pain-of-loneliness> (accessed on 20/11/2011).

- 5 Cf. <http://www.healthster.co.uk/psychological-effects-of-water-fountain/>(accessed on 20/11/2011).
- 6 <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199907/water-world>(accessed on 20/11/2011).
- 7 Martin Lings, *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 3. (Summer, 1968) © World Wisdom, Inc.
- 8 Maura O'Neill, *Women Speaking Women Listening Women in Inter-religious Dialogue*, Orbis books, Mary Knoll, New York, 1990, p.102.