

Water Rituals – Primordial and Cleansing



Sailing into the Trollfjord in Norway
Wikimedia Commons: Grant from Oslo, Norway

I'm headed to San Francisco tomorrow for the Big I Conference! The "I" stands for all sorts of things – interfaith, interspiritual, integral and independent – but my presentation is on water rituals from the various faith traditions. I thought I'd share some of my talk with you. My presentation is rather long, so this post is a version of the first half. I'll post a version of the second half next week.

Two types of water rituals are fairly common around the world. The first type focuses on the idea that water is a fundamental, primordial element in all of life. The second type focuses on water as a purifying/cleansing agent.

In the Beginning (Water as Primordial)

The idea that we all come from water, in one way or another, can be found in the world's creation myths. In many of those myths, including the one in Genesis, water was here before anything else – or at least before the earth as we currently know it. We'll start with the Abrahamic texts – the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the Qur'an.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.
(Genesis 1:1)

Have not those who disbelieve known that the heavens and the earth were of one piece, then We parted them, and we made every living thing of water? Will they not then believe?
(Qur'an 21:30 – Pickthall translation)

Various Native American creation stories also feature water as a primordial element. This passage is from one of the many earth-diver stories. In these tales, the earth is below the water, and some being – usually an animal – dives down to bring the land back up. Here's the start of one of those stories from the [Potawatomi tradition](#).

In the beginning of things, there was nothing but water everywhere and no land could be seen. On the waves a canoe floated, and a man sat in it and wept because he had no idea what would happen. After a while, a muskrat climbed up on the canoe and said: 'Greetings, grandfather! Why

are you crying?’ The man answered, ‘I have been here a long time, and I cannot find any land.’ The muskrat replied, ‘But there is earth under all this water!’ The man asked the muskrat to get him some land, and the muskrat dove down and came up again with both paws full of mud.

American Indian lore also contains several “earth-on-the-turtle’s back” stories, and some of [those](#) also start out with water everywhere.

The idea that water has always been here and that it is part of all life serves as the basis for a variety of ceremonies. Some widely-used examples can be found in the American Indian/[13 Grandmothers](#) tradition and in the [Unitarian Universalist church](#). During these rituals, participants bring water from their own sources – a stream, a pond, the ocean, the kitchen sink – and then the waters are poured together into a common vessel. The ritual provides an easy way to honor the earth, our connection to it, and our bonds with one another. Some groups conduct these rituals on World Water Day, and it’s a great one for kids. In fact, we used a version of it last weekend at [Jubilee! Community Church](#) with our Upper Elementary group to honor the goddess, Brigid.

Water for Purification

Another pervasive metaphor is that of water as a purifier or cleansing agent. In Christianity, we have baptism, but we can find some version of this idea in nearly every major faith tradition.

From Judaism, we have the *mikveh* – a bath that one can use to regain purity. There are various rules for constructing an appropriate *mikveh*, but one of them is that the bath must be connected to a natural water source. The bath is often used as part of the traditional conversion process and by women wishing to regain ritual purity after menstruation or childbirth.

From Islam, we have *wudu* – the process of washing before prayers or reading the Qur’an. It usually involves washing the face, one part of the head, the hands and arms up to the elbows, and the feet/ankles. There are rules about the order in which these steps occur. There are also some rules about what constitutes an appropriate water supply, but many mosques provide places to wash outside the entryway. There is a nice passage from the Qur’an that talks about this practice.

O you who believe! when you rise up to prayer, wash your faces and your hands as far as the elbows, and wipe your heads and your feet to the ankles; and if you are under an obligation to perform a total ablution, then wash (yourselves) and if you are sick or on a journey, or one of you come from the privy, or you have touched the women, and you cannot find water, betake yourselves to pure earth and wipe your faces and your hands therewith, Allah does not desire to put on you any difficulty, but He wishes to purify you and that He may complete His favor on you, so that you may be grateful. (Surah 5 – Al Maida (the Repast), ayah 6, Shakir translation)

From Hinduism, we have the practice of bathing in the Ganges, the large river flowing through India and Bangladesh. Devout Hindus also use the river to honor their ancestors and to worship their gods. Other rivers can be used for similar purposes, but in these cases, they are representing the Ganges, not replacing it, because it is the Ganges that embodies the sacred.

From Buddhism, we have things like the Tibetan Vajravidaran ceremonies. Vajravidaran is one of the deities that destroys evil. The ceremony includes a ritual bath with drops of water sprinkled on the head or other parts of the body. The point is to remove contamination, disease, negativity and misconduct of any kind, while increasing personal strength, self-healing, positivity and protection.

Even the Shinto tradition includes ritual purification with water – either rinsing, washing, or bathing – before engaging in ceremonies. Sometimes, the ritual purification is performed symbolically with a priest's wand.

Many of these purification rituals are highly steeped within the specific religious tradition, which makes the practices seem rather strange to outsiders. Nevertheless, the idea behind these rituals – that we should remove those things that separate us from divine – is a powerful concept. After all, water comes to us from the Great Mystery and allows us to return to the Great Mystery – which is what good ritual is about.

So take a moment today to acknowledge the life-giving force of water. Because water is so plentiful and inexpensive in our culture, it's easy to take it for granted. Instead, be grateful for its power and pervasiveness. Make a commitment to use it in moderation and with respect. Acknowledge the ways in which it connects us to the earth, to one another, and to our deepest selves. And look to it for a moment of reflection, clarity, and reverence.