

Water Symbolism in the Religious Life of Man

Introduction

One of the very significant truths that Comparative History of Religion has been instrumental in spotlighting in the recent past is the important role played by symbols in the religious life of man. With an enormous fund of evidence at its disposal this discipline has proceeded to show how the many symbolic elements and actions utilized by man in his cultic life were not more or less indifferent phenomena forcefully impregnated with a meaning for which they were in no way prepared, but rather quite meaningful in themselves. If particular objects and actions, such as fire and offerings, oil and anointings, water and blessings had a definite meaning in the religious life of man, it could only be because these objects and actions already possessed a natural symbolism of their own, a particular meaning proper to them before they were taken up and employed by man for translating his innermost thoughts and experiences into divine-human relational categories.¹

The meaning which water has had for religious man, for centuries is both rich and varied. Indeed, perhaps none of the other phenomena used in divine worship is so pregnant with meaning and rich in symbolism. The mysterious depths of the ocean, the refreshing coolness of the forest stream, the terrible destructive power of the raging seas, the limpid purity of fountains, the healing powers of subterranean springs, the fertilizing and purifying roles of all waters in general, the mad rush of mountain torrents, the placid flow of the rivers of the plains, the tranquillity of lakes, the inexorable destruction and absorption of persons and possessions in the watery wastes of agitated oceans and rivers in spate—all united to conjure up before the reli-

1. Cf. E. O. James, *Comparative Religion*, (London: Methuen & Co), 1969, pp. 42ff; 78ff., G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, (New York: Harper & Row), 1963, pp. 365ff., L. Bouyer, *Rite and Man*, (London: Burns & Oates), 1963, pp. 63ff.

gious eyes of man a variety of images that served to express his experiences of the Transcendent in symbols on a basis of analogy, similarity, association and approximation. Little wonder, then, that water has played a very prominent role in the religious life of man. Indeed, psycho-analytical evidences reveal today that water is a very common archetypal image of the unconscious.² In the following pages, we shall endeavour to outline the part that water and its symbolism has played in the religions of the non-Christian, the Jewish and the Christian worlds.

As nothing at all comes into being in a meaningless state, it would have been quite logical to expect that early man should have used water in divine worship in a manner that brought out the natural symbolism inherent in its dual role as regenerative and purificatory agent. Jewish religion, blessed as it was with revelation, purified what was not in accord with its tenets and practices in non-Jewish approaches to water in the area of religion, and utilized this fertile symbol in richer ways. Christianity took up the natural symbolism contained in water and used it to make it an expression of dying to oneself in order to rise to a new life in Christ.³

Water Symbolism in the non-Christian World

One of the realities that impressed itself strongly upon the mind of religious man was the relationship between water and life. The fact that all life on earth depended upon its regular and abundant supply, the fact that water contained myriads of living creatures from the tiniest to the most gargantuan, the fact that man felt himself refreshed, reinvigorated, and renewed through immersion in its cool and limpid depths led to the conception of water as a symbol of life and the source of all existence.

Little wonder, then, that the Bhaviśyottara-purāṇa could exclaim: "Water, thou art the source of all things and of all existence"⁴; while the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa and the Vedas went on to eulogize water as the foundation of the whole world, the essence of plant life, the elixir of immortality, the promise of long life and of creative

2. Cf. C. G. Jung, *The Integration of Personality*, pp. 66ff.

3. Cf. A. Nocent, *Quaestiones de Initiatione Christiana*, (Roma: PILA), 1970, pp. 70ff.

4. Bhaviśyottara-purāṇa, 31, 14.

energy, and so on.⁵ The boundlessness of the ocean's horizon, the unfathomableness of its depths and the mysterious formlessness of its nature presented water as the "basis of every cosmic manifestation, container of all seeds, symbol of the primal substance from which all forms come and to which they will return either by their own regression or in a cataclysm. It existed at the beginning and returns at the end of every cosmic or historic cycle; it will always exist, though never alone, for water is always germinative containing the potentiality of all forms in their unbroken unity."⁶

Many are the creation accounts in Babylonian, Egyptian and Indian mythologies that speak about the initial existence of nothing but water and of the subsequent emergence of all living beings, including gods, from the primeval waters. Thus, the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*, describes how before anything came into being, only the chaotic waters existed from which everything that took its origin.⁷ The *Chândogya Upanishad* says: "This water on assuming different forms, becomes this earth, this sky, this heaven, the mountains, gods and man, cattle, birds, herbs and trees, all beasts, down to worms, midges and ants."⁸ And the *Mahābhārata* declares: "For the preservation of all creatures water was first produced—water which is the breath of all creatures, by which they grow and forsaken by which they die; by it all things are covered. The earth, the mountains, the clouds, and other material objects, all these things must be understood as aqueous (*varuna*) because the waters supported them."⁹

At times one and the same verbal symbol is used to designate a number of realities centering on life. Thus, in Sumerian, "a" means water, but also sperm, conception and generation; and a spring is called a "mouth", the "Muttermund" of the earth from which a river emerges.¹⁰ Among the Arabs water is so closely related to life

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5. Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, III, 6, 1, 7; IV, 4, 3, 15; VI, 8, 2, 2; XII, 5, 2, 14; Rig Veda, I, 23, 19ff; X, 19ff; Atharva Veda, II, 3, 6; VI, 91, 3;
 6. M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, (London Sheed & Ward), 1958, p. 188.
 7. I, 1-5.
 8. VII, 10, 1.
 9. XII, 6805.
 10. Cf. F.W. Dillistone, *Christianity and Symbolism*, (London Collins), 1955, pp. 185f., M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, pp. 189f.

that the same word is used to refer to water as well as to semen.¹¹ The frequency and eagerness with which people even today flock to springs, fountains and mineral waters testifies to mankind's belief in the healing and life-giving properties of water.

Again, water is a symbol of purification and regeneration. When something is immersed in water, not a trace of it remains. It disappears, often for good. It ceases, as it were, to exist, at least in the precise state in which it was before its immersion. Plunging into water cleanses a man, purifies him, makes him new.¹² Immersion, therefore, became the equivalent, at the human level, of death, while reappearance from the depths of the waters became a symbol of rebirth.¹³ "Almost all the traditions of deluges are bound up with the idea of humanity returning to the water whence it had come and the establishment of a new era and a new humanity."¹⁴ The fact of man's disappearance into the watery abysses are attributed to the sins of humanity. Mankind, however, does not perish utterly. It appears again, renewed, transformed, reborn. Nature too takes on a new appearance full of vitality and fresh growth after an inundation.

Water also purifies and regenerates because it nullifies the past and restores the integrity of the dawn of things. Ablution purifies man from birth-tabus, cleanses him from the defilement of illnesses which are themselves considered to be the result of sin, removes the contamination incurred through contact with the dead, destroys sin, stops mental and physical decay, and removes dangerous potencies contracted through contact with infected objects and persons. In worship, it was frequently and abundantly used as a very expressive symbol of death to a life of imperfection and sin, and rebirth to a new life of virtue and holiness.

Water Symbolism in the Jewish World

In the Jewish religious world, we find water possessing all the positive aspects of its symbolism among the non-Israelites. It is

11. Cf. F.W. Dillistone, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

12. Cf. J. Scheftelowitz, *Die Sündentilgung durch Wasser*, in *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 17 (1914) 353-412.

13. Cf. F. Heiler, *Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion*, (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer), 1979, pp. 39ff; 186ff.

14. M. Eli de, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

a symbol of fertility and life, of purity and cleansing, of birth and death, and of several other realities as well. It, however, always remains a creature subject to the dominion and benevolence of God.

True, even the Bible speaks of the waters that existed in the beginning.¹⁵ But it is always God who presides over its activities and who commands it to do his bidding as when he said: "Let the waters swarm of living creatures."¹⁶ Water becomes the means by which God manifests his benevolence or his displeasure with mankind. The Bible makes several references to the symbolic role played by water in the history of salvation. It is an expressive symbol of God's blessings to a people who knew only too well the desperate situation they would find themselves in, in times of drought. If his people are faithful to his commands, God gives them rain in due season and in abundance.¹⁷ He even goes so far as to work wonders for them drawing water from solid rock.¹⁸ If, on the contrary, they remain obdurate and stubborn, preferring their own whims to the dictates of God, the divine wrath will turn the heavens into iron and make the earth as hard as bronze,¹⁹ punishing the disobedient with aridity and dryness.²⁰

Many are the passages in Holy Writ where water symbolizes life. God himself is pictured as the fountain of living waters.²¹ His grace and peace are likened to refreshing waters.²² In a similar fashion, the mouth of the just is said to be a source of life.²³ The just man who is faithful to the counsels of God is likened to a flourishing palm-tree by the side of a life-giving stream.²⁴ More than this, water is used to symbolize the benedictions of God,²⁵ and especially the incomparable blessings of the Messianic times.²⁶

15. Cf. Gn 1:2ff.

16. Gn 1:20.

17. Cf. Dt 28:1ff.

18. Cf. Ex 17:6ff.

19. Cf. Lv 26:19ff; Dt 28:33.

20. Cf. Is 5:15.

21. Cf. Jr 2:13; 17:13.

22. Cf. Ps 22:2.

23. Cf. Pr 10:1.

24. Cf. Pss 1:3; 63:2.

25. Cf. Pss 17:8; 23:2.

26. Cf. Is 11:3-9; 32:1-2; 41:18; 44:3-4; Jr 31:9; Ezk 47:1ff; Jl 3:18; etc.

In contrast to life and the blessings of God which water symbolizes, the same element is used by Jewish writers to represent the mortal, the transitory, the perishable and also sudden destruction. Running water is a symbol of that which passes away never to return.²⁷ The same idea is expressed by water that is spilt on the earth and cannot be recovered again. It symbolizes mortality.²⁸ During the rainy season, rushing torrents in their headlong plunge down mountain sides are images of the march of invading armies whose onslaught nothing can withstand,²⁹ or of divine wrath,³⁰ or of personal misery and desolation,³¹ of man's ardent longing for God, or also of the torments suffered by souls separated from God.³² The impetuous rush of waters in spate are symbols of danger.³³

Water has also been used to castigate evil elements purging among the people of God, as during the time of the deluge, or to protect his chosen ones against their enemies as during the crossing of the Red Sea. This last event was also a symbol of God's victory over Rahab, the sea-monster that symbolized Egypt.³⁴ Later on, its re-enactment at the moment of the initiation of Jewish proselytes into the Jewish community through a baptismal ceremony was used to symbolize Jahweh's victory over the forces of evil, the deliverance of his chosen ones from spiritual tyranny and their admission into the ranks of his elect.³⁵

Finally, mention must be made of the many purification rites enjoined on the Jewish community and especially on priests and levites prior to their taking part in divine worship – a rite which evidently was meant to signify interior purity which every one approaching an all-holy God was bound to have.³⁶ Not only persons, but sacrificial victims too had to be ritually purified before being

27. Cf. Jb 11:16.

28. Cf. II S 14:14; Ps 58:8.

29. Cf. Jr 47:2; Is 8:7ff; 17:12; 28:2.

30. Cf. Os 5:10; Ps 88:17ff.

31. Cf. Ps 87:18.

32. Witness the case of Dives and Lazarus – Lk 16:24.

33. Cf. Pss 18:17; 32:6; 69:3; 125:4ff; Lm 3:45.

34. Cf. Is 15:10.

35. Cf. J. Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*, London (Darton, Longman & Todd), 1956, p. 88.

36. Cf. Ex 30:17ff; 40:31ff; Nb 19:7.

presented to the Lord.³⁷ Sacred libations³⁸ were symbolic of man's complete dependence on God.

Thus, we see how the Jewish religion took up the natural symbolism of water utilized by the non-Israelite world, purged it of whatever was unacceptable to it, and employed it herself in her cultic life giving it at the same time not only a greater variety of meaning but a sublimer one as well.

Water Symbolism in the Christian World

In the Christian religion, the natural symbolism of water is taken up and given a higher meaning when it is instituted as the symbolic sign of rebirth in Christ. The immemorial and ecumenical symbolism of immersion in water as an instrument of purification and regeneration is given very rich meanings.

St. Paul tells us very eloquently how baptism becomes the chief instrument of spiritual regeneration, immersion in the water of baptism symbolizing burial with Christ. "You have been taught," he writes, "that when we were baptized in Christ Jesus we were baptized in his death; in other words, when we were baptized we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life. If in union with Christ we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his resurrection."³⁹

Jesus himself affirms that he is the source of living waters and that anyone who comes to him will never thirst nor ever die.⁴¹ The Fathers of the Church wrote very extensively and beautifully about the many symbolic relationships between water and baptism. Thus, St John Chrysostom wrote: "It (baptism) represents death and burial, life and resurrection. When we plunge our head into water as into a tomb, the old man is immersed, wholly buried: when we come out of

37. Cf. Lv 1:9, 13, 21; 9:14.

38. Cf. I S 7:6.

39. Rm 6:4ff.

40. II C 5:17. For the symbolic relationship between baptism and the paschal mystery of Christ, see, T. Pereira, *ofm. cap.*, *The Paschal Mystery and the 'Ordo Baptismi Parvulorum'*, in *Melita Theologica*, 24 (1972) 15-30; 25 (1973) 48-59.

41. Cf. Jn 4:10; 13:7.

the water, the new man appears at that moment."⁴² St. Cyril of Jerusalem reminds the Catechumens of the great transformation that they will soon be undergoing when he says: "Bearing your sins, you go down into the water; but the calling down of grace seals your soul and does not permit that you afterwards be swallowed up by the fearsome dragon. You go down dead in your sins, and you come up made alive in righteousness."⁴³ Tertullian in his turn observes: The water was the first to produce what has life, so as to prevent our being astonished when one day it came to give birth to life in baptism. In forming man himself, God used water to complete his work. Why should not that which produces life from the earth also give the life of heaven? What used of old to heal the body now heals the soul; what gives health in time gains salvation in eternity."⁴⁴

There was much more that water signified in the Christian world, such as danger and trials. Like the flood, the work of Christ too brings both judgement and salvation to men.⁴⁵ Christ himself referred to the lashing waters that brought destruction to the house built on sand,⁴⁶ while his act of walking upon the sea was symbolic of his victory over the powers of evil.⁴⁷ In Christianity, too, we find water symbolizing purity and health. Jesus made pointed references to this when he directed beneficiaries of his many saving actions to go and wash themselves, thus signifying that they were not only cleansed thereby of bodily illnesses but of their spiritual uncleannesses as well.⁴⁸ And the Letter to the Ephesians speaks of Christ sacrificing himself for the Church, "to make her holy. He made her clean by washing her in water with a form of words, so that when he took her to himself she would be glorious, with no speck or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and faultless."⁴⁹

42. *Homily on the Gospel acc. to St. John*, 25, 2.

43. *Catechetical Lectures*, 3, 12.

44. *On Baptism*, 3-4. Cf. also Hermes the Pastor, *Parables*, 9, 16, 2; Justin the Martyr, *Apology I*, 61; St. Ireneus, *Against Heresies*, 3, 17, 2.

45. Cf. Mt 24:37; II P 2:4ff; 3:3ff.

46. Cf. Mt 6:15ff.

47. Cf. Mk 6:49.

48. Cf. Jn 5:1ff.

49. Eph 5:26f.

The Rite of Baptism takes up these rich realities symbolized by water and utilizes them to portray baptism as the font of spiritual life for many through the power of the Holy Spirit. "In baptism we use your gift of water", says the Rite, "which you have made a rich symbol of the grace you give us in this sacrament."⁵⁰ The lowering of the paschal candle into the baptismal font during the Easter Vigil service is a fertility gesture—that underlies the fact that it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that men are born to a new life in God. The words that accompany this ritual action read as follows: "We ask you, Father, with your Son to send the Holy Spirit upon the waters of this font. May all who are buried with Christ in the death of baptism rise also with him to newness of life. We ask this through Christ our Lord."⁵¹ Water as a symbol of destruction and construction, of death and life, is referred to in "the waters of the great flood you made a sign of the waters of baptism, that make an end of sin and a new beginning of goodness."⁵² Water as a symbol of freedom and of adopted sonship is expressed through pointing to the waters of the Red Sea and those of the river Jordan which were events that centred on God's special choice and manifestation of his chosen people in adoptive sonship and of his own Son through public acknowledgement. Also mentioned in the baptismal rite is the water that flowed from the side of Christ that gave birth to the Community of the Redeemed.⁵³

Conclusion

In this brief survey of the symbolism of water in the religious life of man, we see how Christ did not destroy the natural symbolism contained in it but took it up, ennobled it and made it the sign of a supernatural reality. In this, Jesus gave us a glimpse of his infinite wisdom and merciful comprehension of man's frailty which comes to the knowledge of spiritual things by starting from what he sees, what he touches, and what he does. When Jesus wished to reveal his saving presence to the Samaritan woman, he took as his starting point her own daily action of going at meal-time to draw water from Jacob's well.⁵⁴ When he wished to manifest himself as the Bread of Life he

50. *Rite of Baptism*, Ranchi (Catholic Press), 1970, no. 54.

51. *Revised Roman Missal*, p. 201.

52. *Rite of Baptism*, no. 54.

53. Cf. *Ibid*;

54. Cf. Jn 4:7ff.

commenced his discourse with the miraculous meal that had fed the great crowd in the desert: "You seek me, not because you have seen signs, but because you ate your fill of bread.⁵⁵ When he wished to call Peter and Andrew to be his disciples he took up their profession of fisherman so that he may extend his invitation to them: "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."⁵⁶ And when he wished to teach men how they could be purified of their sins, how they could die to themselves and be reborn to a new life, he made use of the rich symbolism of water, the symbolism of purification, of life and of death.

In order to ascend to the spiritual, one must often begin with the material; and in order to rise to the supernatural one must almost invariably commence with the natural, for their relationship is obvious. Not to understand this fundamental law of divine pedagogy which was made known to us by Jesus is to forget that earth is not heaven; that as yet we know only "as in a mirror, in an obscure manner,"⁵⁷ and that if we wish to arrive at spiritual things we ought perforce to follow the road of earthly signs and symbols.

55. Jn 6:26.

56. Mk 1:17.

57. IC 13:12.