

The One Sacred Gift All Religions Share

“From birth until death, our rituals may differ, but our commonality is as clear as clean water.”

By Brian D McLaren (2015)

From Genesis 1:2 to Revelations 22:17, you'll find one word written 722 times. It's not just a word –it's the singular symbol shared by all of the world's religions. The symbol that plays a central role in our rituals. Religions have recognised its sacredness for millennia because it is the foundation for all life. The Dao De Jing, an ancient Chinese text, beautifully observes that it is the “void within the cup” that makes the cup useful – as a holder of water. From birth until death ... water. Here are a few ways religions share similar beliefs about the sacred nature of water.

Creation

Hinduism: According to the Rig-Veda, “... in the beginning everything was like the sea and without light.” Water (jal) carried a divine egg or seed from which the god Brahma was born –and it was he who raised the earth from the waters.

Islam: the Koran teaches that “we have created every living thing from water.”

Judaism/Christianity: In Genesis 1:2, the spirit of breath of god moves on the face of the waters and sets into motion the divine creation of the universe.

Purification

Shintoism: Japan's indigenous religion is based on the worship of innumerable deities believed to inhabit mountains, trees, rocks, springs and other aspects of nature. But worship always begins with the all-important act of purification with water. Inside the many sacred shrines are troughs for rituals washing.

Islam: *Wudu*, or ritual washing, is done before each of the five daily prayers.

Judaism: Orthodox Jews observe the practice of mikveh, which is the ritual immersion into water to purify.

Christianity: Christians are baptised by water as a symbol of liberation.

Spiritual thirst

Christianity: Water is spiritually thirst quenching. Jesus said to a Samaritan woman, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:13-14). Here, water fills everything it enters as God fills those who are immersed in god. Just as we need water to survive physically, we need God to survive spiritually.

The Bahá'í Faith: Water is a key element for this monotheistic faith that emphasises spiritual unity for all humankind. In “Prayer, Meditation and the Devotional Attitude”, Abdu'l-Bahá writes, “The Almighty

Lord is the provider of water, and its maker, and hath decreed that it be used to quench man's thirst, but its use is dependent upon His Will. If it should not be in conformity with His Will, man is afflicted with a thirst which the oceans cannot quench."

Sacredness

Zoroastrianism: Zoroastrians believe that pollution is evil and water that is pure is both sacred and a fundamental life element. Therefore, while water is used in rituals, by itself it is sacred and kept from being contaminated.

Immortality

Sikhism: Sikhs go through an initiation rite as soon as they are old enough to understand the full commitment they are making to the faith. During the *Amrit* ceremony, hymns are recited from Sikh scripture, prayers are said and the principles of Sikhism are affirmed. Then the *amrit*, a mixture of sugar and water that has been stirred with a double edged sword, is prepared. The word *amrit* means "death is un-come", and implies a state of immortality.

Rebirth

Christianity: To be baptised as a Christian enacts or dramatizes the "spiritual rebirth" with water as the sacrament of initiation.

Hinduism: the *Asthi Visajan* is part of the last rites and is a ritual deeply associated with rebirth. After cremation, ashes are to be put into any of the holy river waters. This death in spiritual water ensures the soul of the dead a favourable rebirth.

Death

Buddhism: During funerals water is poured into a bowl and placed before the monks and the deceased. As it fills and pours over the edge, the monks recite, "As the rain fills the rivers and overflow into the ocean, so likewise may what is given here reach the departed."

From birth until death, water brings people together around meaningful religious rituals. Because water is essential for life, it is our sacred duty to make sure that clean and drinkable water is freely available for all. ... To give the gift of water is to give the holy gift of life.

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