

SACRED WATER:

Sustaining Life

A Brief Look at Our Water through the Eyes of Faith

Written by Eric Burnette for the 2009 Festival of Faiths in Louisville, Kentucky

A QUESTION:

Is water sacred?

Something sacred is something special, something set apart. It is a high standard, reserved for only those things central to our lives and culture. Faith is sacred. Life is sacred. These are clear. But what about something more mundane, more ordinary? What about water? We use all the time, even for the most menial tasks. Can it still be set apart? Can it, too, be sacred?

This is a brief look at those questions through the eyes of faith. This booklet is by no means an exhaustive account of the ways in which we use water or how it might be sacred. It is but a drop in a sea of information. But our hope is that this journey will give you many questions about water, some answers, and the desire to learn more about both. May this be but the beginning of the conversation.

THE ATTRACTION:

How are you drawn to water?

Something about water simply calls to us. We're drawn to it. We seek it out. We want to be around it; to see it, to listen to it, to be in it. It calms us and relaxes us. It makes us new.

For Brian McLaren it's the upper Potomac. Every summer the Christian writer and former pastor spends a few days fishing and hiking along the river not too far from his Maryland home. "It has become truly holy ground for me, because I just love that river and all the life sustained by it," he says. "There's no cathedral that's more sacred to me than that beautiful space."

For Kunwar Bhatnagar, the Ganges in his native India is the great holy river. "When you take a pilgrimage to the Ganges, you meet holy people," the retired University of Louisville professor of anatomy and member of the Hindu Temple of Kentucky explains. "And I was there. You have an internal sense of spirituality, which cannot be explained by words or by any other means."

Louisville Rabbi Joe Rooks Rapport also grew up worshipping near the water, in a hand-built synagogue in the woods, on a cliff overlooking Lake Superior. "When I go home, when I meditate, when I think of myself returning to the roots of my beginnings

spiritually," he says, "I always go back to that place, that cliff, that lake. That's sort of a touchstone... of the heightened spiritual awareness that led me to the rabbinism, that led me to my involvement in my religious faith."

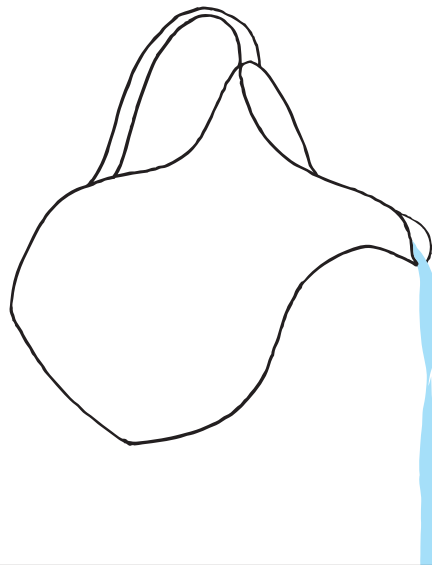
Father John Rausch likes to swim in Indian Creek, a tributary of the Rockcastle River in southeastern Kentucky. The priest, writer, and director of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia goes to a spot where a boulder sits in the path of the water and causes it to pool into a small pond. On hot days, with the water and the woods around him, he swims and thanks God for the beauty. "Water caresses you," he says. "It's like air. It's all around you. And when you're in a body of water, you can bob up and down or float... perhaps you're reminded of your time in the womb where you were surrounded by water."

In a way, the entire planet is in the womb. Christiana Peppard points out that the saline content of amniotic fluid is the same as that of the ocean. Peppard is a Yale doctoral student and religious ethicist, writing her dissertation how Western society values fresh water. She likes to look out at the horizon, where the sky and water meet, "where they bleed together, where they become indistinct,

where they seem almost to be one.” It brings to her mind the Genesis account where God separates the waters above from the waters below, with the sky in between. “I think that that’s incredibly powerful and poignant,” she says, “being encircled by water and being held... in creation by it.”

Father Joe Mitchell also explains our attraction to water in spiritual terms. Mitchell is the founder and head of the Passionists’ Earth and Spirit Center in Louisville, whose goal is to bring faith into the campaign for the Earth’s future. He sees water as one of the many “manifestations of divine presence,” inherent in the natural world God created. Mitchell paraphrases Sir Thomas Aquinas: “Because the divine could not manifest itself forth in any one form, it created a multiplicity of forms, so that what was lacking in one would be made up by the others, and the whole creation would manifest God more than any one creature could.”

Of course, our water draws us in an even more fundamental way: We can live for days without food, but not without water. Only breathing is more urgent.



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OUR DAILY WATER:

How often do you use water?

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Think for a moment about water's role in your typical morning routine.

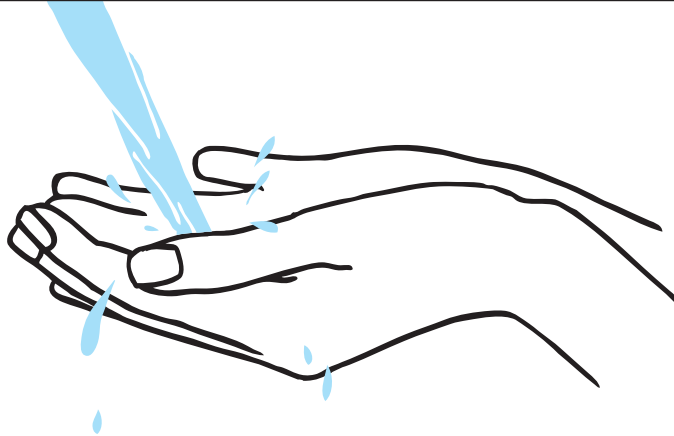
You start the day by rolling out of bed and ambling to the bathroom. Your mouth is dry, depleted of its water-based saliva after several hours without anything to drink. You flip on the light and deposit the remains of your last liquid consumption into a bowl filled with treated water. When flushed, it goes away, replaced by a bowl of clean water.

You then clean your body in a shower of hot water. The clean water comes from above and the dirty water disappears below. Water is good for cleaning, because it dissolves just about anything and carries it off in small pieces. After 10 or 15 minutes and 20 or 30 gallons, you're satisfactorily clean. You turn off the water, dry off, and get dressed. Yesterday's dirty clothes go into the laundry basket to be washed later in the week. You then walk to the kitchen refreshed and ready to begin your day.

You fix yourself a bowl of cereal or a piece of toast, made from crops grown with water. Whatever you wash it down with—milk, tea, or coffee—you're primarily drinking water. You were thirsty after several hours without anything to drink, and you feel better now. The saliva returns to your mouth, and your tongue perks up like a saguaro cactus after spring rain. Finishing your breakfast, you put your dishes in dishwasher, brush your teeth with water, and head out the door.

Although these events are small and mundane, they are not insignificant. Every morning, and indeed at all hours of the day, you interact with water in ways that change you and change your water. In each part of your morning routine, water has nourished and refreshed you. You would notice the absence of any one of these water-related tasks. And each of your actions is like a vote for how water is used and treated in our world.

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What does your faith say about water?

In the book of Genesis – the starting point for Jews and Christians – there is no separate day for the creation of water. It's simply *there*, even before God says “let there be light.” In fact, water was all there was. The Earth was “void and formless,” the book says, and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters of the deep.

During the week-long Creation, God formed the water into clouds and gathered the seas in one place and the land in another. The land was watered by springs, and God filled the land and the waters with living creatures. A river flowed through the Garden of Eden, where God formed the first man out of the dust of the ground.

In the Qur'an, God formed all living things out of water, and indeed your body needs so much water—around four pounds a day—because by volume it mostly is water. Take the hands holding this booklet. The blood coursing through your veins is almost entirely water. The muscles moving your fingers and the skin around them are mostly water. The cartilage cushioning your finger joints is mostly water. Even your bones contain a significant portion of water. Without water, “you'd be a handful of dust” even now, observes Father Mitchell.

Precisely because water is the source of all life, it is considered sacred

in Islam, says Mohammad Faghfoory, a professor in the Department of Religion at The George Washington University. Water is also sacred, he says, because “it is pure and... it has a purifying effect.” In other words, we rely on water not just to keep the dust of our body together, but also to keep our bodies clean of the dust.

Water's power to make clean is vital to many religious cleansing rituals. Kunwar Bhatnagar explains that in Hinduism, “Every worship service utilizes water. Water is used for building the deity... and for general cleanliness—external cleanliness as well as cleanliness of the mind internal.” It is this quest for the physical and spiritual cleanliness bestowed by water that leads Hindus to make pilgrimages to bathe in sacred rivers.

Likewise, Mohammad Faghfoory says that “every act of worship in Islam starts with ablution.” He explains that “each and every [ablution] is, in fact, quite a spiritual experience, because it is assumed that by purifying your body, you are going to stand before God.” Muslims perform lesser ablutions before each daily prayer by washing specific parts of the body such as the hands, head, and feet. In a similar fashion, many Catholics dip their fingers in holy water on the way into mass. “When you go into the house of God, you want to bless yourself and you want to release from your mind those things that

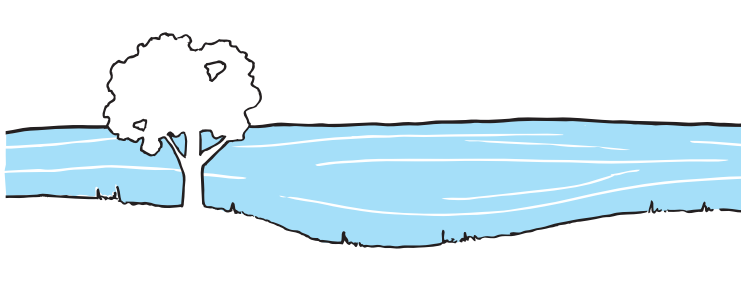
are pulling you down and allow yourself to be in the presence of God,” Father Rausch explains.

Muslims perform greater ablutions—washing the body from head to toe—following specific events such as conversion to the faith or participation in the various stages of the human life cycle. Similar events regularly lead many Jews to practice ritual immersion in sacred water, says Rabbi Rooks Rapport. In the practice known as *mikvah*, the participant is immersed in water from a constantly renewed natural source. Everything that would get in the way of contact with this “living water” is removed, from clothes to make-up to nail polish. Then, with the aid of a rabbi or rabbi’s spouse, the person repeatedly is repeatedly submerged in the water while reciting prayers specific to the occasion.

In one Gospel story, Jesus gave a new twist to the notion of “living water,” saying, “whoever drinks the water I give him will never

thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” Indeed, Christian baptism has its roots in *mikvah*. Brian McLaren explains that baptism began with a Jewish prophet called John the Baptist. John made his name by leading the repentant to leave behind their sinful lives and be made new through baptism, and Jesus himself began his three-year ministry by being baptized by John in the Jordan River.

Baptism soon became an initiation ritual into the Christian faith. Though not all baptisms are done by immersion (many involve pouring or sprinkling water on the head of the baptized), they all symbolize the washing away of one’s sins and old self. “Through baptism, we become a new creation,” says Father Rausch. “The old ways of greed and indifference are gone. The new creation is a whole life where you look after one another.”



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What is your impact on water?

As fundamental as water is to our existence, our health, and our faith, many of us have trouble answering some of the most basic questions about it: Where did it come from? What happened to it along the way? And what's in it?

Within a single cycle, most of our water comes to us from rain. When it rains, part of the water percolates below the surface, where it replenishes underground reservoirs. These underground aquifers can be tapped with pumps and wells to provide drinking water. Some of the rain runs off our roads and our roofs into streams. Sometimes these streams are dammed up to form above-ground reservoirs, which can serve as water sources in areas without natural bodies of water. Other streams run into rivers and eventually out to the sea. Along the way, these rivers run through serene rural areas and busy urban ones. River cities often get their water from their rivers, drawing it through pipes, processing it in large facilities, and distributing it throughout the metropolitan region. When used, the water is returned to the ground, the air, or the watershed.

Such is the water cycle. It is one of the ancient cycles of the earth: always changing; always rising and falling, flowing or freezing; always returning. In this way, all water flows to us from the beginning of time. Water is one of the original renewable resources. When

used, it comes back; when sullied, it becomes clean again.

But in the last century, this has changed. At various stages along its journey from cloud to cup and back again, our water collects small pieces of our world: eroded soil from our fields and construction sites; coolant or brake fluid from our cars; pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers from our yards and farms; wastewater from our sewers; chemicals from our factories; and toxic sludge from our coal mines and power plants. Some of these toxins make it through our water treatment process. And some come out in our rain.

“We’ve polluted the water cycle,” says Kentucky author Wendell Berry. “How many miles of streams in Kentucky are fit to swim in or eat fish from? I don’t think there’s any.” His indictment is all the more potent because Kentucky has more miles of running water than any state but Alaska.

Waterways are in the same trouble across the globe. If Jesus were baptized at the same spot in the Jordan River today, he would either be wading in sewage or standing on a dry bed. Similar problems plague the Ganges after it passes through India’s industrial centers. The many pilgrims who travel to bathe in these rivers likely do not realize how sick the waters can be.

How does this happen? There are the obvious sources of water degradation: the proverbial polluting factory or municipal sewage system that let untreated waste into rivers, streams, and aquifers.

But many of us become parties to water degradation without even trying to. For example, much of our food is grown with nitrogen fertilizers, which run off into the water, leading to a condition known as “hypoxia”: algae gorge themselves on the surplus nutrients, blooming until they have sucked loose oxygen out of the water, rendering it paradoxically incapable of sustaining life.

We’re also putting chemicals into our water, often without knowing it. When we ingest pharmaceuticals, the chemicals pass through our bodies and into our water, and some people even dispose of unwanted drugs by flushing them. Combined with the chemicals discharged by pharmaceutical manufacturers, we have changed the chemistry of our water. We have just begun to grasp the consequences of what this means for our health.

And then there is electricity. “To have the light switch, which we all have to have now to live, we suffer our land and water to be degraded,” says Wendell Berry. Coal strip mines, he says, have made the Kentucky River where he lives “unhealthy.” Strip-mining, which

is also called mountain-top removal, involves getting at coal by blowing up and removing everything on top of it. Often, this debris is dumped into an adjacent valley, wiping its streams off the map forever. Streams that aren’t filled in still suffer from toxic sludge, a coal by-product which carries high levels of heavy metals. These harmful substances can contaminate our drinking water and cause an increased risk of cancer and birth defects.

In the Third World, the lack of clean drinking water can be even more dire. “So many hospital beds in the world are being filled because of water-related disease, very preventable disease,” says Stan Patyrak of the non-profit Living Water International. “It’s just a constant day-to-day for about 800, 840 million people.” Patyrak and his colleagues work to provide affordable clean water to people in need. Their job has gotten more difficult as global population increases, wasteful water practices, and climate change have combined to put a strain on many fresh water supplies.

The increasing scarcity of freshwater, says Patyrak, has led some to suggest that water may be “the new oil,” with wars fought over its control. Indeed, even in the United States, water fights are being waged in the courts, with increasingly worried states trying to lock up the rights to as much water as they can.

RESTORING OUR WATER'S HEALTH:

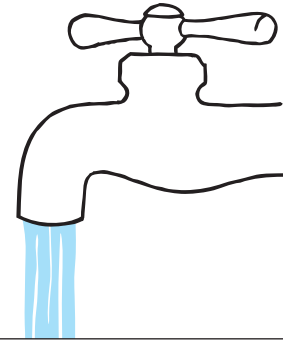
How do our faiths respond?

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Ruined water ruins us. Water never goes away. It merely goes somewhere else. Anything put into water goes along with it unless removed. And it quite literally becomes part of us. We cannot separate water or its care from ourselves or anything we do.

Our waters are liquid threads weaving our planet together: all people, all faiths, all actions. Caring for it, then, will require more than “being careful at the business end of the faucet,” to use Wendell Berry’s phrasing. It will require seeing how we are connected to the health of our water in all aspects of our lives.

The challenges facing water are as difficult as they are important. While many people of faith have been working diligently on water crises—pollution, contamination, scarcity—much remains to be done. It is work that begins each morning in each of our homes and permeates choices we make throughout every day. Many of these water issues can only be tackled through collective action. And still others have likely yet to be perceived; we will become aware of them only with a greater awareness of our water.



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It is our hope that the [2009 Festival of Faiths](#) in Louisville, a city birthed and continually fed by the Ohio River, will lead you, your family, and your house of worship to better understand the role of water in your lives. Our aim is to inspire you to ask: what does it mean to care for our water? We will seek to answer this question from our many faiths with one voice, that together we may bring new life to our water—one of the few sacred things none of us can live without.

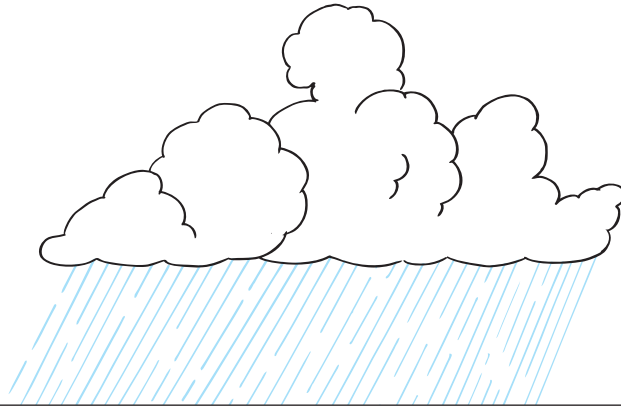
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Festival of Faiths, please visit
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