

Holy Water

Module 11 • i2P • H2O Tour



“A river sings a holy song conveying the mysterious truth that we are a river, and if we are ignorant of this natural law, we are lost.”

- From The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life

THE RIVER OF LIFE

The Ganges River flows 2,510 kilometers from the western Himalayas through the Indian subcontinent before emptying into the Bay of Bengal. It has long been considered a holy river by people of the Hindu faith, and was mentioned in the earliest Hindu scriptures. Many people of the Hindu faith make pilgrimages to the Ganges River to bathe, and it is commonly felt that life is not complete without having cleansed oneself in the river at least once. Hinduism is not the only faith that upholds the central importance of water as a holy symbol.

There are five major world religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism and in all of them water plays a significant role. Although different faiths treat



Figure 1: Pilgrims on the shore of the Ganges River in Varanasi India (source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

and employ water in distinct manners, water has two common spiritual functions; to ritualize spiritual cleansing, and to signify the source of all life. Despite its lofty position as a well-source for life, water also can represent disaster and death, particularly in deluge or flood mythology found in many religions.

CHRISTIANITY

In Christianity water plays an important role in many rituals and stories. One enters in the Christian faith through the ritualistic cleansing with water, a ritual called baptism. When baptized one is either sprinkled with, or in some cases partially or fully immersed in water in a ceremony that welcomes people into the Christian faith. Different Christian sects interpret the act of baptism differently, with some simply upholding that it signifies symbolic spiritual cleansing. The Catholic church however maintains that baptism involves an actual supernatural transformation that results in the literal washing away of original sin. The practice of baptism has its origins in the baptism of Jesus Christ by John the Baptist who was a mission preacher on the banks of the River Jordan.



Figure 2: A modern baptismal ceremony in the River Jordan (source: [wikimedia commons](#))

The water used for baptism is called holy water. Holy water is water that has been sanctified by a priest or bishop for the purposes of baptism or in some faiths can serve to repel evil. (see: [holy water](#)) Water also serves a central role in Christian theology, from

its supporting role (pardon the pun) in Jesus' miraculous walk on water, to the manner in which Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea to allow the Israelites to flee the pursuing Egyptian Army.

WATER CREATES & CLEANSSES

Other faiths share the Christian theme of water as a purifying agent, and creator of life. In simple terms most religions are based on a set of morals that describe what is right and wrong. To engage in ill conduct or thought is to be sinful or 'morally impure'. Water in many faiths serves a ritualistic function to cleanse or purify one's spiritual or moral self.

The Qur'an, the holiest text in Islam states, "from water every living creature was

created". Islamic principles uphold the right of all people to quench their thirst and water their plants and animals. Muslims must be spiritually pure when approaching God in prayer. Many mosques have a pool of clean water in the courtyard that enables worshippers to practice ritual cleansing before entering to convene with God.

In Buddhism water symbolizes purity, clarity and calmness, and is used as a vehicle through which one can cleanse ones mind and learn the teachings of the Buddha. Judaism shares traditions with Christianity such as the parting of the Red Sea by Moses. In the Jewish faith ritual washing in water also plays a central symbolic role in the spiritual cleansing of adherents.



Figure 3: The Buddha (source: [wikimedia commons](#)).

GODS OF WATER

Water is honored in virtually every culture in the world through water deities or Gods. In the western tradition the most recognized water Gods are Poseidon and Neptune, central deities in Greek and Roman mythology. Poseidon and Neptune are Gods of the sea and of earthquakes, and were brothers of the Kings of the Gods Zeus and Jupiter.

Cultures as diverse and geographically distinct as the Inuit,

Did You Know?

The waters of the River Jordan are unusual in that they never reach the ocean. Rather they feed into the Dead Sea where they remain until evaporated. For the Dead Sea as we learned in module 7 is a terminal lake.

Did You Know?

In Homer's Epic poem the Odyssey, Poseidon wrecks Odysseus' raft during his ten year trip after the battle of Troy to his home in Ithaca.

Chinese, Egyptian, Norse, and Maori (to name but a few) have mythological water deities (for a complete list see: [water deities](#)). Similarly ceremonial dances to invoke rainfall, known as rain dances are found in a number of cultural traditions, most notably the American First Nations.

THE FLOOD

Water in religious tradition is not always sacred and sanctified. Water is cast in the role of destroyer and harbinger of death in flood mythology. The great flood as recounted in the Bible is created by God to destroy life on earth because of man's wickedness. Noah alone is spared when God identifies him as a 'just man' and instructs him to build an ark to save his family and all the animals. With Noah safely on the ark, God summons the



Figure 4: Noah's Ark (source: painting by [Edward Hicks](#)).

waters that rise to cover all the world's mountains sparing no living creature. Flood mythology is found in other religious traditions including Islam and Judaism.

FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

The transcendent importance of water in religious ritual and thought is likely a reflection of the fact that water is essential for life. Jesus Christ referred to "living water". The ultimate life giving properties of water are captured in the enduring story of the fountain of youth, the legendary spring that restores youth to any who drink its waters. Legend has it that the Spanish conquistador Ponce de Leon was seeking the Fountain of Youth when he discovered Florida in the sixteenth century.

Did You Know?

The next film in the Pirates of the Caribbean series scheduled for release in 2011 is based on the search for the Fountain of Youth.